

AGAINST THE CAREERIST CONCEPTION OF WELL-BEING

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INTRODUCTION

The question of what sort of life is most worth living no doubt predates the birth of philosophy, and people of any place, era, or culture reflect on issues that touch it intimately. However you dress it up, it remains *the* quotidian¹ question of philosophy, and it is no wonder that it completely dominates early philosophical ethics in the Hellenic and Hellenistic periods. Its subsequent departure from centre stage is more puzzling, but can perhaps be laid at the door of Christianity, with its authoritarian prescriptions and proscriptions, and guaranteed rewards and punishments—ground that is rich and fertile for *duty*, the stern dominatrix of modern philosophical ethics.

Of course human well-being has never been completely neglected by philosophers, and these days it shows up as a secondary character in various places, including the back rooms of liberal political philosophy, where it appears as *the good* of which we have irreconcilably differing conceptions, and which politics must therefore leave for us to pursue for ourselves.

Our current understandings of humanity and culture give us more reason than the ancients to acknowledge a possibly irreducible pluralism and relativism in the kinds of lives that are worth living, and thus in legitimate conceptions of human well-being. But we are nonetheless drawn by the lure of an overarching theory that reveals some unities beneath the endless diversities, even if those unities are only skeletal structures or family resemblances. And I too see such a theory as an enticing goal—even if it cannot be achieved. But this goal figures only incidentally in the present essay, which has the far more modest aim of exposing one candidate for such a theory as a fraud.

Actually, the candidate I have in mind, which I brazenly label *the careerist conception of well-being*, is more a picture than a theory. Moreover, it seldom appears in full-frontal glory, but often lurks coyly in discourse directed mainly

at other purposes. I don't believe that I can pin this picture decisively on any particular philosopher, but a wide range of contemporary thinkers seem to me to be tacitly committed to large parts of it. Among them are some outstanding liberal thinkers, even though the careerist conception is not, I believe, an essential or even desirable component of liberalism.

In what follows I take the liberty of casting Ronald Dworkin as a champion of the careerist conception of well-being for the sake of having a determinate adversary with a ready-made script with which I can join issue.² But, although at points Dworkin comes close to an endorsement of the careerist conception, parts of his text leave him room to disown it. In any case, I don't think that Dworkin is much more guilty of the view than others in whose thought it is merely insinuated.

EXPOSITION

I call the view of well-being that I am targeting *the careerist conception* because it in effect treats a worthwhile life as akin to a successful career—or, at least, to a certain caricature of a successful career. It abjures the idea that a worthwhile life must have a particular substantive character and include specifiable goods; and I will not take issue with it on these points. What I will contest is its way of filling the resulting gap, viz., by insisting that a worthwhile life must involve the realisation of a life-plan that the agent has freely, consciously, and reflectively chosen from a position of self-knowledge and realistic foresight about her likely future circumstances; and that it includes the setting of short-, medium- and long-term challenges through careful deliberation based on that overall plan, and ongoing success in meeting these challenges. The careerist conception, in other words, construes a worthwhile life as one that is freely and self-consciously authored by a “strong evaluator,” who understands, endorses, and owns the desires, tastes, inclinations, decisions, and intentions on which she acts.³

This sort of view emerges quite naturally from the social, economic, and intellectual atmosphere of the West at the turn of the century. I will not dwell on the flourishing culture of self-appraisal, strategic planning, and success and failure that, through the conduits of the global economy, is spreading almost everywhere, but I would like to mention three philosophical currents that tend in the general direction of the careerist conception of well-being. First, there is a widespread, tacit commitment to some form of rational decision theory as an appropriate normative guide for human choice—a commitment that some critics of the dominant “economic” model may share. Second, within the philosophy of action, there is a strong inclination to assume that planning is pervasively involved in almost all human intention and action.⁴ Third, there is a stronger and deeper tendency, with

important roots in the thought of Kant, to see an action as free or a life as autonomous only if it is knowledgeably, rationally, and self-consciously created or authored by the agent. As George Sher describes this position, “to qualify as autonomous, a person must formulate, execute, and monitor his *own* life plan.”⁵

Some aspects of the careerist conception of well-being are well illustrated by Dworkin’s *model of challenge*. “Life itself,” Dworkin tells us, “is to be seen as a challenge” (*FLE* 249). Furthermore, “the value of a good life lies in the inherent value of a skilful performance of living” (*FLE* 241); and “our critical interests consist in the achievements, events, and experiences that mean we have met the challenge well” (*FLE* 244). Moreover, “if living well is regarded as a challenge, defining what it is to live well must be part of that challenge too” (*FLE* 251); and “skill at that challenge might . . . require avoiding rather than embracing arduous exploits in favor of a life more suited to one’s talents or situation or satisfactions or cultural expectations” (*FLE* 249).

Thoughts like these are accompanied by a pervasive tendency to identify well-being with *success*. Dworkin, for example, recommends the model of challenge because it “allows more subtlety to our judgment of the success of our own and other people’s lives” (*FLE* 248); and he thinks that the model of challenge can do justice to his belief that “it is obviously compelling that making great music or conquering pneumonia or restoring the pride of a race are among the good ways to live” (*FLE* 247–48).

Although Dworkin views *goals* and *ambitions* and their achievement as central to a worthwhile life (see, e.g., *FLE* 243), he does not explicitly invoke the notion of planning in the particular text from which I am quoting. Planning is, however, in the forefront of Rawls’s discussion of well-being in *A Theory of Justice*,⁶ where he sees a constitutive link between life-plans and well-being: “The rational plan for a person determines his good. Here I adapt Royce’s thought that a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan” (*TJ* 408). And again: “The definition of the good is purely formal. It simply states that a person’s good is determined by the rational plan of life that he would choose with deliberative rationality from the maximal class of plans” (*TJ* 424). It is pointless to protest that an unplanned life could in principle satisfy this condition, for how could anyone seriously present the above as a *definition* (rather than, say, a heuristic for discovering someone’s good) if he did not think that planning itself was essential to well-being?

I hope that these considerations will persuade you that the careerist conception of well-being is not the product of an overactive imagination, but a live philosophical position that is worthy of critical attention.

CRITIQUE

I begin my criticism of the careerist conception of well-being with a counterexample that I set out in some detail. I must, however, emphasize that my case against the careerist conception does not depend crucially on this counterexample. For not all my objections to the careerist conception are reflected in the counterexample, and those that it does reflect could easily be illustrated in radically different ways.

Consider, then, the case of an easy-going man of good humour and good will, but very modest intelligence, who spends his entire life in a stable, crime-free community that is economically well-off and relatively isolated from the ills of the world. Suppose he grows up contentedly in a loving family that provides for most of his physical and psychological needs; that he is blessed with good health, which takes care of itself throughout his life; that after the normal basic education he joins a well-established local firm without much deliberation or forethought and spends his entire working life there, advancing slowly and moving between departments, always content with his mildly interesting, socially rewarding, and not too challenging job, which takes little planning on his part, but gives him a satisfactory income and a great deal of leisure time. He values this highly, and devotes it to relaxing and socialising with friends and family, reading undemanding novels, watching sport and sitcoms on television, and other unchallenging activities that he greatly enjoys. Of course he sometimes plans and dreams and evaluates, but all in all he's not a very reflective guy, and his planning is minimal and concerns the particular and immediate rather than the general contours of his life. Imagine that he marries a woman whose needs and wants complement his own; that they spend their lives together happily as friends and lovers who have an active and rewarding sex life; that without much deliberation they decide to have children, whom they greatly enjoy; and that they have the good luck of never having to face a crisis with which they cannot cope. Finally, since we are in the land of make-believe, let us assume that our hero is generally satisfied with his life, never feels threatened by serious evil, sees himself as meeting most of his obligations and doing some good, and has an easy death.

Perhaps this may appear a life too unchallenging and unproductive, and a fantasy too boringly quotidian, for you and me. Perhaps. But relative to the modest talents of our hero and the lot of most human beings, it would clearly be a life that is well worth living. This easy judgment is an expression of the more fundamental thought that, other things being equal, if a life *feels* good to the liver (either consistently, or dominantly over the later years—but let us not quibble about details here), then it *is* good. And, I would add (adapting a phrase of Tweedledee's), *if it doesn't, it ain't*.

Let me stress that in this context “feels good” should be understood broadly so that it embraces not only enjoyable sensations and emotions but also, to mention just two further possibilities, a less determinate glow that might infuse one’s activities over extended periods, and a more cognitive disposition to evaluate one’s life and lot positively. Of course a life may not feel good in all the ways in which this is possible, and it may feel good in some ways and bad in others—which might subtract from, or add spice to, what feels good about it. This leaves plenty of room for philosophical technicians to toy with the issue of how to arrive at an overall evaluation, but it in no way compromises the crude, general link between a life’s feeling good and its being good; and this is enough to cast serious doubt on the careerist conception of well-being.⁷

What the above example illustrates is that good fortune can make an enormous contribution to well-being, and that reflective life-planning is not always necessary for its realisation. As I have suggested, it is not hard to come up with other examples that challenge the careerist conception in these ways even though they differ greatly in tone, detail, and perspective. Think of an idealised “primitive” life in circumstances of natural abundance, or the (perhaps more admirable) case of a hard-living, hard-drinking writer who seldom indulges in introspection or planning, but always seizes the many opportunities that come her way, and relishes every day of her life.

Reflective life-planning is not only unnecessary for well-being; it is also insufficient. As Annette Baier observes, deliberative reason may not always serve someone’s interests as well as impulse and instinct do.⁸ Moreover, no amount of planning, however responsible and insightful, could rule out the possibility that

. . . the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

—Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*

There are numerous ways in which we are hostage to fortune. Among the many factors that are apt to affect the quality of our lives but may be completely beyond our powers of prediction or control, it is worth mentioning:

- the circumstances into which we are born;
- our characters, dispositions, abilities, and disabilities, and those of our parents, siblings, children, or others with whom our lot is cast;
- who we meet and how our initial responses to one another will impact on possible future relationships;
- how people who could or do make a difference to us will act and react in critical circumstances;
- what joint actions and processes (and bonds and tensions) will emerge from the individual behaviour of members of groups with which we are involved;
- our health and physical constitutions, and how they will be affected by various possible lifestyles;
- large-scale social, political, economic, scientific, and technological circumstances, forces and changes, and their probable effects on our lives; and, finally,
- natural circumstances, forces, accidents, and disasters.

It is clear that factors like these could be far more significant than any life-plan.

Of course the immensely complex circumstances of modern life often necessitate intricate planning. But that's what makes it hard, not good; and its goodness does not usually depend directly on the intervention, but on the quality of what that makes possible. This is not, however, to deny that planning, like dreaming, can itself be a fulfilling and even consummatory experience.⁹ But when this is so, it in no way ensures that the implementation and actual outcome of the plan will be as rewarding. And, rather than trying to put such a plan into effect, one may well do better to recast it as a dream, and go with the natural flow of events. (Which would you prefer: a passionate love that takes root, grows, blooms, and flourishes naturally and of its own accord, or a well-controlled liaison that meticulously implements a plan that once consumed your soul?)

I detect two possible responses to these quotidian considerations in Dworkin's text. The first is that his model of challenge copes far better with the data I have put forward than its alternative, which he calls the *model of impact*. The second is that my arguments fail to take proper account of the important distinction between what he calls *volitional* and *critical* well-being. I tackle these objections *seriatim*.

With respect to the first, Dworkin claims that

our ethical instincts and impulses reflect two different and in some respects antagonistic ways of conceiving the source and nature of the value of a life. . . . The first of these, . . . the model of impact, holds that the value of a good life consists in its product, that is, in its consequences for the rest of the world. The second, . . . the model of challenge, argues that the value of a good life lies in the inherent value of a skilful performance of living. (*FLE* 240–41)

Dworkin goes to great lengths to argue for the superiority of the model of challenge, which he sees as central to a “liberal ethics” (see *FLE*, 244–77). I think that these arguments are successful. More to the point, the model of challenge can certainly accommodate my intuitions about well-being far better than the model of impact. For example, my unambitious lower middle-class example of a worthwhile life could not possibly be seen as one that has value because of its impact on the rest of the world (which is a reason why many of us do not find it admirable), but it could at a stretch be construed as a life that satisfies the undemanding challenges which our laid-back hero tacitly sets for himself.

However, this way of understanding his well-being is surely far too contrived to be enlightening. The same applies to other cases that illustrate the same general points in very different ways. And this in turn suggests that Dworkin’s “two ways of conceiving the source and nature of the value of a life” are not at all exhaustive. In fact, they are simply alternative ways of identifying well-being with success, and the main arguments of this essay undermine the assumption that one of the two must be correct.

This brings us to our second Dworkinian objection. Dworkin explains the distinction between volitional and critical well-being as follows.

Someone’s volitional well-being is improved, and just for that reason, when he has or achieves what in fact he wants.¹⁰ His critical well-being is improved by his having or achieving what he *should* want, that is, the achievements or experiences that would make his life a worse one *not* to want. (*FLE* 230)

I imagine Dworkin challenging me on the ground that the question of what sort of life is most worth living concerns critical well-being, while my arguments, resting as they do on a presumed link between a life’s feeling good and its being good, concern volitional well-being.

I reply that this link does not in fact restrict me to volitional well-being as defined by Dworkin. For it is quite possible for a person who possesses volitional well-being *not* to feel good about her life, since she may often be dissatisfied with what she wants and gets. The idea of critical well-being could be developed as a means of overcoming this problem, in which case I would say that I have been concerned with critical well-being, and rightly so. Dworkin, however, uses the idea of critical well-being to import a substantial moral dimension into his account of what sort of life is most worth living. The result is that he sees justice as a *prima facie* conceptual requirement of well-being (see, e.g., *FLE* 258–62). Moreover, he thinks that this is something which falls out of the challenge model itself (see *FLE* 283). But if this were true, it would merely give us an extra reason to reject that model. For to write virtue into well-being as a (qualified) conceptual assumption is to beg the important questions of how the

two are related, and of why one should be virtuous or just. I sidestep this sort of problem by avoiding a commitment to any specific definition of the concept of well-being before tackling the question of what sorts of lives are most worth living. Given that the question is understood well enough by those who ask it, this approach is clearly legitimate.

Let me turn next to a deeper objection to my case against the careerist conception, viz., that it fails to do justice to the importance of *autonomy* for human well-being. Now, I intended to leave space for autonomy when I said earlier that “*other things being equal*, if a life feels good to the liver . . . then it is good,”¹¹ thinking (but not saying) that a lack of autonomy was perhaps the most significant way in which other things might *not* be equal. But I hear my critic protest that, once we understand what is involved in autonomy, we will see that this space is far too small to accommodate it. For autonomy, he claims, is a matter of creating oneself as a person, and autonomous human beings are those who self-consciously author and plan their own lives. Granted that autonomy is required for well-being, this completely undermines my main arguments.

My response is to endorse autonomy as a requirement for well-being, but to challenge this critic’s conception of what it is. As a way into the issue, consider the sorts of things that we ordinarily wish to rule out when we accept autonomy as necessary for well-being. If a life feels good to the subject just because he is plugged into a Nozickian “experience machine” that feeds him an ongoing sense of satisfaction and well-being along with whatever illusions of activity and power are necessary to sustain it (while his body lies strapped, cathetered, tubed, and wired-up in the vaults of the Happiness Centre),¹² we decline to count it as good on the ground that it is not autonomous. The same applies if its feeling good is due to deeply unwarranted and unrealistic beliefs, or to childhood manipulation and indoctrination that severely limits the subject’s development as a human being but produces contentment with her lot. On the other hand, we do not gainsay the well-being of the subject of a rich, varied, and enjoyable life simply on the ground that it was unplanned, or did not happen in the way in which she planned it. Such examples reflect a partly negative conception of autonomy in terms of which a human being who has developed certain basic capacities, including the powers of deliberation, decision, and judgment, qualifies as autonomous in the absence of significant interfering factors.¹³ Only this modest form of autonomy is essential to well-being, and the space that I have provided is clearly big enough to contain it.

And a good thing too, for my critic’s aprioristic conception of autonomy as self-creation through planning and authorship is, at best, extremely difficult to satisfy; and I doubt that he could come up with an example of any actual person who is fully autonomous in his sense. Don’t get me wrong. I think that we can to some extent re-create ourselves, that we do plan, and that we do make sense of our lives by constructing narratives about our past and future selves—and I also

think that the capacities which we exercise in doing these things are intimately linked to real autonomy. But our re-creations are not creations; our plans are usually of limited scope; their failures (which are often to our benefit) hardly ever compromise our autonomy; and the stories that we tell ourselves are seldom binding.

My strictures on the careerist conception of well-being therefore remain intact. This is not, however, to deny that, when we are thinking about well-being, self-reflective counterfactual questions about what sorts of selves we would create and what sorts of plans we would like to enact can be of great heuristic value. But when we ask such questions we stand at some distance from our everyday perspective, and we must be open to the possibility that our hypothetical self-creations may create selves that do not create themselves, that our hypothetical plannings may plan unplanned lives. For even if a life that *conforms* to a given plan is extremely worthwhile, importing that plan into the life itself could undermine it, killing much of what is spontaneous and welcomed as good fortune. A general observation, viz., that to say that a life is worthwhile because it conforms to a good life-plan is to get the matter backward. The truth, rather, is that what makes a life-plan good (if it is good) is that the salient life conforming to it would be worthwhile.

In the end, the trouble with the careerist conception of well-being is that it speaks in an ambitious, public, intellectual, Western voice—or a recognisable parody thereof. In this it is exclusionary, for it cannot embrace the hopes and fears, pleasures and pains, joys and sorrows, and dreams and disappointments of numerous other forms of human life. But it is from everyday factors such as these that the value of a life is constituted, and in so far as the careerist conception of well-being attempts to bypass them, it thereby devalues the quotidian.

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NOTES

I would like to thank the members of the Witwatersrand discussion group on political philosophy for stimulation without which this essay would never have been written, and my audience at the Conference on Quotidian Ethics at the University of Cape Town in August 1999 for comments, questions and criticisms that helped me to clarify my ideas. I regret that circumstances have prevented me from taking up some interesting issues raised by participants at that conference.

- 1 An earlier version of this essay was prepared for presentation at the conference on “Quotidian Ethics: Moral Deliberations about Everyday Life,” University of Cape Town, August 1999.
- 2 The relevant work is Ronald Dworkin, “Foundations of Liberal Equality,” in *Equal Freedom: Selected Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Stephen Darwall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), cited as *FLE* in my text.

- 3 The term “strong evaluator” is from Charles Taylor, but I use it for its general associations, not with a view to invoking the details of Taylor’s account of what a strong evaluator is. See Charles Taylor, “What Is Human Agency?” in his *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 4 This is a central theme of, for example, Michael Bratman, *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 5 George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.
- 6 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), cited in my text as *TJ*.
- 7 These remarks are not of course intended to present an alternative to the careerist conception of well-being, but only some *prima facie* considerations that count against it (and that might favour some alternative conception, e.g., well-being as self-realisation).
- 8 See Annette C. Baier, “On Davidson’s Version of Having Reasons,” in *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore and Brian McLaughlin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 123.
- 9 I borrow this phrase from John Dewey. See, for example, James Gouinlock, ed., *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, rev. ed. (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1994), 75–82.
- 10 One might, incidentally, protest against this definition on the ground that it mistakenly suggests that willing and wanting are the same, but I see no real harm in simply giving Dworkin the term “volitional.”
- 11 Note that I have altered my original pattern of emphasis in this quotation.
- 12 See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 42–45.
- 13 For a little more on this conception of autonomy see my “Personal Autonomy, Democracy and the New Constitution,” *South African Journal on Human Rights*, 11 (1995), 485–94. The negative side of the conception, which I emphasize above, resembles Mark Leon’s account of the autonomy of action and belief, in terms of which (very roughly speaking) an action or belief is autonomous if it is caused in the normal sort of way, without the interference of any compromising factors. (See Mark Leon, “On the Value and Scope of Freedom,” forthcoming in *Ratio*, and “Believing Autonomously,” forthcoming in the *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*). I think that this tells only part of the story, and that there are crucial positive requirements for autonomy in the case of actions and beliefs as well as that of persons and lives.