Chapter 5

Necessities

There's something marvelous about the very idea that just one thing matters in life. It would be amazing if it were true, and in a way wonderful. Think how much easier it would be to make decisions and plans if there were only one thing ultimately worth having. This is an enticement for philosophers who prefer to think of what's ultimately valuable as something singular.

There would be advantages if there were just one form of good, but life would be a bit dull. A popular story line traces the journey from bad to good, or at least worse to better. Stories of improvement are as diverse as *Crime and Punishment*, nineteenth-century slave memoirs, and the biography of Helen Keller. On any one-value view, all these worse-to-better stories must tell essentially the same tale. If they really do plot life improvement, then they must all be stories of somebody getting happier, or becoming more virtuous, or becoming more . . . whatever.

The truth is certainly more interesting. The trajectories of improvement are varied. But are they infinitely varied? That might be especially interesting, but it would also be bewildering. For every story of a life getting better, there's someone who had to live that life "from the inside." He or she had to settle on aims, sometimes letting go of one thing to pursue another. If an unlimited number of valuable things demanded attention, our heads would spin. We should at least prefer to find that there is some manageable core to what's worth pursuing.

We get an implicit sense of the various things that have worth by immersing ourselves in life stories. That implicit sense is probably more satisfying than any tidy, explicit list could be. But our job here is to make things clear and precise. So the goal is in fact a list. I'll try to keep some

flesh on the bones of this enterprise by returning as often as can be to the stories themselves. They will be a part of our evidence for what belongs on the list.

The things we want on our list are fundamentally good – good in their own right, not because of anything else. Many stories of life getting better relate to how food and shelter were obtained, or health was restored, or safety was secured. These can be really good stories. (My favorite of this kind is Steven Callahan's *Adrift*, which recounts the 72 days he spent alone in a lifeboat.) When we're in the midst of these kinds of struggles, nothing is so intensely important to us as being fed, getting warm, being free of pain and disease, or getting out of the way of danger. But really, health and safety don't seem good purely for themselves, but because of all the things that are possible when we have them. A story of recovery from an illness, if it ends with simple health, isn't always a story with a conclusive ending. The person who has recovered is in a better position to have a life that goes well. But he may or may not actually have one.

There's no reason to think that every fundamental good makes a difference to how our lives go. It's conceivable that there are ultimate goods that don't play a direct role in our lives. For example, you might think that ecosystems are better or worse off depending on how diverse they are. Biological diversity, on this view, is an ultimate good. But this particular ultimate good (if it is one) doesn't have much to do with an individual life. It obviously shouldn't be placed on the list we're after. And then, it's possible that there are fundamental goods that could make a life go better, but not a human life. Perhaps omniscience would make the life of a supreme being as good as it can be, but it wouldn't be beneficial for us (would it be good if you knew what your spouse was thinking all the time?). There might be fundamental goods that make animal lives go better, but not ours.

The fundamental goods we want to focus on are *relevant* to a human life. But relevant how? As long as we were envisaging just one good, like happiness, the idea of relevance was clear-cut. That good had to be understood as being necessary to making a life go well. Having enough of that good had to be sufficient to make a life go well. Even if there are merely two fundamental goods, X and Y, a new question emerges. Does a life get to be overall good just from being imbued with a lot of X *or* Y, in whatever proportion, or must both X *and* Y be present? On the first alternative, X and Y are interchangeable. Lots of one can make up for

little of the other. On the second, they both deliver good, but they deliver it in importantly different, non-interchangeable forms. Each is a necessity. To complicate matters, the truth could be mixed. Different fundamental goods could be relevant in different ways. Some could be necessities, comprising a sort of "A" list, and others interchangeable contributors, making it only onto a "B" list.

If there are fundamental goods that are necessities, they would play a special role in our lives. We would have to reserve some of our energy for obtaining them, and pay special attention to them in thinking about the way we raise and teach our children, and how our societies are structured. Since necessities would play such a special role in our lives, we'll be particularly focused on identifying fundamental goods with this status – the items on the "A" list.

What kind of evidence would show that something is a fundamental good that's not just relevant to living well, but necessary? There certainly isn't anything like a sure-fire test. We can only aspire to say what seems most reasonable. We certainly should not expect to be able to recognize which are the critical goods in one intuitive flash, without spending time looking at any sort of evidence. It may take you some time before you come to think that happiness or morality, or any other candidate, is fundamentally good. A person could come to think so only after reading a searing biography, or watching a movie, or reflecting on a life experience. At the very least, you would have to sift through examples. We're all familiar with lots of lives and we deem some better than others. If the lives we deem good consistently are lives of – say – eating lots of popcorn, then eating lots of popcorn looks to be a fundamental good with relevance to human well-being. If we deem lives bad when they're lacking popcorn consumption, then that's a reason to view popcorn consumption as a necessity.

Beyond this sort of sifting of cases and discovery of patterns, we learn something from looking at human motivation. Since I'm no more astute a judge of value than anyone else, it pays to think about what people value and how they value it. If many people will stop at nothing to procure popcorn, that's some support for regarding eating popcorn as a necessity. That's not to say that we need to do surveys to show that everyone wants popcorn. The occasional popcorn hater doesn't refute the theory that it's necessary, because, as I said at the end of the previous chapter, desires are manipulable; they're not definitive. But they're certainly a piece of relevant evidence.

Finally, it's got to help to get to the bottom of the talk of necessities. What (on earth!) could make any fundamental good a necessity, instead of merely one optional way to add goodness to a life? Once you know the basis of this kind of necessity, that would surely help you determine what's necessary and what's not.

In this chapter and the next, all these considerations will play some role. Here I will be particularly concerned with cases and patterns and motivations. The basis for necessity is going to come up in the next chapter.

Happiness is a reasonable place to begin. Some philosophers have questioned whether feelings of happiness are good at all, let alone fundamentally good. The Stoics, for example, argue that plain physical pleasure adds nothing positive at all to a life that is good because of virtue:

> It is like the light of a lamp eclipsed and obliterated by the rays of the sun; like a drop of honey lost in the vastness of the Aegean sea; a penny added to the riches of Croesus, or a single step on the road from here to India. Such is the value of bodily goods that it is unavoidably eclipsed, overwhelmed and destroyed by the splendour and grandeur of virtue . . .

Kant takes a kindred stand when he says that the only thing that's good without qualification is the morally good will. If feeling happy is sometimes good, and perhaps even for itself, it's not good at those times when it's enticing us in the wrong direction or rewarding evil deeds.

My intuitions side with the Hedonistic Utilitarians of the last chapter. Happiness is a good thing, always. We don't like to see bad people experience happiness precisely because we do think it's something good, and we want them to have no share of what's good. There's something disturbing about ill-gotten happiness. It's especially creepy to contemplate sadistic pleasure, pleasure that's actually derived from causing others to suffer. But I don't think we can assess whether five minutes of happiness is good or not based on its pedigree. Happiness is good, period.

And it's relevant to how well a life is going. In *Darkness Visible*, William Styron tells the story of a depression that overwhelmed him and nearly drove him to suicide; as the depression lifts, and he has his first moments of non-misery, and then moments of happiness, there's no doubt that his

life is going better. You could insist that greater happiness was life-enhancing for him because it paid off in greater creativity or healthier relationships, or some other coin, but that's not what seems to be the case. Think of a time when your own life was not going well. Gradually, you started to be happier. You found your days more pleasant. You enjoyed the company of your friends more. Your boss didn't annoy you as much. You weren't dwelling on worries about the future any more. This change of mood probably improved your life – directly, and because of itself. Happiness, whether it comes about in mysterious ways, in good ways, or in bad ways, is a fundamental good that can directly affect how our lives are going.

If happiness is relevant to the way a life is going, is it also necessary? Without at least some happiness, it does not seem like we can reach the level of even minimally good lives. A person without any happiness at all is unconscious, or continually miserable, or at best in a neutral frame of mind. Of these possibilities, neutrality certainly seems the most appealing, but it's hard to imagine a person constantly in such a state whose life could be judged positively, overall.

Happiness is critical, but it's not the only critical thing. David Shipler portrays the lives of people struggling to make ends meet in his recent book, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. His stories have a recurrent theme: the lack of control that's the cost of poverty. The low-income workers he portrays are deprived of independence, autonomy, self-determination. They have no chance to be the authors of their own lives.

One of his portraits is particularly touching. Caroline works in the women's department at Wal-Mart. She needs to be home with her teenaged daughter in the evenings, because of her mental retardation and epilepsy, but she's forced to work night shifts. She'd have better hours and make better money as a manager, but – perhaps because she's missing all her teeth – she's repeatedly passed over for promotion. She finally quits the Wal-Mart job, and then one business after another gives her irregular night shifts, until her daughter's teachers become concerned that she's being neglected. Caroline finally loses both her home and her daughter, who goes to live with a relative.

Nobody has perfect control. But there is a level of autonomy beneath which we do not want to fall. Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Nickel and Dimed*, describes the way control is lost even before a person is hired. The job

applicant has to take drug tests and fill out phony psychological questionnaires. If hired, the blue-collar worker finds herself being told exactly how every aspect of the job must be performed. In the worst cases, the worker becomes little more than a cog in a machine. Shipler describes a woman in Los Angeles sewing flies into blue jeans at a rate of 767 per hour, on pain of being docked a portion of her hourly wage of $5.75. In the very worst cases, the worker is physically prevented from escaping her thing-like status; she is nearly a slave.

Having more control is one thing, it seems, that would have made Caroline's life better. It would have been a major improvement if she could have controlled her work schedule to accommodate her daughter's needs. Advancing to a managerial position would have increased her control over her daily activities. It would have been some improvement if she had been given the chance to initiate and innovate on the job, instead of having to follow rigidly prescribed routines.

Is autonomy really something we should value in itself? For Aristotle it is all too obvious that a slave has no chance of living a good life. Still, a natural slave, a person deficient in reason, ought to remain a slave. When irrational people are put in charge of themselves, reason does not have a chance to rule, and that's the worst situation of all. What's valuable, to Aristotle, is *rational* autonomy, not mere autonomy. What if the exercise of autonomy leads Caroline to reorganize the women's clothing department by color (all the green clothes here, all the purple clothes there); or spend most of her salary on lottery tickets; what if she lost her teeth by choosing to eat candy all day? Is self-determination valuable regardless of its outcome?

What I'll say about foolish exercises of autonomy is just what I said about ill-gotten happiness. Autonomy is always, as such, good. What would be *too* counterintuitive would be to say that every increase in autonomy automatically makes a person's life overall better. But we needn't say that. There are other things a life needs besides autonomy, and foolish exercises of autonomy will typically get in the way of the fulfillment of those other needs.

Lack of autonomy tends to be accompanied by unhappiness and greater autonomy by greater happiness. It's difficult, therefore, to disentangle the desire to be more autonomous from the desire to be happier. Still, unless we are utterly determined to construe happiness as the sole motivator in life, the pursuit of autonomy is everywhere to see: it's evident when slaves demand freedom from masters, when teenagers

demand more independence from parents, when workers wrestle some control over their hours from managers, when women demand the right to vote.

In contemporary Western culture, there's no doubt that we place a huge premium on personal autonomy. Autonomy is regarded in quite a different way in other settings. Certainly we should avoid drawing a picture of the necessary kinds and amounts of autonomy based on what's in our own backyards. Arranged marriage is alien to us, but does it cut into autonomy excessively? An Indian couple I know tell me how their marriage was arranged in their twenties by thoughtful parents looking out for their best interests; their marriage seems as good as most. On the other hand, in traditional Hindu villages, it's not unusual for parents to arrange the marriage of a girl as young as eight, who is then kept behind the walls of her home until she's old enough to join her husband's household. In this case, unlike the first, there's a disturbing loss of control. In saying so, we're not necessarily holding an alien idea about individual lives over the local one. The local assumption seems really to be that the girl is just a girl, and not entitled to the best life – an idea we are compelled to reject. Her individual interests are regarded as subordinate to the interests of men, or families, or the village as a whole.

Insisting that a good life includes "enough" autonomy seems to particularly conflict with the most traditional Islamic ideas about the good life for women, but again, the contradiction can be read in another way. In Saudi Arabia, women live out their lives in *purdah* hidden in their fathers' or husbands' homes, and behind veils. They depend on male relatives to take them places and are denied the right to vote. As Martha Nussbaum points out in *Women and Human Development*, it's not necessarily true that social arrangements reveal a vision of the best life for a woman; arrangements are often defended because they're thought to be best for society as a whole. The good for individual women doesn't count, or counts for less. By contrast, she supports – persuasively – "a principle of each person as an end."

Surely, though, there are cultures quite unlike our own that really do conceive of what it is for an individual to live well in ways that give less emphasis to autonomy. In Thomas à Kempis's fifteenth-century classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, the advice to the devout is to find someone to obey. Letting someone else run your life is regarded as good, not bad (as long as you attach yourself to the right superior). The ideal of limiting oneself is taken about as far as possible in some of the medieval religious

orders. In *Galileo's Daughter,* Dava Sobel describes the religious order where Galileo – that highly disobedient Catholic – sent his own daughters. In the order of Saint Clare, life was spent within the confines of a convent. The confinement was supposed to facilitate a virtuous life. So Saint Colette explains:

> He Himself deigned and willed to be placed in a sepulchre of stone. And it pleased Him to be so entombed for forty hours. So, my dear Sisters, you follow Him. For after obedience, poverty, and pure chastity, you have holy enclosure to hold on to, enclosure in which you can live for forty years either more or less, and in which you will die.

Imprisonment in the convent was taken to be a good life for the individual sisters, not just a means to some greater collective good.

Stretch our preconceptions as we may, we have to be prepared to say that some views are just wrong. The idea that loss of autonomy is conducive to living the best life is a view that has been superseded by other ideas, even within the monastic tradition, and rightly so.

Happiness, autonomy. could those be all the necessities there are? "Nowhere Man" must give us pause. He is well endowed with both, but his name is based on the fact that one week he's working at a slaughterhouse, but the next week he quits and works at the local animal shelter. Now he's actively involved in Republican politics. Next he's earnestly supporting the Democratic Party. He gets excited about Buddhism and then he's moved on to Jewish Mysticism. "Doesn't have a point of view, knows not where he's going to," as the Beatles song so aptly puts it.

Nowhere Man's problem, on the surface, is that there is no unity or continuity in his life. That sounds like a merely aesthetic criticism (this novel is choppy; it doesn't hang together; the midsection doesn't belong). It seems too abstract to really be relevant to evaluating a life; until, that is, we reframe the problem as a lack of self. We want to be amply endowed with the ingredients covered so far (happiness and autonomy), but we want our way of pursuing them to spring from our "selves."

If we really have a grip on Nowhere Man's problem, we ought to be able to identify instances of it in the real world, and that is harder than one might expect. People's lives can exhibit considerable contrast and variety without anyone suspecting a missing "self." There's no problem

with Arnold Schwarzenegger's life, just because he went from action hero in the movies to California governor, or because he's a Republican married into the famously Democratic Kennedy family. It's not the sheer disunity of a life that's bad, but an underlying weak self, a self without any strong preferences. A weak self is indifferent to what, for the rest of us, are big differences. No steady convictions and personal traits control perceptions of what's appealing and what's not. Beyond that, it's hard to say what a strong self is, exactly. But it seems critical to our lives going well. If being autonomous and self-determining are as important as they seem to be, it must be equally important for a person to have a self that does the determining.

A sense of identity tends to make us happy, like the other fundamental goods do. But self and happiness don't always go hand in hand. There's probably some situation in which each of us would choose self over happiness. Some people face that choice as the result of a mental illness. For a person who is profoundly depressed, a treatment of last resort is electroconvulsive therapy, which can result in memory loss. With whole swaths of one's life erased – who your friends were, what you read or wrote, where you traveled, what happened in the world at large – you can become virtually another person. Jonathan Cott reports just this in his memoir *On the Sea of Memory*; he seems to lament having chosen ECT to treat severe depression, longing for a return of self, even a self that was depressed. In *Listening to Prozac*, Peter Kramer worries that the alteration of identity is a quite standard effect of anti-depressants, and wonders whether mood improvement is worth the cost.

Injury to self can be done by medications and memory loss, but the causes are innumerable. Shipler's book sheds light on one of the many ways that people stuck in poverty sometimes come to have problems of "self." Many are victims of sexual abuse who suffer dissociative disorders. In other words, they split off a part of themselves and become mere observers of the abuse. This spares them some of the pain of their victimization, but later they continue to observe as things "happen" to them. They watch themselves neglecting their own children instead of choosing to neglect them or choosing to stop neglecting them.

But problems of self are not just outcomes of poverty. To cite just one literary example, in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's first two marriages are to well-off men who define the social role she is supposed to play. The way they use her to adorn themselves stops her from finding her own voice. Descending to a lower socio-economic

stratum, ironically, she discovers a sense of self. Shipler describes how rich parents neglect children and bestow on them an insidious hunger for attention. They become anxious "people pleasers." A child like this reaches adulthood with a set of traits, interests, and abilities that win Mom and Dad's approval. The adult child winds up with no deep-rooted self at the helm. She casts about, now doing this, now doing that. Even if the thises and thats are good things and produce some happiness, there seems to be something amiss with such a life.

Like autonomy, self-expression is especially prized in contemporary Western societies. But is self merely a Western preoccupation? On the face of it, Buddhist thinking involves a diametrically opposed sense of value. Buddhist sages urge us to lose ourselves, not find ourselves; the very highest thing we can achieve is "no self." The phrase is deliberately enigmatic and there is no end of literature about what it means. Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh cautions his readers to interpret the *dharma*, the teachings of the Buddha, with an awareness of the relevant audience. When the Buddha taught no-self, he was speaking to Vedic priests of ancient India, who used the notion of *atman* to justify "the social injustice of the day – the caste system, the terrible treatment of the untouchables, and the monopolization of spiritual teachings by those who enjoyed the best material conditions and yet were hardly spiritual at all. In reaction, the Buddha emphasized the teachings of non-Atman (non-self)." What I am putting forward as a necessity has nothing to do with an immaterial soul or an inborn fixed essence. It's being your own person, knowing yourself, being true to yourself, having your own center; *not* merely imitating, blending in, or bouncing around mindlessly from one thing to the next.

Though Buddhism encourages the realization of no-self, it doesn't encourage us to be like Nowhere Man. I'm inclined to think a Buddhist *doesn't* reject self as I am using the term. What no-self really means is not being rigidly identified with some narrow set of characteristics (I am a female liberal intellectual), not being focused on acquisition, not being egocentric. It is being open, receptive, compassionate.

It's certainly true that if we were to define what self-expression amounts to on the basis of Western models, we would fail to stretch far enough beyond our own cultural frontiers. The self-expression of an Andy Warhol is one thing. But self-expression is not the exclusive preserve of the flamboyant, rebellious, and self-centered. It's also self-

expression to plant a garden in your own way, to devise your own versions of family recipes, to simply have your own point of view.

Morality was one of the goods that was missing for the person hooked up to the experience machine (Chapter 4). The person who is hooked up puts his energy into phantom moral responsibilities and neglects real ones. Perhaps his virtual mother decides to learn Italian and he generously buys her audiotapes and takes her to Rome. Meanwhile, his real mother is lying in the hospital and her long-lost son never so much as visits. My intuition is that this person's life is not going as well as he thinks it is. His moral failings stop him from being able to live even a basically good life.

Morality pertains to the way we treat others, most prominently, but also concerns the way we treat ourselves. It's a moral problem if you permit others to exploit you, or you do nothing to avoid terrible health. That the self-regarding portion of morality should make a difference in a person's life is not so surprising. What's more perplexing is the suggestion that all of morality, the self-regarding and the other-regarding aspects, make a positive difference to individual well-being.

My intuitions about the critical role of morality agree with the ancients – Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics – who all regard moral virtue as central to living our lives well. For some of the ancients, the benefit of morality is so significant that morality is the only thing that determines how my life is going. I can't swallow that whole, but morality can, intuitively, make me a better person and my life a better life. It's not always a matter of morality making me happy – though frequently it does. Morality seems to make a direct difference to how well my life is going.

Certainly, there are stories of life getting better because of moral improvement. In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov kills an old woman, struggles to justify himself to himself and his friends, but eventually feels compelled to take responsibility. At the end of the book, he walks up the steps of the police station and confesses, with no particular sensation of pleasure or pain. We know his life is now going better, even before we read the epilogue and find out what happens to him. It's true that his confession has rewards: he's given a lenient sentence because he's admitted to his crime; he's now able to enjoy and reciprocate the love of the devoted and saintly Sonya; and he winds up

turning tentatively in the direction of her religious faith. Moments of "infinite happiness" arrive while Raskolnikov serves his term in a Siberian prison camp, and more are assured in the future. But the moment when his life has become better precedes the happiness payoff. The sheer moral improvement at the moment of his confession establishes some life improvement before greater happiness comes along and yields more.

The scope and nature of morality are deeply puzzling. Still, the idea that morality is a requirement is not vacuous. We all share at least a sketchy, intuitive idea about which kinds of endeavors have moral merit – doing a favor for an ailing neighbor, keeping a promise to a friend, avoiding roads that lead to addiction or prostitution. And we have a rough idea of the endeavors that have a sort of merit that's non-moral – climbing a mountain, making a delicious meal, reading Russian novels. Do we adhere to the demands of morality by having the right character – by being courageous and truthful and wise, and the rest – as Aristotle and the Stoics think? Is morality a matter of doing the right thing, possibly by promoting the greatest possible happiness for all, as the Utilitarians think? There are these and many other ways of explicating what morality amounts to. Depending on how morality is understood, it can be easier or harder to see the connection between being moral and living well.

The ancient conceptions, with their focus on virtue, are most conducive to seeing the connection. As we saw in Chapter 3, the Aristotelian virtues are sustainers of stability and balance. Being angry at the right time, at the right person, to the right degree, would save a person from being a doormat or a volcano. It's harder to say why a person can make his life go better by sending money to help flood victims on the other side of the world, or by telling the truth in an awkward situation, or by apportioning grades or pay increases fairly. What's the relevance of doing these things for other people to making your own life go well?

Perhaps it comes down to a connection between living well and living among others. If you concern yourself not at all with what you owe to others or with what they need from you, you live in profound isolation. Yes, there are people out there, but in your scheme of things, they're just things – like the rocks in a quarry or the cornstalks in a field. Without morality, you would enjoy, protect, exploit, or destroy others at your pleasure. You would regard yourself as the only one of your kind, the only one whose well-being really matters. If it would be bad to literally

be the only one of your kind, the last surviving person, then it's bad to live as if you were. The good of moral behavior toward others, for each of us, is the good of being part of a richer world, in which there are many beings with independent importance.

Morality is good for us because it makes us less alone – it gives me a kind of friendship not just with my *friends* but with everyone. If friendship strikes you as an obvious good, then this explanation will satisfy you. But what if it doesn't? There is this also to say: there is something painfully limited about our lives. You can only live one life – here, not there; now, not in the past or the future; doing this, not that. We break through these limits by identifying with hungry people on the other side of the globe or with the inhabitants of a polluted, over-heated world in the next century. We become (a bit) *them*. Ethical concern is something of a cure for our sense of finitude. It's good to do the right thing because it gives you an expanded life, one that encompasses not just your own feelings and satisfactions and accomplishments, but those of other people (and possibly animals as well).

Though rather abstract, these thoughts might sustain us through some of our moral travails. Yes, I *will* make a donation to Oxfam, because it is a good thing to be tied by invisible threads to people around the world. Yes, I'll buy a hybrid car, because I identify with the people in the next century who are in danger of living in a drastically altered, warm and watery world. No, I won't make my life easier by giving all my students high grades, because it's really not good for them, or for anyone else, and I recognize everyone's welfare as being just as important as my own.

Such thoughts will often shepherd us toward the right resolution of our quandaries, but not always. Keeping promises, paying the taxes you owe, speaking the truth, giving fair grades, sacrificing for others – all these things can cost a lot. I think they do always add some good to a person's life, but in some situations doing the right thing drives out other good things. Morality can be like the squash and pumpkin plants that are right now starting to engulf my garden. I added a plus to the garden by planting them, but pretty soon there aren't going to be any carrots. Morality isn't the magic ingredient that always makes a life go better on the whole. Still, it is a life enhancer as far as it goes, and so critical as to count as a necessity. (Should you always do the right thing, even when morality encroaches on the other necessities, and you don't stand to benefit? We'll come to that difficult question in Chapter 8.)

A LIST OF FOUR necessities – happiness, autonomy, self-expression, and morality – is admirably tidy, but not absurdly restrictive. Each thing on the list is robustly valuable. We certainly act like these things are critically important in our daily lives. Now we enter less certain territory.

Take, to begin with, a woman I will call Constance. She works as a piano teacher, plays Beethoven sonatas splendidly, enjoys going to the symphony. She wears attractive, timeless fashions picked out of the Land's End catalogue and reads the Bible in her spare time. She's a good friend to her neighbors and a generous donor to the American Cancer Society. The problem is that she does exactly these things from the age of 21 to her death at 81. Constance doesn't get better at playing the piano or choose new music. She doesn't grow tired of Land's End fashions. She doesn't get interested in new charities. There is no improvement in any way; there is minimal change. The good she is missing is the good of growth, positive change, progress.

We do seem to value progress itself, and not just the good things that are the outcome of making progress – like greater autonomy, happiness, and accomplishment. Some of the lives we admire most are lives transformed by adversity. Lance Armstrong would impress us if he won the Tour de France over and over again. He impresses us far more because he progressed from cancer survivor to race winner. We're impressed no matter what by a person who is highly autonomous, but we're especially impressed by the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who started off as a slave and fought his way to autonomy. Since cancer and slavery are very bad things, and undoubtedly detracted from these two lives, we must accord progress itself a very high value, considering that these lives strike us as being especially good.

We want our lives in some way to go from worse to better. We want that to happen over small stretches and large, in minor ways and in major ways. Moving from worse to better might mean fixing the toaster one morning, or learning salsa dancing in the space of a month, or becoming acquainted with Peru over a summer. Or it could mean becoming a better teacher over a 10-year period, or learning to be more compassionate over a lifetime.

But wouldn't it be better to skip "worse" and go directly to "better" – to have the knowledge, or skills, or activities, or experiences that are "better" from the start? Maybe that would be good for another kind of being. God, in our conception, starts off perfect and stays perfect. Absence

of change in a supreme being is no flaw at all. But in us, no progress would be a serious flaw. It's not a fixed toaster, or dancing, or familiarity with Peru that really makes a person's life better. It really is precisely the process of going from broken to fixed, from clumsy to competent, from ignorant to familiar. It's exercising the power to go from worse to better.

In his extraordinary memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt tells the story of a childhood spent in extreme poverty and heartbreak. He lacks just about every good I've discussed at the beginning of his life, and comes to possess everything as an adult. Is this really a better life than one that starts well and ends well? It certainly is puzzling to say that it is. That would imply that to give our children a shot at the best possible lives, we ought to deliberately put ourselves in dire circumstances. Should we?

It's true that you have a shot at the most extraordinary progress only if you start in the deepest trough. But most people who start in the deepest trough stay there. So, no, we shouldn't seek problems so we can rise to their solutions. If progress is a necessity – and I'm going to say it is, with just a dash of uncertainty – the progress we need is moderate. What we must avoid is complete stagnation. Wherever we start, we should aim higher. It's quite ordinary types of change that we can't do without.

With a roster of good things now in place, let's return for a moment to happiness. Happiness is good wherever it comes from, I've argued, and having some is a necessity. But what if all your happiness comes from valueless sources? Maggie works as a nurse in an intensive care unit. Make her the head nurse so that she has plenty of autonomy. She performs her job impeccably and let's also assume she's a supporter of good causes, perhaps a life-long volunteer at the SPCA. Make it up as you like. She's happy and responsible and she's learned and progressed over time. But here's the hitch. Maggie's happiness comes from Magic Drug. Without it she would find her job grueling, she'd fall into dependent relationships, and she'd hate animals. Magic Drug doesn't just help her derive happiness from her life. It's not like the medication that helped William Styron recover from depression, enabling him to once more derive happiness from his writing and friendships and so on. The source of Maggie's happiness is Magic Drug and nothing else.

Maggie's problem takes plenty of real-world forms. Imagine a person with lots of good in his life, who derives happiness only from gambling. When he's with his lovely wife and children, he's not happy with them, he's happy because he's anticipating the next trip to the casino. (Don't think of this person as an addict, or you'll have trouble believing he has autonomy. No, he's in control of himself. It's just that gambling is his sole source of pleasure.) This strikes me as a blight that stops his life from going entirely well. If he were to stop the gambling and begin to derive satisfaction from spending time with his children (let's say), that would make his life go better.

Happiness is good wherever it comes from, but in addition to wanting happiness, we also want our happiness to come at least substantially from things that have value. The good that Maggie is missing is a funny, subtle sort of thing. There's no one word for it; to have it is to be happy *with* the good things in your life. What we want, beyond happiness and the other things I've discussed, is a link between happiness and the other things. There's no reason for every last drop of our happiness to be derived from valuable things – that would be a rather puritanical expectation – but something's amiss when most of it isn't.

The list so far is missing some wonderful things. What about knowledge? It's crucial for Aristotle, who sees it as one of the valuable fruits of the active life of reason. What about friendship, or love, or affiliation, more generally? It's one of the external goods that Aristotle makes essential to *eudaimonia*. Contemporary list makers sometimes include religion, or something to do with religion. At the other end of the spectrum, some include "play," a heading that encompasses laughter, fun, sport. Some include art, or creativity more generally, or the use of the imagination. In the rest of the chapter, the Aristotelian "missing things" will be the topic; religion is addressed in later chapters; and we'll just have to leave play and imagination for another day.

There's no question that knowledge is vital to living a good life. The indirect contribution it makes is clear, but worth emphasizing. Consider people who come into this country with the assistance of smugglers, who dupe them into indentured servitude. They are given free passage to the United States on the condition of paying later by turning over a part of their paychecks until an exorbitant fee has been paid off. They make this agreement based on many false assumptions: the passage will

be safe, the work will not be brutal, the fee will be paid off quickly, more satisfying work will be available later, and there will be a chance to fulfill "the American Dream." Not knowing the truth is life-damaging to say the least. The person who is duped stops being able to control her future. Out of ignorance, she steers herself in entirely the wrong direction: at the very least, toward a desperately miserable existence, and possibly even toward death in a shipping container or in the back of a truck.

In everyday circumstances as well we lose autonomy when we're missing key pieces of information. We need to know the facts about what we're eating or smoking, about the risks we're taking when we choose doctors, medical procedures, travel destinations, forms of recreation, cars, and food. Equally, we need to know fundamental facts about reality. A person who gives shape to her life on the basis of religious beliefs could be involuntarily wasting time, making huge sacrifices, or engaging in senseless ritual if the religious beliefs are false. A person who rejects a supreme being could be getting herself into trouble as a result of *her* beliefs.

Knowing makes an additional indirect contribution because it gives us happiness. Plato, Aristotle, and Mill (among others) stress the pleasures afforded by the intellect. The learned professor loves adding one more gem to his treasure of knowledge. But we all take pleasure in "finding out." Some of our most pleasant moments occur when we are dying of curiosity about something and then suddenly knowledge arrives. Who's going to win the baseball game? When it's over, we finally know, and that feels good. Who is the Unabomber? Who is Johnny's teacher this year? Is the jury going to convict or acquit? Finding out, coming to know – these are great pleasures.

The indirect benefits of knowledge adequately explain why it is to be pursued. But does knowledge itself improve life? There are stories of life going from worse to better that have to do centrally with gaining basic knowledge. By learning to talk and read, Helen Keller comes to have greater and greater awareness of the world around her, and this (along with many other changes), seems to make her life get better.

On the other hand, "fancy" knowledge – what scientists, historians, and other learned people acquire – has an uncertain relationship to life improvement. In Karen Armstrong's memoir, *The Spiral Staircase*, there are many trajectories of improvement. She learns to cope with an illness that once plagued her and caused her misery; she comes to a more confident sense of what she's good at, and therefore who she is; she achieves

greater financial independence, and therefore more autonomy. But there's also the trajectory along which she becomes more and more knowledgeable, writing one erudite book about religion after another. Does this improvement, on its own, make her life better? The answer is not so clear. Stories of intellectual achievement elicit admiration, just like stories of emerging artistic talent do. It's enthralling to read about the blossoming of Bob Dylan's musical talent in *Chronicles*, or about Picasso's growth as a painter in his many biographies. The knowledge that Karen Armstrong winds up with, later in life, seems to add to her life in the same way as the artistic genius of Dylan or Picasso. And surely making art and music are not necessities. If knowledge is a necessity, it's basic awareness of the world – what Helen Keller came to have, despite huge obstacles – that's necessary. We needn't all be working our way to intellectual heights, any more than we need to be trying to sing or paint.

If making music, creating art, and acquiring advanced knowledge are not necessary, perhaps they are still fundamentally good, and relevant to the way a life is going. So maybe we have arrived at a point where we must take up the "B" list – the list of things that contribute interchangeable forms of good. I would also resort to the "B" list when it comes to close relationships. By affirming the role of morality, I have already attached value to the social dimension of human life. A moral person is aware of and concerned about the welfare and rights of other people. But can it be necessary to go further, and actually enter into special relationships with other people? If there are people you love – your children, your spouse, your friends, your parents – it may seem as if having these relationships is essential. But if we stretch beyond our own personal experience, how can we deny that people who live in solitude can have lives that are basically good – and perhaps great? Relationships add a good to our lives – indeed, a fundamental good. Relationships aren't good because of something else, but for themselves. But this is a kind of good for which there are substitutes. There are innumerable love stories that are stories of life getting better. But that love dimension can be absent. Karen Armstrong's memoir is a case in point. She does not come to have close love relationships, or children, or even strong friendships. Helen Keller never marries or has children. It seems simply narrow-minded to think these lives are flawed for lack of intimate affiliation.

I've argued that a life can't go well without happiness, autonomy, self-expression, morality, and progress; and happiness needs to come substantially from good things – we want to be happy *with* the good things in our lives. Basic knowledge or awareness probably belongs on the list as well. Close relationships seem more clearly *not* to belong on the list of necessities; but their value brings to the fore another category of goods – those that are fundamental and relevant, but are merely optional and interchangeable contributors. Perhaps acquiring advanced knowledge, making art, and making music also belong on the "B" list (more on that in Chapter 10).

If the two-list view is correct, then life-getting-better stories are not all the same story. But they are bound to be broadly convergent. I am reminded of the famous first sentence of *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." All good lives resemble one another because they have a common core; they are the lives of people who have a modicum of happiness, who run their own lives to some considerable degree, who are basically responsible, and so on. But lives that are not good are not good in different ways. They can be not good because of misery, or because of an extreme dearth of autonomy, or because of moral reprehensibility. Thus, stories that trace the path from not good to good focus on different paths. The story of recovery from a depression is not the same as the story of escape from slavery, which is not the story of coming to take responsibility for one's actions.

Then again, it's just at the core that good lives converge. There are innumerable ways of being happy, running your life, and taking responsibility. Furthermore, there's the added variety of the "B" list. We'll see in Chapter 10 what we might put on that list, but if things like intellectual and artistic achievement fit in there, all the more reason to expect good lives to be varied. It's not common for all the "B" list goods to be concentrated in one life. In fact, it might not even be possible, because some of the optional goods may in fact be incompatible with others. As I'll argue in Chapter 10, balance seems to add something to life, but so do focus and intensity, and these are virtues that tend to be the virtues of different lives.

The two lists have some practical value. If they're anything like correct, they show that happiness is not everything; that autonomy is not everything. With these lists providing guidance, we would know

that living ethically is not something we do entirely for the benefit of others, but for ourselves as well. We would know that we mustn't stagnate, or spend all our time amusing ourselves in pointless ways, or live our lives in sheer imitation of the way other people live their lives. We would know all sorts of things. But not everything. Unfortunately, life frequently puts us in situations that force us to make hard choices. If personal happiness comes at the price of morality in some specific situation, which comes first? If more autonomy means less growth and progress, which matters more? These are the kinds of questions that will come next.

But before turning to questions of choice, we'll take up something even more fundamental. The "A" list is curious. Are the things on the list really necessities for every human being, or even for all living creatures? If they're necessities even just for one person, there's a second question. What makes any good on the list indispensable; why can't lots of one make up for shortages of others? These two questions will turn out to be related, as we'll see in Chapter 6.