

# Welfare Should Be the Currency of Justice

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Some theories of justice hold that individuals placed in fortunate circumstances through no merit or choice of their own are morally obligated to aid individuals placed in unfortunate circumstances through no fault or choice of their own. In these theories what are usually regarded as obligations of benevolence are reinterpreted as strict obligations of justice. A closely related view is that the institutions of a society should be arranged in a way that gives priority to helping people placed in unfortunate circumstances through no fault or choice of their own. Any theory of this type needs a way of assessing individuals' circumstances to determine who is fortunate and who is unfortunate.

I shall argue that the standard for assessing people's circumstances to determine what they owe and are owed according to distributive justice should be the welfare or well-being level that they can attain, given their circumstances. This claim, that the "currency of justice" should be welfare, has attracted criticisms that some have thought decisive. My counterclaim is that if we adopt an objective account of welfare and properly accommodate concerns about individual responsibility, the criticisms can be drained of their force.<sup>1</sup> In the next section I do some stage-setting that sets up the problem to be discussed, and in the remaining sections I develop a welfarist account that can stand against the most important criticisms that have been raised against views of this type.

## 1. DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE NEEDS A CURRENCY

A version of this currency-of-justice problem was identified and analyzed by Amartya Sen in his 1980 essay “Equality of What?”<sup>2</sup> Sen notes that to the extent that we accept equality as an ideal of distributive justice, we are committed to some metric that allows us to compare the condition of individuals, and determine when their conditions are equal or unequal in the relevant way. Sen’s question is: What is the most appropriate metric, and hence the best interpretation of the ideal of equality? The question is also addressed in a pair of essays by Ronald Dworkin that share the title, “What Is Equality?”<sup>3</sup> But the question that Sen and Dworkin are discussing can be cast in broader terms. Any theory of distributive justice that supposes that an element of justice must be responsive to people’s circumstances, all things considered, identifying people’s circumstances as better and worse, and dictating alteration of their circumstances if the given distribution is unfair, owes us a way of assessing people’s circumstances as better and worse as well as some account of when a given distribution of circumstances qualifies as fair. Equality is one notion of fairness that might be asserted, but there are no doubt many other possibilities.

If the distinction between the issue of the proper metric for distributive justice and the proper principles of distributive justice is not kept in mind, confusion can result. For example, consider the proposal that a just society sustains equality of welfare or well-being among its members. Suppose this equality of welfare norm is qualified so it does not prescribe “levelling down.” That is, justice as welfare equality in this qualified form prescribes no equality-promoting transfers from those who are above average to those who are below average in welfare unless the transfer increases the welfare of the gainers. One might find this proposal unacceptable in the light of its apparent implication for the

extent of resource transfers between severely disabled and able members of society. So long as further resource transfers to the severely disabled would continue to boost their welfare, no matter by how small an amount, and so long as the severely disabled or some subset of them are worse off in welfare over their life course than other members of society, equality of welfare dictates further redistributive transfers, to the point that either equality of welfare obtains or further transfers would not increase by any amount the welfare of the transfer recipients. The severely disabled in these circumstances would then become a basin of attraction collecting enormous resources even when very little good comes of it and huge welfare losses are imposed on the better off.

If this implication is deemed unacceptable, so is equality of welfare. But the problematic aspect of this principle might be its insistence on equality of welfare, not its use of welfare as a distributive justice measure of people's condition. Or perhaps the use of welfare as the measure is indeed part of what is wrong with equality of welfare. We cannot tell which is the case until we decompose equality of welfare into its elements and consider the "welfarism" element on its own.

The suggestion that the theory of justice needs a metric for assessing people's overall circumstances depends on assumptions that might be challenged. Theories of justice such as a Lockean natural rights position and the egoistic contractarianism of Thomas Hobbes and David Gauthier reject the starting point idea that there is some measure of people's condition such that if people are badly off in this respect, justice requires that society (all of us regarded collectively) ought to correct this condition and improve the lot of the unfortunate.<sup>4</sup>

One might also doubt that there is some one canonical measure of people's overall condition that is pertinent for the theory of social justice. One might point to various separate areas of social life in which distinct goods are distributed—the separate “spheres of justice” as Michael Walzer refers to them.<sup>5</sup> Walzer suggests that instead of looking for one canonical measure of people's condition, we should instead investigate the separate spheres in which distinct and importantly different kinds of good are distributed, and discover standards that will enable us to assess whether justice is being done and distribution is fair, sphere by sphere.

No doubt as a matter of fact the distribution of goods that people care about occurs in different ways with quite different mechanisms of distribution depending on the nature of the particular type of good. But we may still feel that whether people are justly treated depends on a global assessment of their circumstances rather than on a separate sphere-by-sphere accounting. Distribution might look fair in each separate sphere, but the overall pattern of distribution too severely disadvantages some individuals—so what had looked fair in isolation is revealed to be unfair in a global assessment. The opposite can occur as well. An individual might get what in isolation looks like an unfair deal in sphere X, but when we take into account the ways in which the individual is advantaged in other spheres, we may decide that the presumptively unfair distribution that falls on the individual in sphere X is compensated by favorable circumstances elsewhere. Of course it should be an open question whether a measure of people's overall condition is available that allows assessment across the distinct spheres of social life. This is the question the “currency of justice” literature addresses. It is surely an important matter what sort of overall set of conditions or circumstances an individual faces in a society, and how these

are to be assessed, provided overall assessment is possible. On this ground one might deny that the “separate spheres of justice” position provides any reason to hold that it is misguided to investigate the question about the currency of justice that I pursue in this essay. The “separate spheres” position is better regarded as a fallback position to which one might be driven if the currency of justice question proved intractable.

The Walzerian objection is not so easily met, however. One can concede that how an individual does in all spheres of distribution taken together matters for justice but continue to insist that what occurs in each individual sphere is crucial information for determining whether an individual is fairly treated and to hold that overall assessments must proceed from sphere by sphere assessment. After all, an individual is not fairly treated if she is unfairly treated in two distinct spheres in ways that happen to cancel one another out. Also, an individual who suffers robbery in the private property sphere but is fully compensated by tort action in the civil law sphere is not ideally treated from the standpoint of justice. No robbery and no compensation would be better.

The position that the theory of justice needs a currency of justice can register the points just made. For example, a welfarist will hold that it is generally a good idea for social practices to be run in accordance with the shared understanding of participants about how distribution should proceed. Football matches, religious services, and social dating go better when these practices make sense in the light of the nature of the goods being distributed, for otherwise the practices will not produce for people the human goods they are designed to deliver. In general, respecting the local context of norms embedded in practices is more productive of human good than any alternative. But what is true in general will admit of exceptions. The welfarist holds that the proper exceptions

are those that improve the degree to which social practices as a whole deliver fair shares of human good to people. Moreover, even well functioning sets of practices can yield unfair distributive patterns, which require correction by other institutions and practices, and welfarism insists that the unfair distributive patterns are those that fail to yield fair shares of welfare for persons. No skepticism about the project of developing an overall account of social justice can be drawn from the “separate spheres” idea.

Another objection to the project of this essay cuts deeper than the “separate spheres” notion. In searching for a currency of justice, we are searching for a best component for a type of theory of justice. But the ultimate evaluation of a component is subordinate to the overall evaluation of the theory in which the component plays a role. This is the flip side of the point already made, that we need to distinguish the separable elements of proposals concerning distributive justice and evaluate the elements separately. But “separate” evaluation of a component will involve combining it with other complementary components in competing theories. In the end we need to assess rival candidate currencies of justice in conjunction with rival views of fairness with which they might be paired. This essay argues that influential objections against taking welfare to be the fundamental standard for appraising people’s condition for a theory of justice are ill-considered. But to nail down this argument it would be necessary to defend a particular welfare-based theory of justice, and this task is beyond the scope of this essay. My provisional way of dealing with this difficulty is to combine welfarism with a prioritarian moral principle (to be elaborated below) which strikes me as being at least a plausible candidate for the role of fundamental distributive justice principle.

To clarify this conception, we might imagine yoking it to a particular ideal of fairness I find plausible, namely the prioritarian family of justice principles.<sup>6</sup> According to prioritarianism, when interpreted in terms of opportunity for welfare, we ought to arrange institutions and practices so that a function of opportunity for welfare for persons is maximized that assigns greater moral value to an opportunity, the greater the utility it affords, and assigns greater moral value to a fixed increase in a person's opportunity for welfare the lower her opportunity for welfare would otherwise be.

The discussion that follows centers on the choice of “welfare” or “resources” as the relevant measure of people’s condition for purposes of distributive justice, so the opposing positions have been called “welfarism” versus “resourcism.”<sup>7</sup> Welfarism then is the idea that in a theory of distributive justice the relevant measure of the opportunities and resources and liberties made available to an individual is the welfare or well-being or utility (I am going to use these terms interchangeably) that accrues to her from this allotment of goods or that the allotment enables her to achieve. Generic resourcism is the denial of welfarism. Resourcism holds that the assessment of an individual’s resources, liberties, and opportunities allocated to her under principles of social justice should not be made in terms of the welfare the individual will get, or is enabled to get, from those resources. Both John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin have developed powerful approaches to social justice that eschew welfarism. These particular approaches have been subject to withering criticism, but so long as welfare is regarded as a nonstarter, the refutation of particular resourcist views will merely suggest the need for a new form of resourcism. In this essay I pay special attention to the negative case against welfare as the standard of

interpersonal comparison for a theory of justice. If welfare after all proves adequate, the search for some standard other than welfare is otiose.

## 2. THE METRIC OF WELFARE

Consider then the proposal that the currency of justice is welfare or well-being or utility. These terms are all to be understood broadly as referring to whatever makes someone's life go better for the person whose life it is. The last qualifying phrase is necessary to capture the pertinent notion, for a human life might be deemed good on the ground that it is lived in an admirable or virtuous way, quite independently of whether the life is going well for the person living it. I hope that this proposal has an immediate intuitive appeal. If social justice requires us to determine who in our midst is especially unfortunate and to alleviate her plight, our moral concern attaches to how well or badly her life as a whole is going. At the level of formulating laws or social policies or recommending changes in social norms, we might well want to introduce various simplifications that allow us to focus on some aspect of people's lives and determine what we owe others or are owed by them with respect to this particular aspect, without having to take into account difficult all things considered assessments of people's lives. But at the level of fundamental moral principle, it is the overall quality of the individual life that merits our concern.

Why is this so? After all, the paradigm of doing justice might be thought to be fulfilling an obligation, as when I repay a debt. I may worry that the person owed money might after all be likely to spend it unwisely, and hence be better off without it, but this thought is not supposed to dissuade me from paying what I owe.



The hunch I am exploring is that these surface norms require a deeper justification, and that to satisfy this requirement is to inquire into what counts as a fair distribution of well-being across persons. If we came to have reason to believe that the practice of repaying debts has undesirable consequences on the whole for human well-being, we would need to rethink the practice. In a particular case, if one judges that repayment in these circumstances will do more harm than good, one is checked by the reminder that assigning the authority to the one who owes a debt to decide whether or not the obligation is swamped by other moral considerations would itself be likely to diminish the degree to which well-being is fairly distributed. But in a case in which one knows for sure that repayment would be counterproductive is a case in which the standard grounds of the obligation do lapse.

That the deeper justification issues revolve around the distribution of well-being above all reflects the assumption that what we fundamentally owe to each other is measured by how well or badly each individual's life goes. If I live in isolation from others, in the sense that nothing I might do would make anyone's life go better or worse, then justice gives me no prima facie reason to favor any action I might do over any other. This conclusion is not undermined by the further possibility that I might still be in a position to affect people's lives, just not in any way anyone has genuine reason to care about. If my actions affect the quantity and quality of stuff that people will count as resources, means to the satisfaction of some of their aims, but it is given that provision of these means will not matter to the degree to which people fulfill any valuable ends, then my actions are still a "don't care" so far as justice is concerned. Justice on this view looks behind the material resources and means made available to people and always wants to

know whose well-being rises and falls with any proposed allocation of means and to what extent. On this view an ounce of manna equals a ton of rocks made available to a person if the ounce and the ton would produce equal well-being benefits for that individual.

However, despite possible initial appeal, this proposal is plagued by strong objections. One concerns individual responsibility. Suppose that two individuals have identical welfare at present and that the social planner can choose between two policies, policy A, which confers a one unit welfare gain on the first individual, Smith, and policy B, which confers a one unit welfare gain on the second individual, Jones. On a welfarist view, it seems there is nothing to choose between Smith and Jones, so neither policy A nor B is to be preferred (perhaps one should flip a coin to decide). This will be so whether one's principle is to equalize welfare, to maximize total welfare or the average welfare of people, to equalize welfare at the highest sustainable level, to maximize the welfare of the person with least welfare, and so on. But suppose we add to the story the detail that whereas both Smith and Jones have low welfare at present, Smith has been prudent and responsible in the conduct of his life but suffered an accident through no fault of his own, whereas Jones, born to every advantage, has behaved in a thoroughly irresponsible fashion and culpably mismanaged his life in all respects. We may then feel that justice should favor aid to Smith over aid to Jones, and thus policy A over policy B, but this thought seems not to be available to any variety of welfarist.

Another way of putting the worry about welfarism versus individual responsibility is to note that if distributive justice assigns responsibility to society for bringing it about that individuals reach some level of welfare deemed to be fair, then no matter how the individual herself chooses to run her life, society will tinker with the results within limits

of feasibility so that the socially approved outcome is reached for the individual regardless of what she herself chooses to do. This may strike us as an inappropriate conception of justice for a liberal society.

For all that has been said so far, the story we told about individual responsibility could have been cast as a story about individual moral merit or deservingness. If welfare is the currency of justice, justice will see no inherent reason to channel benefits to saints rather than to sinners, decent people rather than thugs.

Another objection to the metric of utility or welfare concerns individual freedom. It is plausible to suppose that distributive justice is concerned with gaining for individuals a fair degree of freedom to do whatever they might choose with their lives. We might well wish to give special weight to freedom to do what is choiceworthy, worthwhile, or admirable. A welfarist view must deny this claim. Consider a distribution of resources in which some have only cotton candy and other resources useful only for personal consumption and only if used in some specific way. Provided these resources enable their possessors to attain a sufficiently high level of welfare, these individuals are fairly treated, on a welfarist conception, regardless of whether they have (a) any freedom and (b) any freedom to exercise agency in ways that do not promote their own welfare. But a life that does not include the opportunity to be useful to anybody or anything beyond one's own self-interest might seem an impoverished life. Following terminology introduced by Sen, we can identify an individual's agency freedom with the extent of his freedom to carry out activities he reasonably deems to be valuable.<sup>8</sup> Having the freedom to care for a sick and ailing relative, to pursue the answer to a scientific question, to lobby successfully in a political legislative body for a favored cause, to secure the release of a

person falsely accused of a capital crime, may well be important constituents of an individual's agency freedom, whatever their bearing on her opportunity to cater for her own interests prudently. Appraising individuals' circumstances just by the yardstick of utility seems to leave out of account important dimensions of individual freedom that are relevant to the issue whether individuals have been treated justly or fairly.

A third objection to the utility metric interprets utility or welfare either as desire satisfaction or as enjoyment and argues that neither desire satisfaction nor enjoyment can be plausibly claimed to be an adequate metric for the assessment of people's condition for purposes of a theory of justice.<sup>9</sup> Smith's desires over the course of her life may come to be shaped by her circumstances, which we would intuitively find oppressive. Smith is impoverished, so she comes not to develop desires that require wealth; she is a member of a subordinate caste, denied many ordinary social freedoms, so she comes not to have desires whose fulfillment requires these civil liberties; she is denied educational and skill-enhancement opportunities, so she comes to eschew desires that it requires complex knowledge and skill to satisfy. Instead Smith develops very modest desires, which are satisfied to a high degree. Jones, in contrast, faces a much more congenial social environment, which encourages him to form large, ambitious desires. His degree of overall desire satisfaction or life plan fulfillment is less than Smith's. But our intuitive judgment is still that Smith, not Jones, is oppressed. The desire satisfaction metric misses significant aspects of people's condition. The same holds for an enjoyment metric. Oppressed Smith may manage to be cheerful, and to take pleasure in very small bits of good fortune, and so enjoy more pleasure over the course of her life than Jones, whose life is nonetheless uncontroversially better in many important ways.

### 3. OPPORTUNITY FOR WELFARE

The manifest inadequacies of the first-pass welfare metric do not necessarily justify a stampede to a metric of resources. Notice that the three criticisms mentioned are not knockdown objections.

*Responsibility.* The charge that welfarist conceptions of justice ignore individual responsibility could be met by asserting that an aspect of the fair treatment that justice demands is treating people in ways that are sensitive to whether or not they are behaving responsibly. In other words, what distributive justice demands us to do for an individual depends on her current condition, assessed in terms of welfare, and also on the degree to which she is rightly deemed responsible for her present condition. This might be done in several ways. One way is to hold that what society owes each individual is a fair distribution of initial opportunities and resources, and the measure of the individual's initial opportunities and resources is the opportunity they afford for gaining welfare or well-being. In this abstraction we assume that the factors that determine an individual's welfare over the course of her life are already fixed except for the individual's own choices, so the quality of those choices in the context of her given circumstances determines her welfare prospects. This approach involves a division of responsibility between the individual and society. Society is responsible (in the sense of obligated) to provide the individual circumstances including a resource division and an institutional arrangement that give her a fair opportunity for a genuinely good life, and the individual is responsible (in the sense that she will bear the consequences of her choices without claiming additional compensation) for choosing the sort of life she leads and the resultant level of well-being she reaches.

According to an opportunity for welfare conception of justice, each person is owed a fair level of opportunity for welfare. Given the circumstances you face over the course of your life, your opportunity for welfare is the level of welfare you would reach if you tried prudently to advance your own welfare without violating strict obligations of law and morality and if you pursued this prudent aim as effectively as it would be reasonable to expect of you, when taking into account your choice-making and choice-executing abilities and the difficulty and pain you would have to overcome to live prudently. This definition stretches the ordinary notion of an "opportunity" somewhat. The main stretch is that the opportunity afforded you by a set of options among which you are free to choose is fixed by the level of welfare you would reach if you behaved as prudently as it would be reasonable to expect. This means that the level of welfare you would reach if you behaved better or worse than one should expect does not affect your opportunity in this sense. Of course a more complete notion would somehow integrate all the levels of welfare you might reach given any degree of prudence you might achieve in choosing among your life options. For simplicity I leave the more complete notion unexplored.

Regarding individual responsibility, my proposal seeks to steer between two unacceptable positions. On the one hand, if society brings it about that a person has a fair amount of opportunity for welfare and she then proceeds to make choices, for which she is reasonably deemed responsible, that result in her reaching less welfare than she had an opportunity to get, it would be unacceptable to claim that distributive justice requires further compensation to the individual. On the other hand, it would be too harsh to insist that if one could reach a certain level of welfare only if one behaved perfectly prudently

throughout one's life, then one has a genuine opportunity to reach that level of welfare. For it may be the case that one lacks the ability to behave with perfect prudence, or that doing so would be so difficult or painful that it would be unreasonable to expect that one sustains that level of rational conduct throughout one's life. If I am reasonably to be deemed to have had the opportunity to reach a certain level of welfare, then there must have been a sequence of choices and actions available to me that I could have executed without exceeding a tolerable level of difficulty or pain.

Return now to the tale of Smith and Jones that was supposed to be an objection against any welfare-oriented conception of justice. Smith and Jones have equal welfare at present and given an infusion of available resources, each would gain an equal amount of welfare. So on a welfarist standard, helping Smith looks to be morally on a par with helping Jones, which is a problem, because consistently with all that has been said so far, Smith and Jones might be very unequally responsible for their present welfare condition. But if we identify what people are owed according to distributive justice with a fair amount of opportunity for welfare, we integrate the concern about responsibility without abandoning a welfarist measure of people's condition. If Smith has come to a bad plight through pressure of unfortunate circumstances that he could not have avoided by reasonable choice, whereas Jones has come to an identically bad plight as the foreseeable outcome of choices he made for which he can reasonably be deemed responsible, an opportunity for welfare conception will distinguish their positions and judge that Smith but not Jones may have a claim in justice to extra compensation.

It may be worth noting that the view that justice requires bringing it about that every person has a fair amount of opportunity for welfare as I conceive it accommodates

a norm of individual responsibility but resists the idea that distributive justice holds that people should get what they deserve or should enjoy good fortune in proportion to their moral merits. To see this, consider two variants of the Smith and Jones story. In both, Smith ends up with poor prospects for welfare that are not brought about by her own exercise of choice but are just the results of sheer misfortune. In both variants, Jones makes responsible choices and foreseeably becomes badly off as a result, when she had the opportunity to make another set of choices that would have brought her the amount of welfare the opportunity for which made it the case that she initially had a fair opportunity for welfare. In one variant, Jones behaves nonvirtuously imprudently, and squanders her resources foolishly. In a second variant, Jones behaves virtuously imprudently—she chooses a course of supererogatory virtue and dedicates her life to sacrifice for a good cause. In the first variant, Jones is very undeserving, and in the second, she is morally very deserving, but in each case she is responsible for her present welfare prospect in the sense that she chose a course of actions from an array of choices some of which would have provided her a level of welfare that is acceptable and fair.

Notice that although I have not attempted to integrate a concern for deservingness within a welfarist conception of distributive justice, one could do so. Hence the judgment that any of a variety of views about individual responsibility and deservingness matters for distributive justice does not generate any reason to abandon the position that welfare should be the currency of justice.

*Individual freedom.* Does distributive justice require that each individual get a share of resources that combines with her other circumstances to yield a fair level of opportunity for welfare or rather a fair degree of freedom to do whatever of value that



one might choose to do with one's life, whether or not one's choices enhance one's own welfare? The latter might sound more appealing, but then even a complex welfarist conception of justice must be rejected.

In response, three points. First, to lead a genuinely good life requires choice from options, because the good life for a person involves exercise of agency, not simply passive consumption of imposed pleasure. So the alleged welfarist anti-utopia of unfreedom could not actually provide adequate opportunity for genuine well-being to anyone. Individual freedom is an important means to well-being for creatures like us, who often do not know now what will be best to choose in the future, so for now keeping our options open is best. Individual freedom is also an important constituent of well-being, insofar as people reasonably prefer having a choice among significantly different options and choosing among them to having no choice even if what they must do as matters stand is what they would continue to regard as best even if valuable options were added to their singleton choice set.

The idea of individual freedom invoked just above holds that an individual has more freedom at a time, the wider the array of significantly different valuable courses of action that is available to her, any of which she can choose at that time. One could enjoy wide freedom in this sense without having any significant options that involve broadly altruistic agency—the opportunity to improve the lives of other people or to further another good cause without any benefit to one's own welfare and perhaps at cost to it. If one supposes that distributive justice requires giving people a fair amount of opportunity to exercise altruistic agency, it might look as though welfare-oriented conceptions of distributive justice are still in trouble.

My second point addresses this worry. Having the freedom to choose what is admirable and fine independently of its impact on one's welfare may itself be a significant constituent of welfare. Consider what Amartya Sen has called "agency goals"—goals which an agent pursues, and which he has reason to value.<sup>10</sup> It might be the case that if the options one has over the course of one's life to act on agency goals were somehow confined to the well-being subset of these goals, this would in itself make one's life poorer in well-being. If this was so, then guaranteeing that an individual has adequate well-being by providing him only well-being options would be unfeasible.

Whether or not this point is accepted, a third point can be made. Let us distinguish one's aim that some good outcome should obtain and one's aim that some good outcome be obtained through one's own agency. As a parent my goal might not be just that my children should flourish but that my children should flourish as a result (*inter alia*) of the care I give them. I might prefer that my children flourish via my care to a certain extent to another possible state of affairs in which my children flourish to a greater extent but not via my care activity. The desire that an impersonally good outcome should come about might be entirely disinterested, but the desire that it come about through my agency is in part a self-interested preference, and if reasonable, its satisfaction contributes to my welfare.

My claim is that once one distinguishes agency goals and genuinely altruistic goals, it ceases to be plausible to maintain that distributive justice requires that everyone must have some fair level of opportunity to pursue altruistic goals. The desire to do something significant and valuable with one's life, the desire that the world be made better by one's agency, is a desire whose fulfillment enhances the desirer's welfare. But

if a fair amount of this sort of agency has been made available to me as part of providing me fair opportunity for welfare, further catering to my altruistic goals is not required by distributive justice.

The discussion so far identifies various ways in which individual freedom can contribute to well-being. This point might be thought insufficient to rebut the objection, which was that a welfarist social justice standard need not require that the individual have any freedom (even if freedom is good, its loss could be compensated). But whether this is so depends on whether there are some goods that one must achieve to some threshold extent in order to have an overall acceptable quality of life. If so, and if types of freedom are included on the list of goods all of which must be had to at least some minimal extent, then the welfarist decisively accommodates the thought that a life without individual freedom is a poor one. A weaker response might be adequate to deflect the objection. Suppose that there are no goods one absolutely must have in order to lead a good life, but that one's overall well-being score is affected by the mix of goods one gets, so that one's score on dimension A is enhanced if one also has a sufficiently high score on dimensions B, C, and D (for example). This type of accounting might adequately register the value of individual freedom for the good life.

In responding to the freedom objection, I have helped myself to the assumption that satisfying what I have called agency goals is an important constituent of an individual's welfare. A person who has such goals and has them satisfied is better off, other things being equal, than someone who has such goals but cannot satisfy them, and also better off than someone who never forms significant agency aims. This is to reject the position that what advances an individual's welfare is fixed by the subjective desires

and attitudes she happens to have. This invocation of an objective notion of well-being anticipates my response to the next objection, which supposes that welfare is subjective in nature.

*The claimed inadequacy of preference satisfaction and enjoyment as measures of people's condition for purposes of distributive justice.* Here the response is simple. On its face, this objection does not touch the welfarist idea, but only one or another specific conception of welfare that is claimed to be inadequate. Welfare or utility is just a name for whatever makes someone's life intrinsically better. It is what someone pursues when she is being rationally prudent. According to the classical utilitarians, utility is to be identified with pleasure or happiness, but there are several other theories of utility. Some objections presented as objections against welfarist conceptions of distributive justice are really objections against particular conceptions of welfare. For example, some have claimed that welfarism would require us to hold that Tiny Tim, the cheerful crippled boy in Charles Dickens's story A Christmas Carol, would qualify as one of the better off even if he is poor and lacks the use of his legs, just because he is cheerful and disposed to be happy.<sup>11</sup> This result would be counterintuitive, because we are likely to regard an impoverished crippled boy as disadvantaged regardless of his ability to sustain a cheerful disposition in his adverse circumstances. But the counterexample trades on the supposition that welfare is constituted by subjective feelings of satisfaction. The counterexample moves us, I submit, just because we reject the idea that leading a truly good, choiceworthy life is just a matter of sustaining happy attitudes from moment to moment throughout one's life. This is not what one has in mind when one expresses to the parents of a friend's child the wish that the child will have a good life. But then the

counterexample cannot amount to an objection against welfarism but at most to an objection against a particular conception of welfare deemed to be inadequate.<sup>12</sup>

A closely related point vitiates Ronald Dworkin's attempted refutation of welfarism in his "What Is Equality: Part 1: Equality of Welfare."<sup>13</sup> Dworkin supposes that the most plausible conception of any individual's welfare is not the degree to which her life plans are fulfilled but the degree to which her life as a whole is successful. But one needs a baseline for assessing the degree to which one's life is successful, and the baseline must incorporate an account of one's circumstances, including whether or not one has enjoyed a provision of resources that is fair. One can assess the success of one's life only by determining the degree (if any) to which one reasonably regrets one's life course, compared to this baseline, according to Dworkin. But then any account of individual welfare that could serve as a distributive justice standard must already presuppose an account of fair distribution of resources and cannot contribute to that account, Dworkin concludes.

Dworkin's argument perhaps succeeds against subjectivist conceptions of welfare, according to which an individual's well-being level is fixed by her opinions and attitudes (however weird or unreasonable) toward her life and its attainments. No sensible ideal of distributive justice could suppose that what counts as fair distribution with respect to an individual depends on such opinions and attitudes. But if our standard of individual welfare is objective, then whether an individual is well off or badly off will not vary arbitrarily with her opinions and attitudes, but will be fixed by the degree to which over the course of her life she obtains what is truly valuable and worthwhile. With a list of objective goods and a weighting of their relative significance, one does not need to

suppose that what is good for a person depends on her circumstances. If artistic achievement is good, then it would be good for me, independently of my particular circumstances. Such circumstances as that I have no easel and brush or no artistic talent will determine whether that particular good is accessible to me and whether it would be sensible for me to make its achievement one of my actual life aims. But if what would be good for me to get if I could get it does not vary with my particular circumstances, then a fortiori it does not vary depending on circumstances that should determine what in my life I can reasonably regret. There is no temptation whatsoever to suppose that a welfarist ideal with this yardstick of individual welfare needs anything like the fatal "reasonable regret" idea that Dworkin proposes in order to carry out interpersonal comparisons. Welfarist justice is not a nonstarter as Dworkin alleges.<sup>14</sup>

The same point holds against the "expensive tastes" objection against welfare as the standard of interpersonal comparison for a theory of distributive justice.<sup>15</sup> The objection begins by supposing that the theory of justice holds that each individual in society is owed in strict justice access to opportunities and resources that would enable her to gain some target level of welfare that is deemed fair (this might be equality of welfare or the level fixed by some other distributive fairness norm). Suppose that welfare is construed as preference satisfaction as follows. Each individual rates her basic (noninstrumental) preferences over the course of her life in terms of their importance to her, the aggregate of all the individual's preferences to sum to one. The individual's level of preference satisfaction over her life is given by the ratio of satisfied to unsatisfied preferences weighted by her rating. Now consider this norm in its application to a person who has extremely expensive preferences, for champagne rather than for beer, for caviar

rather than for popcorn, and so on. To attain any given level of preference satisfaction deemed fair, this individual must be allotted a proportionally much larger fraction of available social resources than other individuals receive. But this is counterintuitive, according to the objection, and suggests the inadequacy of welfare as the standard of interpersonal comparison for a theory of justice.

Several points are raised at once in this objection. One point concerns the intuitive idea that welfare understood as preference satisfaction is an unsatisfactory measure of how well an individual's life is going. A theory of justice that employs this measure will generate implications that arouse suspicion. But surely part of the suspicion properly attaches to the idea that preference satisfaction is the measure of welfare rather than to the idea that welfare should be the standard of interpersonal comparison. One responds to the expensive taste objection with the response that satisfaction of these expensive and trivial preferences does little to advance the person's genuine well-being. Social resources devoted to satisfaction of preferences the individual mistakenly deems important are rightly viewed with a jaundiced eye as money down the drain. Suppose that we substitute for preference satisfaction an "Objective List" account of welfare of a type I believe to be more promising. Let us stipulate that engagement in relations of love and friendship and intellectual and cultural achievement are items on the list, and that Smith is hampered by genetic endowment and early childhood socialization, so that he has great difficulty in forming and sustaining relationships of love and friendship and similar great difficulty in finding a field of intellectual endeavor that is a match with his talents and proclivities, and in which he has the opportunity for achievement. The upshot is that Smith needs expensive and continuing adult education and time off from

work to engage in serious adult education in order to be able to reach the level of welfare your favorite theory of distributive justice deems fair. With our understanding of welfare shifted from satisfaction of preferences that might be mere whims or excusable mistaken obsessions to attainment of entries on a list of goods that are objectively worthy, the expensive tastes objection loses its persuasive force.

*Responsibility, Again.* The expensive tastes objection is woven of several strands. One is the identification of welfare with subjective preference satisfaction coupled with the doubt that welfare so construed is a morally weighty matter to which distributive justice must be attuned. Another significant strand concerns personal responsibility. One gets two different versions of the expensive taste objection, depending on whether or not one supposes that the individual who needs expensive social resources to be able to gain the justice-stipulated level of welfare is responsible for his plight by his own past voluntary choices or not. At one extreme, we might imagine someone who deliberately cultivates expensive tastes that will be tantamount to addictions, expensive to satisfy and difficult to undo once developed. At the other extreme, we might imagine an individual who develops expensive tastes through no choice of his own--the tastes merely develop as the inevitable expression of some genetic inheritance along with his early childhood social environment. There will of course be many intermediate cases. Faced with any particular example, the case for holding the individual responsible for his expensive preferences (in the sense that society is not obligated to compensate him specially for them by provision of extra social resources) is stronger, the more the individual is reasonably deemed to be responsible for the acquisition and maintenance of the



expensive taste (in the different sense that he has caused or allowed them to develop by his voluntary choice or chosen or negligent inadvertence).

#### 4. RESPONSIBILITY FURTHER CONSIDERED

Can welfarism accommodate concern for individual responsibility? The issue is more complicated than so far indicated. Dworkin has an interesting point not yet addressed. My own sense is that welfarism accommodates individual responsibility only to a degree, and that is good and plenty of accommodation.

First we need to recall that under the opportunity for welfare conception, the level of opportunity for welfare afforded an individual by a given resource allotment in given circumstances is the level of welfare the individual could obtain with those resources. The moral yardstick that measures my opportunities is calibrated in terms of the welfare level I could reach with those opportunities if I chose to use them to my advantage and if I used them as well as could reasonably be expected. If I fail to behave as prudently as it would be reasonable to expect, no further compensation is owed me.

This view might be thought to give short shrift to responsibility by allotting to society the responsibility for determining what counts as a good life for each of us and leaving to the individual just the truncated responsibility of fulfilling that conception. The objection is that each person has an ethical obligation to decide for herself what counts as the best life for herself and to organize her life and assess its success or failure according to this autonomously chosen conception. One is not morally at liberty to turn over this responsibility to others. Nor is it fair for society acting under the guise of distributive justice to usurp this responsibility, which properly belongs to each individual

alone. Any welfarist theory of justice involves just this improper usurpation and is on this ground defective.

According to Dworkin, the individual can be wrong about what would make her life go better. She can be wrong just about what means are best to achieve her goals. She can also adopt as her final ends goals that are not genuinely choiceworthy. But a good life is a life lived well, a performance, like a skillful dive, and not rightly regarded as the production of something beyond itself. The performance must be one's own. One's life must be guided by one's own sense of what is worthwhile and cannot be improved by being guided by other persons or by others' sense of what is worthwhile when that is not endorsed by the individual herself. On this Dworkinian account of a good human life, provision of more resources might enable an individual to achieve more of her goals and persuasion might move an individual to embrace better (or for that matter, worse) goals than she otherwise would have pursued. But the nature of value renders it the case that one cannot improve another's life by forcing her to do what she would not choose to do absent coercion or by forcibly narrowing her option set so as to prevent her from choosing a bad option or by nonrationally manipulating her choice in a way that bypasses rather than engages her powers of critical reflection. These actions would be analogous to improving a person's diving performance by remote control of her brain signals that control her bodily movements. Such actions as a matter of conceptual necessity cannot improve the individual's performance, since that must be self-guided.<sup>16</sup>

Dworkin then has two arguments from responsibility to the claim that distributive justice should be concerned solely with the distribution of resources and not the distribution of welfare or opportunity for welfare. One argument is that the nature of

human good is such that manipulative and paternalistic interference in individual liberty cannot improve the life of the person who suffers the interference. Another argument is that each of us is ethically bound to assume responsibility for the conduct of her own life and hence we cannot rationally consent to a government or other social agency that usurps this responsibility by taking the improvement of our lives as its proper mission. The arguments are independent in that even if it was conceded that paternalistic coercion or manipulation could improve one's life in some circumstances, one still should not consent to an agency that was committed to paternalistic interference in those circumstances. But I do not see any reason to accept the second argument if the first fails. Why do I have an obligation not to consent to manipulative social interference say by way of rhetorically effective propaganda that induces me to prefer better music instead of worse music just in circumstances where that interference really benefits me at either no cost or tolerable cost to others? The discussion to follow concentrates on the first argument.

According to an opportunity for welfare conception, justice requires that society (individuals who are in a position to help) should provide each individual a fair share of what are really opportunities for a genuinely good life. This view does not make the judgment of society authoritative for the issue of what constitutes a genuinely good life for a particular individual. If society offers its children opportunities to play with dangerous snakes and have sex with adults, sincerely believing that these are means to the good life, true opportunities for the good are not provided, and justice is not done. To what extent is justice more likely to be done if society defers to the judgment of each individual regarding the nature of her own good in dealing with that individual? This

depends in part on the relative competence of society and the individual in question. But not only that. If the good life for a person includes the achievement of genuine goods autonomously chosen by the individual herself, then securing fair shares of opportunities for welfare for individuals will other things being equal include provision of opportunities for autonomous choice and self-determination by each person of her own life.<sup>17</sup> (Once again what had looked to be an objection against welfarism turns out to be a criticism of one conception of welfare—in this case, a criticism of the view that the value of a good an individual gets never depends on whether or not it has been autonomously affirmed as valuable by this very individual.)

Distributive justice on the opportunity for welfare conception of it imposes an obligation on us to make the best determination we can of what arrangement will provide fair shares of opportunity for a good life to people and then bring about that arrangement. That welfarism imposes this obligation to judge what is good on society does not rule out the possibility that each individual is obligated to make her own best judgments after critical reflection about what constitutes her good. At least under the conditions of life in diverse modern societies, where many conceptions of the good jostle and compete for allegiance, one generally will have the best chance of living a good life if one exercises one's critical reflective powers to try to figure out what conceptions of the good make sense. The responsibility of society to make determinations about the good according to its own best lights no more obviates the responsibility of the individual to do the same for herself than the responsibility of society to care for children obviates the responsibility of parents to care for their own children.

Although each individual should try to discover her own good for herself, it remains the case that this is a process of discovery, and the individual, no less than society judging for the individual, can make mistakes. Suppose we take it to be the case that objective judgments about the welfare of an individual are relative to that very individual, because individual natures differ. Even so, it remains possible that the individual herself might hold erroneous beliefs about what constitutes her individual welfare--about what ends are worthwhile as well as what are the best means to worthy ends--and that other people might hold correct beliefs about these matters. There is then a possibility that the opportunity for chess is genuinely a valuable opportunity for me even though I myself judge chess to be inherently worthless and chess playing not valuable for its own sake and no part of my good in this primary sense. We can imagine that my situation happens to render it advisable for me to play chess to gain other goods, and I do so, though I regard the activity as inherently worthless. I would suppose that in these circumstances the opportunity to play chess is in itself—and quite independently of any further goods to which it might serve as a means--a valuable opportunity for welfare despite my own belief that this is not so.

Turn then to the issue of paternalistic coercion, which troubles Dworkin. For the welfarist, paternalism will often be wrong because it is likely to be misguided and inept in the ways that J. S. Mill notes in On Liberty.<sup>18</sup> But likelihood is not conceptual necessity. In principle, and perhaps in practice, coercion of me now can block me from acting on ill-considered valuations of what is choiceworthy in a way that either leads to my making better valuations later and acting on them to my benefit or reduces my available options so that I choose better from the reduced set than I would have done

from the richer set of options that contains temptingly attractive but unworthy choices. In fact not all elements of the good life are performances, but even if they were, judicious paternalistic coercion could bring it about that my intentional performances over the course of my life are better than they would be absent this paternalism. This could be so even if performances that enhance the quality of my life must be freely chosen by me at the time of the performance.

Dworkin attempts to combine the views (1) that what constitutes an individual's well-being is an objective matter not fixed by the subjective opinions and attitudes of that very individual and (2) it is the obligation and privilege of each individual alone to choose a conception of her good and determine a plan of life to fulfill it, and this individual responsibility can neither be alienated to society or social agencies nor superseded by paternalistic or otherwise manipulative social policy. He argues that although any individual might well be mistaken about her good, overriding her autonomy cannot improve her life. The welfarist regards autonomy as an instrument for achieving well-being and also as a partial constituent of well-being but not as a value that takes priority over well-being. She must acknowledge that in principle person A can coercively or manipulatively interfere in person B's life in a way that aims to boost B's well-being according to values B does not share and is successful in this broadly paternalistic enterprise. This leaves it open for the welfarist to give strict priority to protection of liberty in self-regarding matters for libertarian utilitarian reasons. The welfarist can then march only part way down the road Dworkin urges, but on this road of individual responsibility, part way may be as far as one can sensibly go. I conclude that the proponent of an opportunity for welfare conception of distributive justice need not be

making the mistake of denying proper individual responsibility for making value judgments that determine what counts as a truly good opportunity for that individual.

## 5. THE FACT OF PLURALISM

Some readers will be impatient with the argument to this point. They will hold that the decisive reason not to use a welfare standard in the theory of distributive justice is that no such standard is available, so we really have no choice. The idea that we can appeal for political purposes to an objective ideal of well-being to make interpersonal comparisons runs afoul of the fact of pluralism: In the absence of clearly unacceptable state tyranny, reasonable persons will not agree on any standard of value or conception of the good that could play the role of welfarist standard. Instead they will continue to embrace, and reasonably embrace, a wide variety of conflicting views.<sup>19</sup> So we are stuck with the best version of a resourcist theory we can construct, whatever its liabilities.

This fact-of-pluralism objection cannot be dismissed so long as we lack a convincing objective account of the good for humans.<sup>20</sup> Uncontroversial judgments about what constitutes human good tend to be pitched at a high level of abstraction, and arguably do not suffice to yield a standard of interpersonal comparison. Nonetheless, the fact of pluralism is not the knockdown objection against welfarism it is sometimes taken to be.

It will be useful to state the objection in the form of an argument invoking the ideas of a legitimate government and reasonable rejectability.

1. A morally legitimate government does not impose on its citizens coercively on the basis of principles which some could reasonably reject.

2. Any coercive imposition on citizens on the basis of controversial conceptions of human good is coercive imposition on the basis of principles which some could reasonably reject.

3. A morally legitimate government does not impose on its citizens coercively on the basis of controversial conceptions of human good.

If one adds the premise that a just government is a morally legitimate government, then justice requires abstention from coercive imposition on the basis of controversial conceptions of human good.

Some clarification of the terms of the argument is needed. Let us say that one acts on the basis of a principle when the principle is needed to justify the action. Whether or not a governmental policy offends against the moral legitimacy ideal does not depend on whether citizens do actually reject its principled basis, but on whether they could reasonably do so. This implies that citizens might actually reject unreasonably the basis of a policy that is not reasonably rejectable, and citizens might actually unanimously acquiesce in a policy whose basis is in fact reasonably rejectable.

If one adds the further premise that any purportedly objective conception of human well-being will be controversial, then justice requires that government should refrain from coercive imposition on citizens on the basis of any such objective conception of human well-being.

This position will seem all the more plausible once one notes that in contemporary democracies, most citizens derive their comprehensive conceptions of the good from theological premises. But any such theological premises and their negations as well that could serve as a justification, secular or religious, for state policies would be



reasonably rejectable by some citizens. The liberal affirmation of religious toleration and state neutrality in religious matters, when its implications are developed, supports the ideal of morally legitimate government.

My response to the three-step argument is that it provides no reasons for doubting that welfare should be the currency of justice. This becomes clear once one concentrates on the interpretation of the idea of reasonable rejectability. If one understands “reasonable” strictly, so that all moral positions except the one that is best supported by reasons (or the set of alternative views if several are tied for best) would be reasonably rejected, then coercive imposition on the basis of the theory of human good that is best supported by reasons is not reasonably rejectable. Following this path, one finds that the legitimacy ideal is unexceptionable but is fully compatible with reliance on principles of right that include the best theory of human good. On the other hand, if one interprets “reasonable” loosely, so that a person who conscientiously tries to ponder what moral principles to accept and engages in critical scrutiny above some threshold level of competence can be deemed reasonable even if she makes mistakes in her practical deliberation, then the moral legitimacy ideal yoked to this loose construal of reasonable rejectability is itself illegitimate and cannot sensibly be invoked to rule out welfare as the currency of justice.

In other words, you can say if you like that one should always respect persons by conducting oneself in relation to them only on the basis of principles they could not reasonably reject. Joined with other persons and acting through a government or a similar agency of society, one is bound by the same principle of respect for persons. But the principles one can reasonably reject are those that are not best supported by reasons.

If you act or refrain from acting toward me on the basis of a principle I reject because I am (perhaps excusably) mistaken in my deliberations on moral principles, you do not violate this norm of respect for persons. I may be excusably an advocate of a racist principle, but a government does not violate any valid ideal of legitimacy or respect for persons by coercively imposing on me on the basis of a nonracist moral principle that I would accept if I were fully rational. Exactly the same holds for coercive imposition on the basis of conceptions of the good.

Up to this point my formulation of the reasonable rejectability idea assumes that best reasons are available. Suppose more realistically that our epistemic situation with respect to choice of moral principle is cloudy: we see through a glass darkly. Our understanding of the considerations that bear on choice of principle is fragmentary, and reasonably thought to be fragmentary. But the same points made already about reasonable rejectability still hold, *mutatis mutandis*, with “best supported by available reasons” substituted for “best supported by reasons.” The principles best supported by available reasons are the ones that those who engage in practical deliberation more competently than anyone else find to be best supported by reasons. From the standpoint of a more enlightened age, these principles could still turn out to be knowably false. But I am not treated with wrongful disrespect, and no valid ideal of moral legitimacy is violated, if other people or the state impose coercively on me on the basis of moral principles that are best supported by available reasons even though they are rejected by me because my practical reasoning efforts are less than fully competent.

We should also take note of epistemic asymmetries. Smith might in a sense reasonably reject the moral principle on the basis of which Jones is acting toward him to

his disadvantage because he is ignorant through no fault of his own of empirical facts that warrant the principle. Or the principle might be warranted by an argument that involves mathematical reasoning that Smith, through no fault of his own, has never learned. The relevant sense of reasonable rejectability that figures in the moral legitimacy ideal and the associated norm of respect for persons abstracts from these matters of local unavailability of relevant reasons. It does not violate any valid norm of moral legitimacy and respect for persons if people impose on Smith coercively on the basis of an antiracist principle that Smith, a believer in racial superiority, rejects because through no fault or responsibility of his own he lacks access to the empirical premises or modes of reasoning that render the principle best supported by available reasons.

The foregoing may strike the reader as a harsh and implausible doctrine.<sup>21</sup> Given their different life experiences and their nonidiosyncratic but also nonidentical assignments of weights to competing reasons, fully reasonable people will disagree in fundamental ways about the ethical principles that specify how we should live. Consider religious disagreement. After reflective scrutiny, some individuals will base their fundamental views on the right and the good on religious premises that other equally reasonable individuals reject. It is unreasonable not to allow that individuals can disagree in these ways, and hence unreasonable to impose controversial conceptions of the good and the right in violation of the moral legitimacy ideal.

I disagree. To the extent that different individuals reasoning and reflecting in ways that are equally likely to single out best reasons for principles come to disagree, then once their disagreement is known, the fully reasonable person modifies what she believes. If I believe that philosophical contemplation is a basic good (good for its own

sake), and you deny this, and your reasons counterbalance mine, and the extra weight I assign to some reasons is no more warranted than the assignment of extra weight you assign to opposed reasons, then both of us if we are rational must modify our original views. We should believe that the reasons for and against are in the relevant respect evenly balanced, so philosophical contemplation for all we know might or might not be a good. A fully reasonable person does not insist on continued adherence to an opinion in the face of another who disagrees and can muster just as good reasons for denying the opinion as the believer had for affirming it.

Nor does the existence in society of wide disagreement about ethics reflecting widely different views about God and the afterlife rule out the deployment of a controversial theory of the good in the determination of social policy in the just society. In fact we have no reasonable basis for beliefs about the afterlife of the sort that religions teach, so no such doctrine is available as a reasonable basis for public policy, whereas secular views about this-worldly good are not ruled out on this basis. (This last claim needs a defense in philosophy of religion arguments that this essay does not attempt to supply.) An objective theory of human good supported by best available reasons may well be controversial because rejected by some citizens, but should not be controversial, because it is not in the strict sense reasonably rejectable by anyone.

It may well be that the theory of the good yields only partial commensurability, in the sense that in some circumstances, an individual's achieving X neither adds more to his well-being than would achieving Y, nor less, nor the same amount. Goods X and Y in these circumstances would be indeterminately as good as one another. But the reasonable response to partial commensurability is not to abandon welfarism but to accept that in

many circumstances the best theory of justice does not specify a uniquely best policy even when all relevant facts are known, because of evaluative indeterminacy.

Political philosophers tend to exaggerate the extent of reasonable disagreement about the good. Reasonable people can make unreasonable mistakes, but one's general reasonableness does not render any of one's particular mistakes reasonable. Moreover, people vary in reasoning capacity (though identifying the variations among persons in the midst of controversy may be difficult in practice). Questions of human good are complex and intertwined with hard empirical and metaphysical issues. It is not easy to hold together all the threads that need to be integrated in sound ethical judgment, and it is not elitist but just sensible to acknowledge that most of us are not very good at making these judgments and some of us are lousy at it. In the absence of rigorous critical scrutiny that eschews cognitive errors by those who pronounce on ethical controversies, disagreement on the good among citizens of contemporary societies, however endemic, has little probative force against welfarist standards. In this domain of thought much that is regularly controverted is not genuinely controversial. Among the entire citizenship of a democracy, there may well be just as much intractable disagreement about empirical matters of fact as about ethical values, but the fact of disagreement does not block us from basing public policy on the best scientific opinion we can locate, and should not block us from basing policy on the best conceptions of human good we can discern.

At any rate, the resourcist supposes that there is a significant asymmetry between norms of right and standards of good, such that the former can be the object of reasonable disagreement when the latter cannot. But the asymmetry is not defended, and implausible as stated. We are every bit as reasonably confident about our most

considered convictions about the good as about our most considered convictions about right and justice. If one rejects the false presumption of asymmetry, then wholesale skepticism about the possibility of reasoned agreement about human good should be accompanied by similar wholesale skepticism about the possibility of reasoned agreement about principles of right. The fact of pluralism in any form that defeats welfarism supports not resourcism but the euthanasia of theories of social justice.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the major objections against the employment of welfare as the standard of interpersonal comparison for distributive justice and found them all wanting. If you believe that justice requires social provision of aid to the unfortunate, you ought to interpret misfortune as deficit in welfare or well-being understood in objective terms, and hold that institutions and social practices should be arranged so as to enable each individual to achieve a level of welfare that the principles of justice determine to be fair.

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<sup>1</sup>. My suggestion that some objections to employing welfare as the standard of interpersonal comparison for a theory of justice are overcome by adopting an Objective List account of welfare raises the question how my account is related to the views of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on these issues. Sen is an implicit ally, because in his writings he stops short of asserting that the theory of justice needs an objective theory of good. Nussbaum explicitly advances an approach to distributive justice along the lines I favor. For my responses to Nussbaum and Sen, see my “Perfectionism and Politics,” forthcoming in *Ethics* (2000). For Sen’s views, see [Inequality Reexamined](#) (Cambridge:

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Harvard University Press, 1992). For Nussbaum's views, see her "Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution," Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, supp. Vol. 1 (1988): 145-184; also "Aristotelian Social Democracy," in Liberalism and the Good, ed. R. Bruce Douglas, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 203-252; "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," Political Theory 20 (1992): 202-246; and "Women and Cultural Universals," in Martha Nussbaum, Sex and Justice (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29-54.

<sup>2</sup>. Amartya Sen, "Equality of What?," reprinted in Sen, Choice, Welfare, and Measurement (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982): 353-369.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare," Philosophy and Public Affairs 10 (1981): 185-236; "What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources," Philosophy and Public Affairs 10 (1981): 243-285; and "What Is Equality? Part 3: The Place of Liberty," Iowa Law Review 73 (1987): 1-54.

<sup>4</sup>. On Lockean natural rights theory, see Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (New York: Basic Books, 1974). On Hobbesian contractarianism, see David Gauthier, Morals by Agreement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup>. Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Equality and Pluralism (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>6</sup>. On prioritarianism, see Derek Parfit, "Equality or Priority?," Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1994. See also Paul Weirich, "Utility Tempered with Equality," Nous 17 (1983): 423-39.

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- <sup>7</sup> . This terminology is used in John E. Roemer, Theories of Distributive Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), ch. 5.
- <sup>8</sup> . See Amartya Sen, “Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984,” Journal of Philosophy 82 (1985): 169-221.
- <sup>9</sup> . Amartya Sen’s writings develop this objection. See Sen, “Rights and Agency,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 11 (1982): 3-39; also Sen, “Well-being, Agency and Freedom.”
- <sup>10</sup> . Sen, “Well-being, Agency and Freedom,” 203.
- <sup>11</sup> . The example and the point it illustrates is borrowed from G. A. Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” Ethics 99 (1989): 906-944; see pp. 917-918.
- <sup>12</sup> . This point is drawn from Arneson, “What Do Socialists Want?,” Politics and Society 22 (1994): 549-567.
- <sup>13</sup> . Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare.”
- <sup>14</sup> . See Arneson, “Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 19 (1990): 158-194; see esp. 180-183.
- <sup>15</sup> . See John Rawls, “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” reprinted in his Collected Papers, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 359-387; see 368-371; Ronald Dworkin, “What Is Equality: Part 1: Equality of Welfare,”; also Eric Rakowski, Equal Justice (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- <sup>16</sup> . Ronald Dworkin, “Foundations of Liberal Equality,” in The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, vol. 11, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 1-119.



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<sup>17</sup> . Peter Railton indicates how the embrace of an objective account of human good enhances the plausibility of consequentialist moral views in his “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” reprinted in Consequentialism and Its Critics, ed. Samuel Scheffler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 93-133.

<sup>18</sup> . J. S. Mill, On Liberty, in Collected Works, vol. 18 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 213-310.

<sup>19</sup> . See John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), Lectures I and V.

<sup>20</sup> For good recent discussions, see Thomas Hurka, Perfectionism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and George Sher, Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> . For arguments for this claim, see John Rawls, Political Liberalism, Lectures I and V; also Joshua Cohen, “A More Democratic Liberalism,” Michigan Law Review 92 (1994): 1503-1546.