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DESIRE AND THE HUMAN GOOD

Richard Kraut
University of Illinois, Chicago

Presidential Address delivered before the Ninety-Second Annual Central Division Meeting of The American Philosophical Association in Kansas City, Missouri, May 6, 1994.

I

When we compare contemporary moral philosophy with the well-known moral systems of earlier centuries, we should be struck by the fact that a certain assumption about human well being that is now widely taken for granted was universally rejected in the past. The contemporary moral climate predisposes us to be pluralistic about the human good, whereas earlier systems of ethics embraced a conception of well being that we would now call narrow and restrictive. One way to convey the sort of contrast I have in mind is to note that according to Plato and Aristotle, there is one kind of life, that of the philosopher, that represents the summit of human flourishing, and all other lives are worth leading to the extent that they approximate this ideal. Certain other ethical theories of the past were in a way more narrow than this, for whereas Plato and Aristotle maintained that many things are in themselves worthwhile, others argued that there is only one intrinsic good—pleasure according to the Epicureans, virtue according to the Stoics. By contrast, it is now widely assumed that all such approaches are too exclusive, that not only are there many types of intrinsic goods but there is no one specific kind of life—whether it is that of a philosopher or a poet or anyone else—that is the single human ideal. Even hedonism, a conception of the good that had a powerful influence in the modern period, has few contemporary proponents. A consensus has arisen in our time that there is no single ultimate end that provides the measure by which the worth of all other goods must be assessed.

But if we want not merely to take note of our departure from the past, but also to show why we are justified in being pluralists about the good, then we must have something to say about what human well being is. We should not simply assert that there are many goods and many kinds of good lives, but must offer some general account of what well being is that explains why it is so multiform. In response to this demand, many philosophers would, as a first approximation, equate the human good with the satisfaction of desire, and would explain the multiplicity of the good by pointing out that because of the enormous variety of our interests and tastes, our desires exhibit a similar heterogeneity. Roughly speaking, what makes a state of affairs good for someone is its satisfaction of one of that person’s desires; accordingly, our lives go well to the extent that our desires, or the ones to which we give the greatest weight, are satisfied.
A complication is created by the fact that sometimes we have desires—those created by addictions, for example—that we wish we were without. But this can easily be handled in familiar ways by giving special weight to second-order desires. The general idea is that so long as one wants something wholeheartedly and with open eyes, then it is good for one’s desire to be satisfied, regardless of the content of the desire. The objects we now want or will want are made good for us by our wanting them; they are not already good for us, apart from our having a present or future desire for them. There are no facts about what is ultimately good for me that are independent of my aims, facts that I need to discover in order to know what to aim at. No wonder, then, that well being is multiform. Our good is invented and constructed rather than discovered; and because of the great variation in our personalities and abilities, we invent different plans of life and our desires are directed at many different kinds of objects.

Although the “desire theory,” as it might be called, is widely accepted, in part because it gives some backing to the assumption that the good is multiform, I will argue that it nonetheless has weaknesses serious enough to justify its rejection. At bottom, its main deficiency is that it is too accepting of desires as they stand, and cannot account for some of the ways in which they are subject to evaluation. What we need is a theory that is more objective and in this respect closer to the eudaimonistic theories of ancient and medieval philosophy. I would like to show how we can abandon the desire theory and still hold onto our sense that many different kinds of life are worth living—more than earlier systems realized, but not so many as the desire theory endorses.

II

I begin with a point that, despite its familiarity, cannot easily be accommodated by the desire theory. It is conceptually and psychologically possible for people to decide, voluntarily and with due deliberation, to renounce their good in favor of an alternative goal. They can clearheadedly design a long-range plan and fulfill it, thereby satisfying their deepest desires, in spite of the fact that they realize all the while that what they are doing is bad for them. In fact, they can carry out certain plans precisely because they think that it is bad for them to do so. For example, suppose a man has committed a serious crime at an earlier point in his life, and although he now regrets having done so, he realizes that no one will believe him if he confesses. So he decides to inflict a punishment upon himself for a period of several years. He abandons his current line of work, which he loves, and takes a job that he considers boring, arduous, and insignificant. He does not regard this as a way of serving others, because he realizes that what he will be doing is useless. His aim is simply to balance the evil he has done to others with a comparable evil for himself. Taking a pill to relieve his pangs of guilt would be of no use, since his aim is to do himself harm, not to make himself feel good. He punishes himself because he regards this as a moral necessity, and when he carries out his punishment, he does so from a sense of duty rather than a joyful love of justice and certainly with no
relish for the particular job he is doing. In an ordinary sense of “want,” he doesn’t want to punish himself, but the desire theory cannot take refuge in this point, since it uses a much broader notion of desire, according to which what we voluntarily seek is what we desire. And in this sense, our self-punisher does want above all to punish himself.

Spending one’s days performing a task that one rightly regards as boring, arduous and useless is not something we would ordinarily consider advantageous, and so we can plausibly assume that when the self-punisher carries out his plan, he is not only trying to act against his good, but he succeeds in harming himself, despite the fact that he gets precisely what he wants. It would be dogmatic and counter-intuitive to insist that he must benefit from his punishment simply because he desires it. The more reasonable response is to concede that sometimes carrying out one’s plans and getting what one above all wants conflicts with one’s good.

Furthermore, I see no plausible way for the desire theory to make adjustments that convincingly accommodate this sort of counter-example. Bringing in the notions of rationality and full information will not help. The self-punisher is not violating any obvious principle of rationality and he has all the empirical information he needs. The moral that is most naturally drawn from this case is that there are circumstances in which people voluntarily renounce their good. When they do so, they are still getting what they want, and so we cannot equate well being with the satisfaction of desires, even when these desires are rational and exposed to full information. Other sorts of cases in which this happens, which are more common than self-punishment, are those in which we willingly make sacrifices in our well-being in order to promote the good of others. But rather than pursue this idea, I will turn to another type of objection to the desire theory. The weakness of the theory is best appreciated when we see the variety of difficulties it encounters.

III

Imagine a boy who, while walking through the park, sees a duck, and at the same time spots a rock on the ground. Impulsively, he picks up the rock and throws it at the duck. Is it good for him, to some extent, if his desire to hit the duck is satisfied? I find that implausible. Surely he would be no worse off if he had never felt an impulse to hit the duck; and once this impulse does arise, he would be no worse off if it evaporated before he acted on it. We might even say, with some plausibility, that it is bad for him to satisfy this desire, that for his own good he should be free of such destructive impulses. Someone who wants to defend the desire theory may suggest that we should salvage it by making a slight modification. The boy’s desire to hit the duck is a mere passing whim, and so what we should say is that satisfying desires is good for us only when they are more enduring than fleeting urges. The desires that are good to satisfy are those that organize our lives and lead to projects that absorb considerable time and energy. The problem with this idea is that we can easily imagine desires that are unobjectionable as whims but become perverse when given more significance than that. Consider for example the impulse one might feel on a winter walk to reach out and knock an icicle to the
ground. And imagine someone who has more than a fleeting urge to do this. Rather, he has the project of knocking down as many icicles as he can before they melt. He hires a crew of workers and a fleet of trucks, so that he can reach icicles hanging from tall buildings; and this is how he spends his winters. It is implausible to suppose that now that this desire is no mere whim but a grand project, its satisfaction has become good.\(^8\) Rather, our reaction to the example is that the subject has become the victim of a senseless passion. The amount of time and effort he devotes to his plan does not make us confident that this is where his good lies; on the contrary, this feature of the example is precisely what inclines us to think that he is wasting his time.\(^9\)

Some philosophers will react to this case by saying that if the icicle fanatic really has carefully considered all of the alternatives available to him, and decides after due deliberation that this is the plan he wishes to pursue, then, peculiar as it may seem, the satisfaction of this desire is where his good lies.\(^10\) Who are we, it might be asked rhetorically, to stand in judgment of his conception of the good? To this it can be replied that we cannot responsibly avoid considering the specific content of people’s projects when we make decisions about whether we should assist them. If the icicle fanatic appealed to us for financial support, we would not and should not set aside doubts about whether he is doing himself any good, and these doubts arise precisely because we focus on the object of his desire and fail to see why it is worth his while to undertake this project.

IV

There is one other aspect of the desire theory that should be considered, before I propose an alternative approach. The theory holds that it is the satisfaction of my desires that constitutes my good. We can gain a better perspective on the theory if we construe it as one among a family of closely related views. For example, what me might call the parental desire theory would hold that what makes something good for a person is the fact that it is something his parents want for him. The sibling desire theory and the grandparent desire theory would have the same structure: each would identify the good of X with the satisfaction of the desires some Y has regarding X, alternative versions of the theory picking out a different Y. The desire theory is the special case in which Y is identical to X. This leads us to ask why we should take the desire theory to be more plausible than the parental desire theory or any other member of this family of theories. We cannot reply: because each person knows where his best interest lies. For we recognize that as a hazardous generalization. If the parental desire theory must be rejected because there are times when parents fail to have the necessary love and knowledge to guide the lives of their children, then we will be faced with the question why these failures cannot also occur in the relation one has to oneself.

Perhaps the parental desire theory (and all other variations in which X is not identical to Y) should be rejected because its general acceptance would lead to passivity and submissiveness. Children would continually make their most important
decisions by looking to the blueprint for their lives drawn up by others, and they would fail to develop such qualities as self-reliance, creativity, autonomy and the like. But why should we think that these are qualities that children should develop? An appealing answer is that it is part of a person's good to be a designer of one's life and a molder of one's desires. But that is not a suggestion the desire theorist can accept because, according to that theory, if my good consists partly in exercising initiative and expressing autonomy, then that is true only on condition that these are qualities I want to have. If I don't want them because I haven't been educated to value them, then, according to the desire theory, my lacking them is in itself no loss.

Although no one thinks that the parental desire theory is correct, there is nonetheless a modest and obvious truth that lies in its vicinity, namely that in the first stages of human life, it is best for children to be looked after by adults who take responsibility for their present and future good. And one reason why this is so is because there are many things that are or will be good for children that they are in no position to know about and cannot be said to want. A baby wants food, warmth, stimulation, and contact; but we cannot attribute to it a desire to develop its capacities or to be nurtured in the customs of its society. Education about these matters is beneficial for children, but the desire-theory cannot easily explain why, because children are for a time too young to have any desire for such learning. The desire-theory says that one's well-being is constituted by the satisfaction of one's desires, but the example of small children forces us to recognize a gap in the theory: it cannot be one's present desires alone that constitute one's well-being.

The gap could be filled if we say that the satisfaction of one's future desires is also a component of well-being. Even though a child may not now want an education she will want this at some future time, and so it is in her interests if we prepare her for the satisfaction of this future desire. But this way of expanding the desire theory does not fully capture our reasons for educating children: the child isn't going to have a desire to be educated independently of the way we bring her up; rather we train her so that she develops this desire and can satisfy it, and we do so because we think that having and satisfying this desire will be good for her. We encourage the interest children show in music, or their curiosity about the natural world, because we think it is and will be good for them to have a love of music or of nature. But there is nothing inevitable about their developing these desires. When we promote the future good of young children, we do not merely aim at desire satisfaction in general, but we try to instill certain desires rather than others on the grounds that some things are worth developing a desire for, and others are not.11

V

I conclude from what I have said so far that wanting something does not by itself confer desirability on what we want or getting it. It is intelligible and at times appropriate to act on the thought, "I want to do this, even though I don't think that it's good for me or will make my life better." That expresses the attitude many of us normally have towards our whims and impulses. Although we act on them, and need not be subject to criticism for doing so, we don't puff up the importance of
these desires by supposing that it will be good even to the slightest degree if they are satisfied.\textsuperscript{12}

But if wanting something does not make it good for the want to be satisfied, then we have to ask what does. My response is that what makes a desire good to satisfy is its being a desire for something that has features that make it worth wanting. Notice the difference between this approach and the one that lies behind the desire theory. It says that we confer goodness on objects by wanting them; by contrast, my idea is that the objects we desire must prove themselves worthy of being wanted by having certain characteristics. If they lack features that make them worth wanting, then the fact that we want them does not make up for that deficiency.

The sort of view I have in mind can also be expressed if I switch for the moment from talking about what people want to talking about what they love. It is widely accepted that someone who is living a good life should love something or someone. If one has no interests or attachments at all, how can one's life be going well? Or if one is only slightly interested in things, if one has no strong emotional attachments, then that too is a deficiency, because there are objects to which a more enthusiastic response is appropriate. But, according to the conception of the good that I am presenting, some things are worthy of our interest and love, whereas others are not. So what makes one's life a good one is one's caring about something worth caring about. But of course that cannot be the whole story, because we can care a great deal about what is worthy of love and yet be cut off from it in some way. Imagine someone who loves painting but is imprisoned and unable to carry out her work; or someone who loves his children but is prevented from having any relationship with them. These people may love what is worth loving, but they don't have a satisfactory relationship with what they love, and as a result their lives are not going well.\textsuperscript{13} So, there are at least three conditions that make a life a good one: one must love something, what one loves must be worth loving, and one must be related in the right way to what one loves.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps other conditions must be specified, but I will not explore that possibility here.

It might be objected that the thesis I am proposing is empty unless it is backed by a systematic theory that enables us to decide which among alternative ways of life is most worth living and which objects are most worth loving. It would of course be nice to have such a theory, but it is possible to do without one and still make defensible judgments about what is worth wanting and what is not. Recall the examples used earlier: we can judge, without having a systematic conception of the good, that the self-punisher is harming himself by doing boring, arduous, and insignificant work; or that the icicle fanatic is wasting his time. To take other cases: We believe that in normal circumstances only a certain amount of attention deserves to be paid to such things as neatness, appearance, or health, and we consider an interest that goes beyond this to be obsessive, because it undermines a person's good. We think that certain intellectual or artistic projects would be a waste of time because they would produce uninteresting results or none at all. To take another sort of case: if someone devotes considerable time to friendships with people who are contemptible and undeserving of affection, then we think that his life is to some
degree misspent.

What these examples suggest is that when we choose the objects of our interests successfully we can justify our choice of a way of life by pointing to the qualities of those objects. We have more to say in these cases than "this is what I want to do;" we can explain why we want to do these things by describing the admirable qualities of the objects we love. And by educating others to recognize and care about those qualities, we can rationally persuade them that it was worth their while for them to develop an interest in objects to which they were initially indifferent.

If this approach is correct, then certain widespread and powerful human desires may be such that their satisfaction does us no good. Consider, for example, the desire to have positions of power over other people, simply for its own sake. Those who love power in this way are not making any obvious error of fact or reasoning. Yet, if one asks what it is about power that makes it worth loving, it is hard to know how to answer or even to see that the question admits of an answer. Someone who develops a desire for power does not do so by being trained to focus on its properties; we don't become sensitized or educated so that we can respond to or articulate the admirable qualities that power has. So it's no wonder that we draw a blank when we ask what it is about power that makes it desirable.

Notice how different the situation is when it comes to certain other things we care about. If we are experienced and articulate, we can say a great deal about why we love our favorite novel or piece of music or friend. This is because we become attached to these objects through a process of training that makes us adept at recognizing and articulating certain properties that we respond to. Power, by contrast, is typically sought for no reason at all. And if we reject the desire theory, then we have no reason to think that satisfying the desire for power is in itself good for people. The same holds true of other deep-seated worldly motives, such as the desires for fame, recognition, and wealth.

It is here that we find one of the greatest contrasts between certain traditional conceptions of the good and the desire theory. The older conceptions took the desires for power, reputation, wealth, and the like to be, at best, of limited value; in fact, despite many disagreements among Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, and Christians about what the good is, there was until recent times a striking consensus among philosophers in these traditions that strong desires for power, status, material goods, and the like are contrary to self-interest properly understood. By contrast, the desire theory must hold that, so long as we pursue these goals without psychological division and with open eyes, making no mistake of fact or logic, then they are no less worth pursuing as ends than any other possible goals. That is why I said earlier that the chief weakness of the desire theory is that it is too accepting of desires as they stand and that it underestimates the ways in which we can subject desires to criticism. The desire theory does not demand that the objects in which we take an interest have in themselves desirable features, since its basic idea is that we invest those objects with desirability by being attracted to them. Traditional conceptions are more able to criticize desires as they stand because they insist that the objects we love prove themselves worthy of our interest by their possession of desirable characteristics.
VI

The controversial nature of the proposal I am making can be brought out still further if we notice what it says about pain. It is often taken to be obvious that physical pain is in itself bad;¹⁷ but my doubts about the intrinsic goodness of power lead me also to question the intrinsic badness of pain. When I said that power is not good in itself, my reason was that I saw no feature of it that makes it worth wanting. Similarly, even though we all want to avoid pain, I see no feature of it that makes it worthy of avoidance. We don't notice any characteristic of pain that grounds our aversion to it; we just hate the way it feels. But according to my proposal that is not enough to show that it really is bad in itself.¹⁸ Just as our going for something does not show it to be good, so our avoiding it does not show it to be bad. And the fact that we all avoid it, and instinctively so, does not show it to be bad either. Our instincts are subject to evaluation, and so something more must be said about our aversion to pain besides its instinctual character, if we are to conclude that it is bad in itself.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me add that of course I think that pain is almost always bad to some extent. But my reason for thinking this has to do with the things that physical pain normally accompanies, namely some injury or the interruption of healthy processes. Almost every pain distracts us from devoting full attention to the things we care about, and over time pain depresses the level of energy we have. Pain is an animal's generally reliable mechanism for keeping it out of harm's way, and this applies no less to human animals than others. When we take into account the other events that accompany pain, we can see why it is generally bad for us to some degree. What I am questioning is whether, when we leave aside these other features of pain and just concentrate on the way it feels, we have any reason to think it is bad, and not merely something we dislike.¹⁹

Perhaps I can create some doubt about whether pain is intrinsically bad by calling attention to a number of other sensations that are disliked even though they are not physically painful: for example, foul odors and grating noises. Should we say that these are in themselves bad to experience, apart from the harm they typically bring about by distracting or annoying us? Suppose I am the only person who is repelled by a certain sound, and everyone else is indifferent to it: if we say that it is intrinsically bad for me but not for others to hear the sound, then we are presupposing that it is a person's likes and dislikes that create what is good and bad for him.²⁰ And we will then have to say that satisfying our whims and urges is good, and in particular that it is good for the boy in our earlier example to hit the duck. On the other hand, if we say that a grating sound is bad for me to hear only if everyone else has the same response then we have to explain why the reaction of others should be so important to my good. The most plausible way of disposing of this whole problem is to say that we should not infer from our aversion to something that it is contrary to our good, just as we should not infer from the presence of an urge that it does some good to satisfy it. If we accept this proposal, then we should become doubtful about the intrinsic badness of pain.
VII

There is one further matter that should be addressed before we return to the theme of pluralism with which we began. I have been focusing exclusively on the human good and have said nothing about the good of other sorts of animals. But it might be objected that this is the wrong way to go about things, because we need to locate the human good within a framework that has broader application. And it should be obvious that much of what I have said about the human good does not apply to other animals. I claim that for a human life to go well one must love something worth loving. But it would be absurd to hold that the life of a non-human animal goes well only on this condition. What in the life of a salmon or a snake or a mole is worth loving? Can these animals be said to love anything at all?

The inapplicability of these conditions of human well being to non-human life might suggest that we have been on the wrong track all along. Perhaps we should have begun by looking for an account of well being that covers all cases, not just the human condition. Such a thought may partially account for the attraction of hedonism to earlier thinkers. Pleasure and pain guide the behavior of all animals; and hedonists, ancient and modern, have always appealed to the universality of these forces to support their doctrine. Hedonism has an apparent advantage in that it determines the good of all animals with one fell swoop. But we should not be impressed, for the implausibility of hedonism as applied to human life still stands. What we must do therefore is find some substitute for it. We need a general account of the well being of all animals, and then we must ask how the more specific conception of human well being is related to this broader framework.

The general formula that we should apply across the board is one that we find in Aristotle and the Stoics, namely that the good for each animal consists in leading the kind of life that is appropriate to its nature. And since each animal species has a different nature, we must consider the peculiar physical characteristics of each species to determine more specifically where its good lies. The nature of non-human animals is fixed by their bodies and physical capacities, and so for them living well consists in the maintenance of physical health and the full use of the capacities of their bodies. That is why the confinement of a bird to a small space would be contrary to its good, even if it were attached during its confinement to a machine that constantly stimulated the pleasure center of its brain.

But what should we say about the peculiar nature of human beings? Because of our possession of the kind of brain we have, the lives we can lead are far less restricted than are those of other animals. Our intellectual capacity allows far greater plasticity in our development, and it makes the kind of life we lead far more a matter of choice than it is for other animals. The good of a non-human animal is, as it were, built into its body, whereas for human beings the good is an object of rational choice and its achievement requires the training of desires and emotions so that they take appropriate objects as determined by reason. This is not to deny that we have a nature. Rather, it is to say that it is our nature to be choosers, to be capable of using reason to make choices and to mold our desires and emotions. And so the nature of human beings is reflected in our theory of the good when we say
that in order for our lives to go well our desires and emotions must be directed at objects whose features make them appropriate choices for us. It is implicit in the notion of choiceworthy that the objects of our desires are open to evaluation by means of reflection. By insisting that desire satisfaction is not in itself good, that the object of the desire must be worth wanting, we bring in the need for evaluation and reflection, and we thus ground our good in our capacity for rational choice. We explain the human good not as hedonism does, by means of a single comprehensive theory applicable to all animals, but by a two-stage process in which a broad account that applies universally is then made more specific by being tied to the peculiarities of the human situation.

Since I have accepted the traditional view that our nature as human beings consists in the exercise of our capacity for rational choice, it might be asked why I do not go further and accept a more determinate conception of the good, one that holds that human lives are worthwhile to the extent that they are devoted to reasoning. My reply is that the extent to which it is intrinsically worthwhile to engage in reasoning, or good reasoning, is itself a matter that is subject to rational evaluation; there is no self-contradiction in the idea that one might reason to the conclusion that there are activities that are better than reasoning, or that one's life goes best if reason plays a secondary or minor role. So the fact that reasoning is distinctive of human beings does not itself determine the proper place of reasoning in a human life. The best way of establishing the importance of reason in a good life is to take note of the various kinds of worthwhile activities there are, and recognize how many of them we would be incapable of undertaking, if our capacity for reasoning were seriously impaired.

VIII

We can now return to the ideas with which we started: that the good for human beings is highly varied, that there is no single master good that measures the worth of all others; that there is no specific kind of life that is best for everyone. Pluralism, so construed, is a newcomer to the philosophical scene, and it is worth asking whether any arguments can be found for it. One of the apparent attractions of the desire theory is that it offers an explanation for this variety, but in light of that theory's deficiencies we have reason to seek an alternative account of why pluralism about the good might be true.

A better way to defend pluralistic intuitions, I suggest, is to accept the general thesis that some objects of human pursuit have qualities that make them objectively worth wanting and that others are without merit, but to reject any of the more specific theses that have been proposed in the past about how to achieve a more determinate ranking of human lives. The modern philosopher’s sense that many different kinds of lives are worth living, but that we cannot arrange them in a hierarchy ranging from best to worst, is best supported by concrete illustration rather than a highly general argument: the favored strategy should be to take note of all of the different objects that are worth pursuing and the diversity of worthwhile lives
devoted to these pursuits, and then to show that none of the objective conceptions of the good with which we are familiar from the history of philosophy does justice to this rich variety. But this pluralistic project cannot succeed simply by pointing to the great variety of lives people in fact lead; what must be shown is considerably more difficult, namely that these different kinds of lives are worth living, and none more so than any others.

If this is correct, then the hierarchical conceptions of the good that are now out of favor cannot be undermined with a single blow; if there is no supremely desirable object or life, in comparison with which all other objects or lives must be evaluated, then this must be established on a case-by-case basis by showing why each proposed candidate fails to provide a plausible standard. The defender of the multiplicity of the human good must support this thesis by persuading us that many different types of thing are worth wanting and by showing why we should reject attempts to assign each of them a discrete place on a single hierarchical scale. Although I am sympathetic to such a project, I have not undertaken it here. My main point has been that the multiplicity of the good cannot be directly inferred from the variability of human desire. So my conclusion is a conditional one: if we wish to be pluralists, then we should accept the point, once widely taken for granted, that in deciding which sorts of lives it is good to live, we cannot bypass the task of evaluating our desires by asking whether their objects possess the qualities that make them worth wanting.21

Notes


2. I admit that it is difficult to characterize the contrast between pluralism and more restrictive theories in a precise way. For example, consider the complex thesis that (a) the intellectual life is best; (b) there are many types of intellectual lives (one may study botany, mathematics, literature . . . ); (c) and all such lives are equally worthwhile. This will strike the contemporary pluralist as insufficiently pluralistic, even though there is nothing "formally" incorrect about the thesis, since it holds that there is no one best kind of life. The modern intuition, I think, is best characterized in historical rather than formal terms; it holds, in other words, that theories of the past went wrong in being unduly restrictive.

3. Here the word "satisfaction" must be construed not as a reference to a feeling but merely to the obtaining of a desired state of affairs. What makes something good for us is our wanting and getting it, not any felt response.

5. Perhaps it will be suggested that we need to distinguish two senses of a person's "good;" in some sense, the self-punisher is promoting his good, since he is carrying out his plan, but in some other sense he is making himself worse off. But this approach runs the risk of inventing a purely technical sense of well-being, one whose only justification is that it salvages the desire theory. Another alternative would be to restrict the desire theory so that the only desires whose satisfaction are good are the ones that have no moral content. That would enable the desire theory to avoid the conclusion that the self-punisher is promoting his good, but the theory so modified would rule out far too much. Desires to be a good friend, a good father, or a good citizen all have moral content; and it is hard to see why we should rule out the possibility that satisfying these desires can be good. Still another move would be to say that our good consists in satisfying desires that are formed under favorable conditions; since the desire to punish oneself is a response to an unfavorable condition, namely an earlier crime, it might not be counted as the sort of desire whose satisfaction is good. But this modification would also rule out too much. Many lives are governed by a desire to find remedies for such unfavorable circumstances as disease, injustice, and ignorance; but lives devoted to the alleviation of these conditions can certainly be good, in spite of the fact that they are responsive to unfavorable conditions.

6. One could resist this step by saying that satisfying the desire to hit the duck is only slightly good for the boy. But why so? What if his desire to hit the duck is extremely strong? And what if the stone is rather small, so that the injury to the duck will be slight? We can say that the boy should suppress his desire to hit the duck because the duck has a right not to be injured. But rights can be justifiably infringed when doing so does enough good; so, if the boy's desire is strong enough, will hitting the duck do him enough good to justify his infringing the duck's right? I should add that I think nothing in this example would be changed if the person throwing the stone is an adult in full charge of his faculties rather than a boy.
7. Amartya Sen also questions conceptions of the human good that allow the satisfaction of whims to be in one's interests. See Inequality Reexamined, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, p. 56 n. 1; and his "Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," The Journal of Philosophy 82. Sen also develops the point that individuals living in conditions of severe deprivation might satisfy their desires simply by limiting them to what is attainable. See Inequality Reexamined, pp. 7, 55. This corresponds to the point made by Rawls that a "plan of life" must be "drawn up under (more or less) favorable conditions" if its execution is to constitute a person's happiness. See A Theory of Justice, p. 409.

8. It might be objected that the icicle fanatic is doing himself some good because his project is giving him pleasure. But it should be recalled once again that the desire theory does not make the value of satisfying desires depend on the pleasure that in many cases comes when desires are satisfied. And in any case even when we take into account the pleasure the icicle fanatic gets, we have to ask why getting pleasure is always to some extent good for a person. Is it because we desire pleasure? In that case, it cannot be the pleasure achieved by the icicle fanatic that makes his activity good for him, but the fact that his desire for the pleasure of knocking down icicles is satisfied. But we can still demand an explanation for why the satisfaction of this desire is good for him.

9. "... here we meet ideas which are curiously elusive, such as the thought that some pursuits are more worthwhile than others, and some matters trivial and some important in human life. Since it makes good sense to say that most men waste a lot of their lives in ardent pursuit of what is trivial and unimportant it is not possible to explain the important and the trivial in terms of the amount of attention given to different subjects by the average man. But I have never seen, or been able to think out, a true account of this matter ..." Phillipa Foot, Virtues and Vices, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 6.

10. We can ask philosophers who take this position why we should think that a person who has reflected about what he wishes and has made no logical or factual errors is guaranteed not to be in error about the worthwhileness of what he proposes to do. It is only in rare and contrived situations that going through an intellectual process guarantees a correct result. Pure and perfect procedural justice are examples of this, but in these cases we can see why a certain process must give rise to the right outcome. In general, however, if someone has thought long and hard about some question, including a normative question, and has avoided obvious and elementary errors, this does not insure that he has answered the question correctly.

11. This example also reveals a weakness in a different way of expanding the desire theory: we might say that a person's well being is constituted by the satisfaction of the desires he would have if he were rational and well-informed. On this basis, we might say that what makes it good for a child to be educated is the fact that she would want to be educated were she rational and well-informed. But once again this
does not capture the way we think about the education of a child. We do not give a child a musical education, for example, because we ask what she would do if she were completely rational and fully informed, and then somehow come to the conclusion that she would want to develop a love of music. Rather, we already have the conviction, based on our own experience and that of others, that it is good for people to develop a love of music.

12. Some philosophers—Aquinas is a prominent example—have held that whatever is wanted is wanted on the grounds that it is good. That is precisely what I am questioning. Furthermore, Aquinas, following Aristotle, held that whatever is desired by everyone must be and not merely seem good, to some extent. But if everyone had a desire to knock icicles to the ground, that would not show that doing so is a part, even a small part, of the human good. That one person feels an internal push does not show that it is good for the push to have its way; even if everyone feels the same kind of push and gives way to it, we need not infer that it is good for us to satisfy that desire.

13. What it is to be properly related to objects one loves varies according to the kind of object it is. The idea is that if one is in some way cut off from what one loves, then one is not faring well; but what being cut off amounts to depends on the kind of object it is. (My use of the term “object” should not be taken to mean that persons are excluded from being objects.) Being properly related to an object one loves presumably involves the satisfaction of desires, so I am not suggesting that such satisfaction is irrelevant to well-being. For this reason I would not want to describe this conception of the good as an “objective list” theory, in Derek Parfit’s sense. But neither does it fit his two other alternatives: hedonistic and desire-fulfillment theories. See Reasons and Persons, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 493. I also assume that being properly related to an object one loves involves some degree of enjoyment of the object. It should be noticed that the idea I am proposing has something important in common with the desire theory: a person’s good, I think, consists partly in his being in a certain psychological state. This should be contrasted with a view according to which one’s life is going well if one perfects certain capacities, regardless of how one feels about doing so.

14. Notice that this gives us an easy and natural way to account for the phenomenon of self-renunciation that was discussed earlier. Although it would be extraordinary to have no desire to do and take delight in what one loves doing, one might nonetheless decide that this desire ought to give way to something else one considers more important. That is the situation we described earlier when we discussed the person who punishes himself by leaving a job he loves and condemning himself to several years of useless drudgery. For a period of time there is nothing in his life that he loves, and so one of the conditions of living well is not fulfilled. Similarly, one might decide not to promote one’s good not as a punishment but as a sacrifice for the good of others. One might think for example that one will be of greatest use
to others if one chooses to do something that, as it happens, one unfortunately does not love doing. A life of drudgery can in certain cases be of great value to humanity, and if one voluntarily accepts such a life for moral reasons that should not be taken to mean that one is aiming at or doing what is best for oneself.

15. I am not saying that such sophistication is a necessary condition of leading a good life. What is necessary is that the objects of one’s desires have features that make them worth wanting—not that one be articulate about what those features are.

16. This of course does not mean that power is intrinsically bad or instrumentally worthless. If the pursuit of power has a proper role in human life, as it presumably does, then this must be shown indirectly, by establishing a connection between the desire for power and some further purpose already determined to be worthwhile.


18. To this it may be objected that since all justification comes to an end, we should not be impressed by the point that we cannot say what it is about a painful sensation that makes it worth avoiding. Painfulness simply is a quality of a sensation that makes it undesirable; why should there have to be some further feature of pain that makes it worthy of our aversion? In reply: Justification in ethics involves systematization, but the thesis that pain is inherently undesirable is one that does no real work in the process of systematization. If we give up the belief that pain is bad in itself and hold instead that we don’t like pain, we have lost nothing we need for theoretical or practical purposes. Nothing is gained, for the moral life or for moral philosophy, by upholding the thesis that pain is not only disliked but worthy of being disliked. By contrast, we would be justifiably disturbed to be told about certain other things we love or hate that there is nothing lovable or hateful about them. There is a big difference, for example, between saying that I dislike another person and saying that he merits my aversion. It is true that after I have said everything I have to say about why he is awful (and this will involve saying why certain personal qualities are objectionable), my justification comes to an end. But by pointing to certain personal features, I am entitled to say that I have given a justification for my attitude. In the case of pain, however, this sort of justification is unavailable; and appealing to my aversion to pain does not constitute a justification of that attitude. Opponents of my thesis might nonetheless insist that we simply "see" that pain is bad in itself, and that we do not have to support this intuition by linking it to any other judgments we make. But this conception of justification in ethics has serious difficulties.

19. A critic of my proposal might nonetheless persist by focusing on hypothetical situations in which we must make a choice between undergoing two medical procedures: they are equally effective in producing a good result, but in one of them we feel some pain whereas in the other we do not. We can suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is no advantage in taking the painful alternative and no
drawback in undergoing the operation painlessly. In such a situation, everyone would of course opt for the painless procedure. But what does this thought experiment tell us? It shows that pain is in itself bad for us only if we also accept the thesis that what everyone would want in a certain situation must be good. But that thesis is precisely what is at issue. Another objection to my proposal is that unless pain is by itself bad we have no reason not to cause others to feel it. If we can be sure that causing someone pain will lead to no other harm, and if it is not in itself bad, then why is it wrong? We can reply that how we treat others cannot be determined simply by asking what is good or bad for them. We show our concern and respect for them by paying attention to their desires and aversions, and not merely their good and bad. If someone else is repelled by a certain kind of sound, then that by itself is reason for me not to make it; and similarly, the fact that others dislike pain is all the reason one needs for not inflicting it on them. We need not affirm the badness of pain to provide a basis for refraining from cruelty.

20. Nagel, op. cit. p. 158, holds that "we have reason to seek/avoid sensations we immediately and strongly like/dislike," and applies this to "experiences to which not everyone reacts in the same way, like the sound of squeaking chalk." But he does not accept the broader principle, "Seek what you want and avoid what you don't want." Why then is it good for one to avoid noises one does not like, but not, more generally, whatever one does not like? He replies: because noises are sensations or experiences, and one's dislike of them is "immediate and unreflective." This strikes me as artificial. Why should the immediacy and unreflectiveness of a sensation make a difference to its intrinsic goodness or badness?

21. I benefitted greatly from the criticism and encouragement of Samantha Brennan, Tom Christiano, David Copp, John Deigh, Walter Edelberg, Bill Hart, Dan Hausman, Terry Irwin, Shelly Kagan, Douglas MacLean, Connie Rosati, Susan Wolf; and audiences at Cornell University, the University of Arizona, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.