Chapter 2
What is happiness?

Selected chapters from Haybron, *Happiness: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2013, on theories of happiness, well-being, meaning, and the good life. This also sets up a book in progress, tentatively *Good Lives*. Given the diverse/busy group I've chosen relatively accessible/"big picture" writings on ethics (this piece) and policy (the other piece).

> Journal notes, August 8
>
> Sundown on the Pond. A gull is laughing from a perch on a post in the Pond. Now a skimmer glides by, plowing a tiny furrow through the shallows. No permanent mark. Nothing is permanent out here. Sand and water…no mark endures save of notion, of idea…Here the veil between us and the truth of existence is very thin and, to my mind, can be pierced. These past few weeks, I have settled into mindless existence, with few thoughts and no dreams. My being is effortless, untroubled by pain, unstirred by joy. This being is meditative, with no need of mantras or quiet rooms.
>
> Ron Haybron, *Island*

Thriving

A click. Rzzzzzzzz! Line spools off the reel at breakneck speed. A lusty bellow, 'dol*pheen*!' Seconds later, another downrigger pops, and more line starts paying out. Two dolphinfish hooked, and where there are two, there are probably more. (These are tuna-like fish, not the beloved mammal.) Eyes gleaming, Big Joe notes the location of the sargassum patch and leaves the helm to take one of the rods, while his friend Mac takes the other. This is commercial fishing, not sport, so the tackle is heavy and no time is wasted playing the fish. Soon a pair of twenty-pounders are aboard and

the boat is circling back for more. Gorgeous fish while alive, a riot of gold, green, and blue, dolphin quickly lose their colour when caught. Occasionally Joe feels a twinge of regret at killing these lovely creatures. But not today. Today he is fully in the moment, locked in on his prey, and whoops with delight as they haul in another pair.

More ballyhoo on the downriggers, more dolphin on the line. 'Gaw-*damn*! Reel's gettin' hotter 'n a [something unprintable].' All told they bring in a couple of dozen, enough for a good profit. Satisfied with the day's catch, Joe puts his twenty-three-foot Sea Ox on a heading for home. A spare, utilitarian boat with twin Mercury outboards and an open cockpit design, the Sea Ox is not for the faint of heart. Not, at least, if you plan to fish forty miles offshore, well into the Gulf Stream, with only a compass and your eyes for navigation. Getting home means hitting a target, an inlet, perhaps a mile across, after hours of meandering through a six-mile-an-hour cross-current. If you do find the inlet, you must thread the boat through some of the most treacherous waters on the seaboard, using throttle and wheel to avoid getting broadsided by a wave or pitch-poling the boat—nose-diving into a trough, flipping end over end. In which case your remains could well become a fine meal for the crabs.

Yet Big Joe Fletcher is in his element. On the long ride home, he is silent, unreflecting, attention fully engaged with the sea, the sky, the boat. Were you to ask him what he feels, he would tell you 'nothing'. He is absorbed in the moment. Passing through the inlet brings a bit of tension, but this quickly fades once they reach the comparatively sheltered waters of the sound. Back at the dock the men share a couple of cans of beer while cleaning the fish, exchanging jokes and friendly gibes with other boaters and passers-by. Joe gives some of the steaks to Mac, keeps some for himself, while the remainder will end up as 'mahi mahi' on the plates of lucky tourists in local restaurants. ('Dolphin', the local name, doesn't go over so well with some diners.)

In the evening, Big Joe and his wife Pam expect to stroll back down to the docks to join the sunset crowd. But some friends drop by and they pass the evening on their front porch, laughter punctuating a chorus of crickets, frogs, and cicadas. An hour later, a couple more wanderers join the fun. Out come a couple of guitars, and the small band of ruffians adds its own music to the nighttime choir.

Things have not always been easy for Joe. He's had his share of romantic troubles and financial difficulties. But at this stage of his life, things are good. The fishing is solid, and between that and the odd carpentry job, the bills get paid. He doesn't need much cash—the house he built himself, and just about any maintenance work on that, the boat, or his truck he can do himself. Many other things can be had by trading with his neighbours.

Joe himself is a big man, in just about every way. A tall, red-bearded man carrying a few more pounds than strictly necessary, and possessed of a booming voice, he carries his bulk with confidence and ease. He does not anger easily, nor is he prone to fret; problems are a part of life, and there's no point worrying. He is big in spirit too: sharp-witted, quick to laugh, exuberant and vital, not given to guile or indirection, he is fully his own man. All the more so since leaving his job at a mainland boatyard. Spending his days at the beck and call of another man never sat well with him, made him feel unnaturally small. Better to be free than a wage slave, even if it means doing without a few things. Big Joe Fletcher is, and feels, free.

You probably won't need much convincing that Big Joe is a happy man. But on what basis would you make this judgement? The description doesn't include Joe's opinion on the matter, and you could well imagine that he doesn't really have one.

In Joe's case, as in real life, we judge how happy someone is not by opinion polling but by observing the person: Do they have a spring in their step? Do they seem tense, tightly wound? Comfortable in

their skin? Do they just seem 'off'? Do they laugh easily? Get angry at little things? Burst into tears over minor frustrations?

What we are doing, I think, is trying to assess the person's general *emotional condition*. The term 'emotional' can mislead, since it suggests a narrow focus on feelings like joy or sadness, fear or anger. But being tense isn't really an emotion at all. And what your posture or stride reveals about your 'emotional condition' is something other than an emotion. It's something deeper than that.

We sometimes try to get around the limits of emotion words by speaking of the psyche or soul. Think 'she's in good spirits', or Bob Marley's plea for a lover to 'satisfy my soul'. But I think these sorts of cases involve broadly emotional matters nonetheless, so I will stick with 'emotional condition'.

If this suggestion is right, then much of our everyday thinking about happiness identifies it with a person's emotional condition. Roughly: *to be happy is to have a favourable emotional condition*. Let's call this sort of view an *emotional state theory* of happiness.

So we have a definition of happiness. Is it a good one? Well, we probably can't point to any single definition and say that's *the* correct one. But I would suggest that it's a pretty useful way to think about happiness. It makes sense of the weight people place on happiness, as when a parent says he wants his children to grow up to be 'happy and healthy'. While I will sketch some reasons for preferring this view to the main alternatives, I will not delve deeply into the debate here. Suffice it to say that, while many people find an emotional state account of happiness attractive, I am not describing a consensus view here. The alternatives remain popular as well.

The three faces of happiness

Let's explore this view of happiness in further detail. What exactly does happiness involve? When people think about happiness in

emotional terms, they tend to picture a specific emotion: feeling happy. So powerful is this association that happiness frequently gets reduced to nothing more than cheery feelings or 'smiley-face' feelings. This is a radically impoverished understanding of happiness: there's much more to *being* happy than just *feeling* happy.

Think about those periods in your life when you were happiest. Not so much that day when you were elated over a special event, like the birth of a child. Rather, those times of relatively sustained happiness. Not everyone experiences such periods, but if you have, I suspect they looked something like our picture of Big Joe Fletcher, or the photograph of my father and me in Figure 2: good stretches of time wholly absorbed in something you love doing, feeling fully yourself and in your element. Energized, alive, and yet also, deeply settled and at peace—no doubts, no fretting, no hesitation. And yes, feelings of joy here and there, perhaps a good dose of laughter. But those feelings are not the most important part of the story.

2. The author and his father, sailing

We can usefully break happiness down into three broad dimensions. Arguably, each dimension corresponds to a different function emotional states play in our lives. But in this book I will skip the argument and simply present the view.

We can think of happiness as a kind of emotional evaluation of your life. Some parts of this evaluation are more fundamental than others. At the most basic level will be responses concerning your safety and security: letting your defences down, making yourself fully at home in your life, as opposed to taking up a defensive stance. I will call this a state of *attunement* with your life. Next come responses relating to your *engagement* with your situation: is it worth investing much effort in your activities, or would it be wiser to withdraw or disengage from them? Finally, some emotional states serve as *endorsements*, signifying that your life is positively good. People often make the mistake of thinking all emotional states are like that.

All three aspects of happiness are important, and different ideals of living can emphasize different parts of the picture. Americans, for instance, put more weight on endorsement or engagement states like joy and exuberance. Whereas Asian cultures tend to focus more on the attunement dimension.

Endorsement: feeling happy and other classic emotions

Let's begin with the most familiar aspect of happiness, the *endorsement* dimension. The most obvious examples here are feelings of joy and sadness. It makes sense for these states to be so closely associated with happiness: they tend to accompany gains and losses, successes and failures.

But it is easy to overstate their significance. While the occasions that call for feeling happy can be important, they may be the exception rather than the rule, even in the best of lives. And such feelings tend not to last very long: you enjoy your good fortune for a bit and then get on with the business of living. If we focus too much on these sorts of feelings, we can easily get the impression that

happiness is fixed over the long haul: a simple matter of fleeting emotions that quickly dissipate, ultimately leaving us back at our temperamental 'set point' level of cheerfulness (see Chapter 5).

Yet we should not discount the endorsement side of happiness. In general, it is far better to be cheerful than dour. Life is impoverished without regular doses of laughter. And the generic label, 'feeling happy', conceals a surprising diversity of feelings. Joy, for instance, should not be confused with high-fiving elation. Consider the quiet joy a parent feels when looking in on his sleeping child. By contrast, the jubilation of a sports fan whose team has just scored a goal may be less pleasant, and less fulfilling, even if the feeling is more intense.

Engagement: vitality and flow

The second dimension of happiness concerns your *engagement* with your life: not bored, listless, and withdrawn, but energetic, interested, and engaged. You can affirm your life, not just by giving it a 'thumbs up', but by enthusiastically taking up what it has to offer. This can happen even when things are not going particularly well, for instance when struggling to accomplish a difficult goal.

There are two forms of engagement. The first of these centres on states of energy or *vitality*: what we might call the exuberance–depression axis. A passionate and demanding orchestra conductor, for instance, might be exuberant, even happy, without being obviously cheerful or joyful. I do not know whether the Cleveland's George Szell was like this, but he was evidently quite passionate in living, embodying a kind of exuberance (Figure 3). The mere fact that he was a harsh taskmaster need not disqualify him from happiness. A lot depends on whether his temper often left him deeply unsettled, or simply passed through, leaving little imprint on his inner state.

The exuberant form of happiness is typified in ideals of passionate living, notably in Nietzsche, Goethe, and countless other

3. Cleveland Orchestra Conductor George Szell

romantics and artists. But one need not pursue the passionate life to the Nietzschean extreme. Many people, like Big Joe, lead lives of great vitality without great suffering.

The second form of engagement appears in Aristotle's work, and more recently in the notion of *flow* developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is the state you assume when fully engaged in an activity, typically a challenging activity performed well. Athletes and musicians describe it as being 'in the zone'. In states of flow, you lose all sense of self-awareness, of the passage of time, and are not aware of feeling anything at all. Yet it is a highly pleasant state, and clearly a state in which you are happy. It is roughly the opposite of boredom.

The importance of engagement is particularly clear in cases of depression, where lethargy and listlessness signals a broad psychic disengagement from one's life. This sort of withdrawal is always awful, and sometimes disordered. But it can sometimes be functional, facilitating major life changes by pulling us out of our

existing routines and signalling that our present way of living may not be worth continuing.

Attunement: peace of mind, confidence, expansiveness

To understand the third dimension of happiness, consider its most familiar aspect, tranquillity. Tranquillity tends to get the back of the hand these days. People crave entertainment and excitement, and peace of mind can sound a lot like boredom. 'Just give me a Xanax to take the edge off, thank you, and I'll be on my way.'

But I would suggest that tranquillity, or something like it, is the cornerstone of happiness. Perhaps it is possible to be happy without it, but the going will be tough. To see why, we need to get clearer on what tranquillity is. We might think of it as 'settledness': not merely peace of mind or lack of internal discord but a kind of inner surety or confidence, stability and balance. Being imperturbable. The ancient Greeks called it *ataraxia*, Buddhists *sukkha*, and it was perhaps the most sought-after state of mind in ancient religious and ethical thought.

Consider how the happy person looks. While endorsement's characteristic appearance is the smile, and engagement's the jaunty gait, tranquillity presents itself in the relaxed, easy posture. It is clearly a highly pleasant state, and not simply the absence of disturbance or other feeling. Nor does it rule out states of high energy or exuberance, as Big Joe illustrates.

Let's expand on this. Think about the biological condition that states like tranquillity represent. When an organism is in familiar and safe circumstances, where it has mastery of its environment, it can let down its defences and confidently engage in whatever pursuits it wishes. It is this condition, in a person, we are concerned with. The Stoics might have said that the individual in that situation finds her life *oikeion*—familiar—to her. She is utterly at home in her life. In her element.

Similarly, think of the state you assume when relaxing with family, or with an old and dear friend. You feel completely at home with that person. 'Tranquillity' seems too narrow a term for the condition of psychically being at home in one's life.

I will call it a state of *attunement*. In this state a person relaxes and blossoms, living as seems natural to her, without inhibition. The opposite of attunement, disattunement, is not merely anxiety, but more like *alienation*: your circumstances are in some sense alien to you—unfamiliar, imposing, threatening. Defences go up: anxiety, stress, insecurity. Attunement appears to have three basic aspects:

1. Inner calm ('tranquillity')
2. Confidence
3. Expansiveness of mood or spirit. Feeling 'carefree', or being 'uncompressed'.

'Confidence' refers to an emotional condition, not your opinion of yourself. Think about what we might call 'somatic confidence'—feeling wholly at home in your body. Picture, at the negative pole, Nixonian awkwardness. The former president seemed to personify a Cartesian dualism of body and mind gone badly askew. You could have stood *behind* Nixon while he thrust his appendages skyward to signal 'victory' and known immediately that you were not observing an entirely happy man. At the positive end of the spectrum, we might imagine the athletic grace of a ballet dancer.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, attunement arguably forms the core of happiness. Anxiety, stress, insecurity, and related states are not just unpleasant in themselves. They rob us of much of our capacity for the other dimensions of happiness. You might get some measure of cheerfulness while suffering from these forms of disattunement. But exuberance, flow, and joy will be hard to come by. Intuitively, a troubled, anxious, tense, or stressed out person does not seem to be happy, however cheerful she might be. She isn't really at home in her life.

It is easy to overlook the importance of attunement for human well-being, because it does not command our attention like the others do. Take the condition of being *stressed*. Stress is said to be pervasive in the present culture, yet seems not to be taken very seriously. Worries about it are often dismissed as the petty complaints of the rich. Such attitudes are unsurprising since stress usually doesn't monopolize our attention the way, say, back pain can. It can seem more a nuisance than a great problem.

The appearance is misleading, for the main drawback with stress is not the suffering it involves but its corrosive impact on the person. (In one rather more literal way than you might imagine: stress can leave a lasting mark on your genes, increasing your risk of future disease. There is good evidence that your baby can *inherit* those changes, and later on acquire further genetic changes, not to mention changes in brain development, from living with your stress.)

As well, stress compresses and flattens the spirit, smothering your capacity for pleasure. Stressed individuals get less out of life, and indeed there may be less *to* life for them. For their attention is narrowed, and they cannot as easily enjoy, or even notice, what life offers them. The joys of living, the manifold small pleasures that leaven our days are substantially foreclosed when we are stressed. What remains is usually quite bearable, but a lot less worth having.

On a winter morning not long ago, one of the world's leading concert violinists, Joshua Bell, pulled out his Stradivarius and gave commuters in a Washington, DC, subway station a 43-minute virtuoso performance. 1,097 people passed by, many being the sort that routinely pays $100 for a ticket to see him play in a concert hall. Fears of a mob scene proved unwarranted: almost everyone completely ignored the musician, and only seven stopped to listen for even a moment.

A Brazilian shoe shiner who normally dislikes street musicians remarked, 'If something like this happened in Brazil, everyone

would stand around to see. Not here.' She continued, 'People walk up the escalator, they look straight ahead. Mind your own business, eyes forward. Everyone is stressed. Do you know what I mean?' The one commuter who recognized Bell exclaimed to a *Washington Post* reporter, whose article was fittingly entitled 'Pearls Before Breakfast':

> It was the most astonishing thing I've ever seen in Washington. Joshua Bell was standing there playing at rush hour, and people were not stopping, and not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I wouldn't do that to anybody. I was thinking, Omigosh, what kind of a city do I live in that this could happen?

Mostly affluent in material terms, these busy, disattuned commuters were in some ways quite poor: in this case time poverty. This in turn yields lives impoverished of beauty and wonder. This is not a minor disadvantage. Recall the quote from the Pirahãs that started this book: when asked why a missionary would be visiting them, beauty is the first thing they mention.

The hidden face of happiness

Our sketch of happiness is not yet complete. So far we've considered the felt or experienced side of happiness. But there's more to it than that. Take the fictional case of Robert:

> Robert leads a very active life, and most of the time he is in a good mood: cheerful, smiling, and genuinely feeling good. He also believes that his life is going well and sincerely reports being satisfied with his life. Yet at the end of the day, when he is alone and no longer occupied with things to do, he often feels deeply depressed, sometimes breaking down in tears before falling asleep. He has been like this for several months.

Robert's overall balance of pleasant over unpleasant feelings—his 'hedonic balance'—seems decidedly positive. But is he happy?

Almost no one I've asked thinks so. Of 39 students given the case, only one deemed him happy, and the most common response was 'very unhappy'. About half the students were asked to explain their answers to the question, and only one suggested that his experience was actually unpleasant on the whole. The most common explanation, by a narrow margin, was this: 'deep down, Robert's emotional condition is bad'.

This is interesting. Apparently, many people think you can be unhappy, in emotional terms, even though you usually feel pretty good! What's going on here? According to a long tradition of psychological thought, a large portion of psychological well-being is *unconscious*. On this view, much of what ails us lies buried beneath the surface of consciousness. While we tend to associate such ideas with Freud and his followers, you need not buy into Freudian theory to accept the importance of unconscious states for human well-being. Indeed, virtually everyone nowadays takes the idea for granted, fuelling countless films and novels whose characters' seeming happiness is belied by smouldering distress, just waiting for the right trigger to bring it out. In the film *American Beauty*, for example, the chipper realtor Carolyn Burnham maintains a sunny demeanour that no one in her family mistakes for happiness: beneath the smiles lies a foundation of festering torment, and it is only a matter of time before she snaps (Figure 4).

In Robert's case, his workaday good cheer masks a deeper discord, which he manages to keep at bay with busyness. His emotional condition, though positive on the surface, is decidedly *un*favourable. He is unhappy.

It seems that happiness includes, not just experienced emotions and moods, but the *nonconscious* aspects of our emotional conditions as well. What, exactly, does that involve? Perhaps we need to posit unconscious moods and emotions. I am not sure we know enough about this region of the psyche to say with any confidence. Perhaps all that really matters is that, in such cases,

4. Annette Bening as Carolyn Burnham, *American Beauty*

we are especially *prone* to experience certain moods and emotions. You might have a hair-trigger tendency to become anxious, for instance. Or perhaps you're generally in a good mood, but unusually likely to become irritable or sad. And those propensities alone count as deficits in your happiness.

Let's call this aspect of happiness a person's *mood propensity*: her current propensity to experience certain moods and emotions rather than others. While an individual's temperament tends to be more or less fixed, her mood propensity changes with the circumstances of her life. Cases like Robert suggest that mood propensity is a major aspect of happiness. Ordinarily we don't think much about this side of happiness, because our mood propensities tend to line up with our experienced feelings. But sometimes they do not. A man grieving the recent loss of his beloved wife, for instance, might cope by distracting himself with chores, watching movies, and playing poker. Yet his close friends don't consider him happy, for his calm and good cheer rest on a knife-edge, liable to turn at any moment into anxiety or tears.

Happiness as emotional well-being

Let's say, then, that happiness has two parts: your emotions and moods, and your mood propensity. Taken together, these things constitute your emotional condition. So:

> To be happy is for one's emotional condition to be favourable on the whole.

Think of happiness as roughly the opposite of anxiety and depression, or what psychologists often call *emotional well-being*. Since this term already has some currency, I will often refer to happiness as emotional well-being.

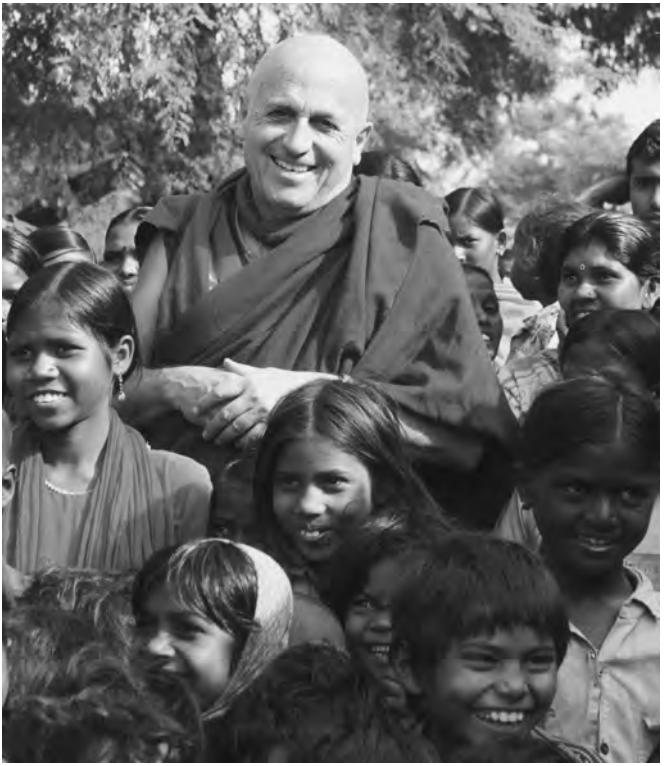
An interesting feature of the Robert case is that, if my students' reactions are any guide, it finds virtually no support for one of the most popular theories of happiness, *hedonism*. Hedonists define happiness as a positive balance of pleasant over unpleasant experience. Hedonism is far better known than the emotional state theory, perhaps because people assume that there's no difference between them.

As 'Robert' makes clear, the two theories are different: people seem to grant that Robert's experience is mostly pleasant, but still think him unhappy on emotional grounds. If nonconscious states form the basis for calling Robert unhappy, then hedonism *can't* be the theory people are relying on. Nonconscious states aren't experiences, by definition. So they can't very well be pleasant or unpleasant experiences.

In fact, the differences between the two theories are pretty deep. According to hedonism, to be happy is just for the flow of your experience to be pleasant enough. Happiness is just a sequence of experiences. According to the emotional state view, to be happy is for your psychological *condition* to be a certain way. To assess happiness is to try to figure out a person's basic emotional orientation or demeanour: is she reacting favourably, in emotional

terms, to her life? To be happy is essentially to be favourably disposed, in emotional terms, toward your life.

A colleague and leading Buddhist thinker on happiness, Matthieu Ricard, describes a very similar view in these words: 'By "happiness" I mean here a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind. This is not a mere pleasurable feeling, a fleeting emotion, or a mood, but an optimal state of being.' This state of being, moreover, 'defines the quality of every moment of our lives'. Ricard himself, pictured in Figure 5, is a pretty good example.



5. Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard and friends

Widely reputed to be an exceptionally happy person, he certainly seems that way to me.

You can accept the basic idea of an emotional state theory of happiness without agreeing with my suggestions about the three dimensions of happiness, or the nonconscious side of happiness. If you think about our emotional conditions differently, you may prefer a different version of the emotional state view. Some readers may prefer yet another account altogether, such as the life satisfaction theory. We will take up that theory next.

Chapter 3
Life satisfaction

'How's your wife?'
'Compared to what?'

Henny Youngman

Two happy men?

One summer night in 1958, Moreese 'Pop' Bickham raised a shotgun and fired at two sheriff's deputies. Soon, both were dead. This being segregation-era Louisiana, and Bickham being black, the act did not bode well for his future. He was promptly sentenced to death and imprisoned in the notorious Angola State Penitentiary, the only surprise being that he wasn't immediately lynched. The facts of the case remain disputed, but Bickham maintains, plausibly, that he acted in self-defence, firing only after having been shot himself. The deputies were allegedly Klansmen out to murder him following a minor argument outside a bar.

Thirty-seven years later, a 78-year-old Bickham was released from Angola following revelations of an unjust conviction, aided by good behaviour in prison. He continues to express remorse for killing the deputies. But on his release, Bickham was asked how he felt about spending nearly half his life in a Louisiana penitentiary, including 14 years on death row. 'I don't have one minute's regret,' he replied. 'It was a glorious experience.'

There were, alas, no happiness researchers in the vicinity. But Bickham comes very close to calling himself satisfied, indeed very satisfied, with his life. It takes very little imagination to suppose that, had he been asked if he was satisfied with his life as a whole, he would have replied in the affirmative. As Bickham 'firmly' averred to a reporter, 'the freest person in the world is the one that's satisfied with what they have'. As many people facing hardship do, he made the best of a tough situation and counted his blessings: 'To live through all this and come out with as much health as I got and the mind that I got, I'm so glad and happy and praising the Lord for it.' There is nothing at all unreasonable about this. In fact it seems something to admire. One of the men who laboured to win Bickham's freedom, radio journalist David Isay, called him 'the most inspirational man I've met'.

Let's suppose Bickham was satisfied with his life, even through much of his ordeal in prison. Should we say that he was *happy* during those years? According to one popular theory of happiness, the *life satisfaction* theory, the answer is yes. There are two things to notice, however.

First, this kind of 'happiness' does not tell us whether Bickham led an emotionally fulfilling life in prison—whether he was in good spirits, at peace, enjoying himself, energized or otherwise in a positive emotional state. Perhaps he was, but that is a different matter from whether he was satisfied with things: life satisfaction is fundamentally a judgement about your life, and you can judge your life favourably no matter how you feel.

At any rate, it is doubtful whether Bickham's life in prison was really pleasant or emotionally fulfilling: we're talking about what is, by reputation, one of the most brutal facilities in the civilized world. Asked if he was like the 'Ice Man' who spent 5,000 years entombed in a glacier, Bickham replied, 'I wasn't on ice, but I was in a can; and they opened the can and I crawled out.' While locked up,

Bickham frequently turned to scriptures for solace; his favourite Bible verse was Psalm 31: 'I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a broken vessel.' Now a free man, he prefers Psalm 30: 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'

I do not think we are compelled to believe that Bickham led a joyous existence in Angola State Penitentiary. And it might seem strange to deem *happy* the 'weeping' prisoner, however satisfied with his life he might be.

The second thing to notice is that, even if satisfied, Bickham may not have thought his life was going *well* for him. In fact it seems rather plausible that he did not: he plainly thinks it vastly better to be free than 'in a can', and is hardly unaware of how much of his life passed him by.

> When I first went in, I had only one daughter, now she's got eight children and they got 24 children. All that happened since I been locked up. It makes a man think, 'How in the world (did) all this happen, and I've got to be away from it?'

He might very well have thought, 'Well, my life is going *terribly*, but at least I've got my health and my wits. What God has given me is more than I have any right to expect, so I'm satisfied.'

To be satisfied does not mean you think your life is going well for you, by your own standards or any other.

If we say, then, that Bickham was happy in prison because he was satisfied with his life, that leaves entirely open whether he had a pleasant or otherwise decent emotional life, or whether he saw his life going well by his standards. It tells us only that he figured it was going well *enough*, however badly that might be.

This might seem a rather curious theory of happiness. You would not be out of line to wonder why anyone should care very much about being happy, if that's all it amounts to. If this is happiness, who needs it?

Perhaps Pop Bickham is a little hard to evaluate, since he seems to have such an upbeat personality. Having little more than the happy ending to go on, it may not be easy to picture the long dark nights of sorrow.

If so, then I offer for your consideration Ludwig Wittgenstein, the famously tormented philosopher who, dying young from an illness, reportedly said to 'tell them I had a wonderful life'. Sometimes called the most important philosopher of the 20th century, it seems not unreasonable for Wittgenstein to have said this about his life, which was certainly interesting and filled with accomplishment. But *happy*? Look at his picture (Figure 6). The man looks like he was born seeing a ghost. This is the sort of 'wonderful life' that one should not wish on the meanest kid in town, and I sorely hope that none of my children experience Wittgenstein's particular brand of wonderfulness. The fellow oozed misery, to the point that his brother Paul, a concert pianist, once protested that 'I cannot play when you are in the house, as I feel your skepticism seeping towards me from under the door!' If you're still not convinced, I recommend a visit to the house he designed for his sister in Vienna, architecture being another of his pursuits. The soulless domicile reeks of gloom, and not even Wittgenstein liked it despite having laboured intensely over it for two years. Nor did his sister, who somewhat surprisingly was not among the three Wittgenstein siblings to commit suicide—the philosopher himself nearly becoming a fourth. And yet, Wittgenstein was evidently satisfied with his life.

As many researchers define happiness, these men were happy. So too are the 6–7 per cent of respondents in one study who claimed

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein

to be 'completely satisfied' with their lives, though they also believed themselves to be *'usually unhappy or depressed'*. Could this be happiness as we know it?

The life satisfaction theory of happiness

While hedonistic and emotional state theories roughly take happiness to be a matter of *feelings*, life satisfaction is normally thought of as mainly being a matter of *judgements*. There are lots of ways to interpret the notion of life satisfaction, but here I will focus on the most common and compelling version of the view. To be satisfied with your life is to regard it as going well enough by

your standards: taking all things together, you see your life as having enough of the things you care about. So life satisfaction is a global evaluation of your life. There is something very appealing about this view of happiness: it takes you to be the authority about your life, and ties your happiness to your view of what matters for you.

People often call life satisfaction a 'hedonic' good—a good of pleasure—lumping measures of life satisfaction in with measures of feelings. This is a mistake. The whole reason for focusing on life satisfaction instead of feelings is precisely that it is *not* just a question of pleasure. Most people care about lots of things besides their own pleasure, and life satisfaction seems to reflect that fact. A high-achieving artist or scientist might be satisfied with her life even if it isn't terribly pleasant: she's getting what she cares about. Life satisfaction seems distinctively important because it tracks people's values. At least, it seems like it should.

How important is life satisfaction?

And yet it doesn't, at least not in the way you might expect. People can quite reasonably be satisfied despite feeling bad, and *despite thinking their lives are going badly for them*. As we saw in the case of Bickham, that you are satisfied with your life tells us surprisingly little about how well your life is going in relation to what you care about.

Why should life satisfaction be so loosely related to our own sense of how our lives are going? There are two basic reasons for it. First, life satisfaction involves making a *global judgement* about your life. But lives are complicated mixtures of good and bad. You might be glad about having an interesting job, impressive hang-gliding skills, a loving family, and a functioning laptop, but not so glad about that back problem, the creepy friends your kids hang out with, that lie you told your husband, or your parents being

deceased. And so on, ad-for-all-intents-and-purposes-infinitum. How does it all add up? Who knows?

Life is not a gymnastics routine. If you try to boil your life down to a single number, the result is bound to be pretty arbitrary. (Even gymnastic scores tend to involve a fair dose of whimsy.) Given how you see things, you might just as easily label your life a 4 or a 7. The fact that you happen to report a seven, in this case, doesn't mean your life is going any better than if you'd offered up a four. It's a coin toss.

Second, life satisfaction involves a special kind of global judgement about your life: a judgement about whether your life is going, not just well, but *well enough* for you. Is your life satisfactory? If you think about it, that's kind of a strange question. Satisfactory compared to what? 'Compared to your goals or aspirations', one might say. But *how much* must you succeed in your goals to reach the 'satisfactory' point? Will getting 12 per cent of what you want suffice, or do you require 74 per cent? Or 100? Is this even an important question?

We often have some idea how to answer such questions about consumer products. If you order a steak well done and it comes out rare, for instance, you have pretty clear expectations and an obvious remedy: it isn't satisfactory, so you send it back. If your life has some nasty bits, though, what should you conclude? Life is not a consumer product. You can't very well send it back for an upgrade, or shop somewhere else next time. Anyway, the price of admission is free: you're just born, and there you are. So it's hard to know where to set the bar for a 'good enough' life. You might choose to be satisfied with a 2, or require an 8 to be satisfied. The fact that you're satisfied with your life may simply mean that you've dropped the bar so low it would take a catastrophe to get you to be dissatisfied. It sure beats being dead.

And so, having made an arbitrary decision about how to add up all the goods and bads in your life, you must make another arbitrary decision about where to set the bar for 'good enough'. A coin toss on top of a coin toss. It may not seem that way, because we often settle into a standard way of making these judgements. For instance, unless things are really bad or really good, you might just say 'fine', or 'pretty satisfied'. Which may be why answers to life satisfaction questions so often converge on the 75 per cent mark of whatever scale you choose: don't want to complain, but not perfect. 'Fine.'

Because we lack any compelling reason to arrive at a particular judgement of life satisfaction, we are free to base our judgements partly on things that have no bearing on how well our lives are going. You may decide to focus more on the positives because you care about virtues like gratitude or fortitude. Perhaps you'd feel like an ingrate being dissatisfied with your life. Or maybe you focus on the positives when things are bad to cheer yourself up. But if you register satisfaction with your life because you don't want to be a complainer, that doesn't tell us much about how well you see yourself doing.

So the fact that people in hard circumstances report being satisfied with their lives does not tell us that they're doing well. Slum dwellers in Calcutta tend to say they're satisfied with their lives, but that leaves entirely open whether they think their lives are going well for them. As the title of the paper reporting this finding suggests, perhaps they're just making the best of (what they see as) a *bad* situation. Similarly, large long-term studies of Germans and Britons found most people claiming to be satisfied with their lives *throughout the experience of their spouses dying, or becoming unemployed.* It is unclear whether they really thought their lives were going well for them during these hardships. When asked to explain why they are satisfied with their lives, Egyptian study participants did not always reply, 'because my life is great'. Instead, they said things like:

> A person adapts himself to his conditions, I accept my destiny.
> One day is good and the other one is bad, whoever accepts the least lives.
> God wants this. Whoever is satisfied says thank God and whoever is tired says thank God. We cannot do anything.

Which are just so many ways of saying, 'life is pretty much a kick in the groin, but what can you do?' This is probably not the sort of happiness you had in mind for your kids.

Worse, satisfaction can respond perversely, or not at all, to important changes in our lives. Dialysis patients in one study reported life satisfaction no lower than healthy individuals, yet also stated that they would give up *half their remaining life-years* to regain normal kidney function. In other words, their life satisfaction reports failed to register a colossal dissatisfaction, probably because they coped with the illness by comparing themselves with other patients.

In a study of colostomy patients, those with permanent colostomies actually reported *higher* life satisfaction than patients with temporary colostomies. Why? A permanent colostomy means needing to wear a bag to hold your waste for the rest of your life. Is that really better than a temporary one? Most likely, the ones with no hope of improvement simply lowered the bar for a 'good enough' life. Doing worse from their point of view, but more satisfied.

You might have thought it important that people be happy. But if by that we just mean life satisfaction, then a world of admirably positive-thinking prison inmates, languishing in *what they see as* unfulfilling, unpleasant, and stunted lives, should do the job nicely. This is not a very inspiring notion of happiness.

It can be hard to get one's mind around the idea that life satisfaction is not terribly important. When we picture the

satisfied person, we tend to imagine certain stereotypes: Aunt Greta reflecting on a highly successful life, say. And since most people seem to report being dissatisfied only when things are truly dismal, that's our image of the dissatisfied person: Uncle Bob ruing his ailing health, failed aspirations, and crumbling relationships.

But what's significant in these cases is not so much the *judgement* of satisfaction or dissatisfaction: it's the success or failure of their *lives*. Aunt Greta's life would still be successful if, duly noting her fulfilling career of high achievement, she concluded that it should be still better: thriving, but dissatisfied. And Uncle Bob's life would still be a catastrophe if he lowered the bar and decided that, well, it could have been worse: miserable, but satisfied. It seems to make only a modest difference whether they are satisfied. But shouldn't it make a huge difference whether they are *happy*?

There is little question that when people speak of happiness, they sometimes have life satisfaction in mind. So it is not quite a mistake to call the merely satisfied 'happy'. But it is probably misleading, and not very helpful.

How life satisfaction does matter

None of this shows that life satisfaction studies can't provide useful information. Even if it isn't very important whether people are satisfied with their lives, knowing whether one group is *more* satisfied than another can tell us about *relative* levels of well-being. Exceptions duly noted, people reporting higher life satisfaction tend on average to be doing better in realizing their values. They report greater satisfaction with specific things in their lives, and generally tend to be doing better on other measures as well. This could be true even if *everyone* set the bar so low that they would be satisfied with just about any life. Still, the problems we've been discussing raise significant worries about life satisfaction

measures. Since it seems important to know how people see their lives going, researchers may want to develop better ways to get this information.

There is an interesting corollary to the idea that the vast majority of people could reasonably be satisfied with their lives. As we will see in the last chapter, it suggests that most people actually have good lives. Not in the sense of being well-off or flourishing, but in the broader sense of having choiceworthy lives—lives they could justifiably endorse. Lives one could, when delivering their eulogies, reasonably deem 'good'.

Bickham and Wittgenstein probably weren't making a mistake in affirming their lives. On the contrary, they seem actually to have *had* good lives: lives worth affirming, warts and all. The mistake is ours: supposing that life satisfaction tells us whether people are doing well or thriving. Apparently, it does not.

What is happiness? Summing up

Summing up the message of the last two chapters: emotional state theories of happiness make intuitive sense and explain the importance we attach to being happy. The rest of the book will assume such a view. Hedonistic theories also vindicate the seeming importance of happiness, but don't seem to fit the ordinary notion of happiness very well. Life satisfaction theories have some intuitive plausibility, but can't seem to make sense of the value we place on happiness. 'I just want my kids to be happy' might be a little exaggerated. But it sounds a lot more compelling than 'I just want my kids to be satisfied'. If you want them to be satisfied, suggest they think of Tiny Tim and count their blessings.

Chapter 6
Beyond happiness: well-being

> Tell me now whether a man who has an itch and scratches it and can scratch to his heart's content, scratch his whole life long, can also live happily.
>
> Socrates, in Plato, *Gorgias*

The need for more than happiness: 3 cases

'I just want my kids to be happy.' 'As long as she's happy, that's all that matters.' People often say things like these. Are they right? Is happiness the only thing that matters? We can understand how people might be tempted to speak this way: as a general rule, happy people probably tend to be faring well; unhappy people, badly. How happy we are is central to the quality of our lives. But it probably isn't the only thing that matters, or even the most important. From here on out, we will be looking at how happiness fits into a good life.

We begin with this question: what ultimately benefits a person? What is it to thrive or flourish? In short: *what is the nature of well-being?* The notion of well-being should not be confused with the concept of happiness, or 'emotional' well-being. That is a purely psychological notion, just like the concepts of pleasure, depression, or anxiety. Well-being, by contrast, is

ultimately a matter of *value*: what is good for us? What sorts of lives should we wish for our children, for their sake?

There are several reasons to doubt that happiness could be the only thing that ultimately benefits us. Well-being seems to require more than just being happy. To see why, consider three problem cases.

Deception

Imagine yourself living sometime in the future, in a world of amazing technology. Scientists have invented an extremely sophisticated 'experience machine' that can simulate any reality you desire. Do you want to be Paul McCartney? Jane Austen? How about a walk on Mars? No problem: the machine can make you believe you're really doing these things, and really are these people. Indeed, life in the experience machine is indistinguishable to you from life in reality. Once plugged in, you will have no idea it's merely a simulation. By now experience machines have become supremely reliable, and you have the opportunity to connect to one. Not just for an evening, but for the rest of your life. Life from that point on will be as pleasant and satisfying as you wish.

Would you plug in? Most people say they would not. In a new study spanning ten countries around the world, majorities in every nation rejected the idea of plugging into the machine. In most countries the rejection rate was higher than 80 per cent. Indeed, people tend to find the idea appalling, recalling dystopian fantasies like *The Matrix* or *The Truman Show*. Or, more realistically, persons blissfully ignorant of their spouses' or friends' treachery. These are not people we envy.

Apparently, most people care about things other than their states of mind. They seem to want actually to succeed in their goals, really to achieve things, truly to do things, and genuinely to have loving friends and families. They want to be happy, but they want

their happiness to be grounded in reality. Better, and better off, to be less happy and lead a real life.

Philosopher Robert Nozick first proposed the experience machine example, which I've tweaked a bit here, in 1974. It has been hugely influential, and is widely taken to show that neither happiness nor any other state of mind can be the sole measure of human well-being.

Impoverishment

Socrates, in Plato's *Gorgias*, has us imagine a decidedly untextured life: someone who is content to do nothing but scratch an itch.

11. A baby starting life in its 'experience machine' pod, *The Matrix*

That's the sum total of his life. Is this an enviable existence? Rawls gives a similar example of a grass-counter, happy to do nothing but count blades of grass all day long. Most people find such lives unappealing, if not downright depressing. There's not much to such flat, featureless, one-dimensional lives. It seems better to lead a life rich with varied activities and experiences. To be able to say you really *lived*.

Similarly, few of us really aspire to be 'couch potatoes', squandering our precious minutes of life on solitary, cheap entertainments, while not actually doing much. Imagine a slob who passes his life alone in a filthy basement doing nothing but watching television and playing video games, living off his inheritance. This is the passive life of rank pleasure-seeking Aristotle dismissed as fit only for 'dumb grazing animals'. Homer's lotus eaters, who laze about all day whacked out on narcotic drugs, raise the same concern. Contemporary films like *Wall-E* and *Idiocracy* depict further variations on the theme. Few parents, I suspect, would wish such lives for their children.

Perhaps scratchers and couch potatoes seem so unappealing because we value personal development, or self-actualization. It seems important to develop and exercise our capacities. Notice how the popular ideal of 'flourishing' suggests the full flowering of one's human powers. The scratcher, the couch potato, and the lotus eater can seem to be squandering their potential, however pleasantly they spend their days. In such cases the individual's life appears to be stunted or *impoverished*.

Deprivation

There is a young woman, 20 years of age, who looks like a baby of about that many months. The woman, Brooke Greenberg, has an extremely rare disorder called Syndrome X, which appears to stop intellectual and physical development beyond the toddler stage. Yet there's no reason to think that she couldn't be pretty happy.

She appears to have a lovely, loving family that cherishes her, enjoys her company, and regards her as a great blessing just as she is. Perhaps, in periods where Ms Greenberg is happy, we should say she is doing well, with a high level of well-being. Still, it is hard to escape the feeling that someone who never reaches maturity is missing out on certain elements of a normal, full life. It seems that there's *something* to be regretted.

We need to be cautious here. I am not saying that a disability makes a person or a life any less valuable. Nor that she can't do well, indeed flourish. Still less that we should feel sorry for her. Those of us with friends and relatives who have disabilities, or who have disabilities themselves, know how irritating and condescending pity can be. In some ways a disability can enrich a person's or a family's life. It often brings out the best in people, making us better and more focused on the things that really matter, than we would otherwise be.

But it is also silly and patronizing to insist that there's no downside *at all* to most disabilities. In cases like Syndrome X and certain other disabilities like blindness, it can seem as though one is *missing out* on something, deprived of one of the elements of a full life. Of course the point does not just apply to disabilities. We can have the same concern for someone who dies young, never experiences the pleasures of sexual intimacy, or, like Pop Bickham, spends whole passages of life in prison, never able to watch his children grow up. Many feel that such a deprivation is an irreplaceable loss. Not least, many such individuals themselves. A priest or monk who takes a vow of celibacy, for instance, may lead a rich and fulfilling life. Perhaps he gains more in other goods than he loses. But he may yet see it as a sacrifice, giving up an important aspect of human life in order to achieve other values. From his own perspective he misses out on something, and no amount of other goods can wholly erase the sacrifice.

So however well-off a person may be on the whole, there still seems to be something to regret, an irreplaceable loss, if she fails to enjoy one of the cherished elements of an ordinary life. It may be important, not just to be happy, but to lead a *full life*, missing out on nothing. (Note that a deprivation does not mean you can't lead a 'full life' at all. Leading a full life, like many things, comes in degrees. Even if priestly celibacy involves a deprivation, many priests still lead full lives.)

Not everyone finds these three cases persuasive. Some people react differently to them, and most theories of well-being, including my own, run afoul of at least one of these cases. Sometimes our intuitive reactions to things are just mistaken. So we must take these cases with a grain of salt. That said, many people find them pretty compelling.

What ultimately benefits a person?

Introducing Aristotle

In Western thinking about human well-being, no figure outside of religion looms larger than the Greek philosopher Aristotle. His views remain popular today. This is a bit surprising, since his outlook on well-being was decidedly un-modern. According to Aristotle, well-being, or *eudaimonia*, can be given a rather striking definition: it is a complete life of virtuous activity. Virtue for Aristotle is not simply moral virtue, as we tend to think of it today, but human excellence generally. It includes not only obvious virtues like justice and bravery, but prosaic talents like being able to tell a good joke, or carrying yourself with dignity. In today's terms, 'excellence' probably works better than 'virtue'. But bear in mind that we are talking about *human* excellence: displaying the excellences characteristic of human beings. His standard of virtue was not subjective, but rooted in universals of human nature. Excellence in collecting bottle caps or selling shady investments would not cut it.

Notice that Aristotle did not simply identify the good life with having a virtuous or excellent character: you could slumber

through life, like Sleeping Beauty, with a good character. And who needs that? A good life, rather, consists in excellent *activity*: it is more something you do than a state you try to attain.

To illustrate: poverty doesn't rule out being virtuous, but it can get in the way of exercising human excellence. When your best option is to spend 90-hour weeks doing monotonous sweatshop labour, your opportunities to spread your wings and fully exercise your capacities are few and far between. Poverty is bad, for Aristotle, because it so sharply limits your functioning. In the worst cases, it can leave you unable to live much like a human at all, reducing you to the condition of an animal scrounging merely to survive.

You can, I hope, see the attractions of Aristotelian thinking at this point. What a 'life of virtuous activity' really means is fully exercising your human capacities, actively pursuing a rich, full life. Such a life is deeply fulfilling too: the most pleasant life a person can lead. Many people find this sort of idea highly appealing when they think about it, and contemporary culture is rife with variations on the theme, for instance in exhortations to 'be all you can be'.

The general theme is that what's good for us is to fulfil our natures: *nature-fulfilment*. There are different ways of understanding nature-fulfilment, but Aristotle's is the best-known. The ideal of nature-fulfilment was widespread among ancient Greeks who wrote about *eudaimonia*. Accordingly, we might call such views of well-being 'eudaimonistic' theories. This family of views has become fairly popular among psychologists lately, giving rise to a movement of 'eudaimonic' psychology.

One of the great virtues of Aristotle's approach to well-being is that it seems to give an attractive explanation of our intuitions about all three cases discussed above: deception, impoverishment, and deprivation. In the experience machine, you aren't really doing anything at all. The scratcher is pretty much the opposite of

the Aristotelian ideal. And some disabilities deprive individuals of important elements of a full human life.

For all its virtues, Aristotle's theory of well-being remains deeply controversial. Some don't like its objectivism: Aristotle thinks there are objective facts about what's good for you, and they don't depend entirely on what you like or care about. Many reject this idea, holding that well-being must be subjective. A deeper problem, I think, is that Aristotelian accounts apply an *external* standard of well-being to individuals: what's good for you is to lead a characteristically human life. Similarly, what's good for a bull is to lead a characteristically bovine life, doing what bulls do. But why should your well-being depend on facts about what species you belong to? Take Ferdinand the bull, from the children's story (Figure 12). He's a bit of an oddball who doesn't want to fight or do other things normal bulls do. He'd rather smell the flowers. And why not? The whole point of the story is that it doesn't matter what's typical for members of your kind: all that matters is what *you're* like.

12. Ferdinand the bull

(The careful reader may have noticed that the 'Ferdinand' point does not sit easily with the 'Syndrome X' point: how can we say that Syndrome X deprives one of anything unless we apply an external standard, looking at human norms? On this score Aristotle's view better explains the Syndrome X case, while the approach I endorse later does better with the Ferdinand case.)

Another popular objection targets the Aristotelian claim that well-being is a matter of virtuous activity. But is it really? Genghis Khan was a rotten person who butchered millions and impregnated a rather disturbing proportion of our great, great ....great grandmothers. (One in 200 people alive today appear to be directly descended from him.) But why couldn't he have been happy, even flourishing? Given the human aptitude for killing, he might have been an *exemplar* of human thriving.

Virtue is extremely important, as we'll see in the next chapter. But many doubt Aristotle's view that virtue necessarily *benefits* us.

Theories of well-being

Where does this leave us? It will help to get a quick sense of what the options are. Probably the four most influential approaches to well-being are these:

1. Hedonism
2. Desire theories
3. List theories
4. Eudaimonistic ('nature-fulfilment') theories

We've already discussed the best-known eudaimonistic theory, Aristotle's. At the other end of the spectrum, *hedonists* claim that only pleasure is ultimately good for us. Such views ably capture the manifest importance of enjoyment and suffering in human life. But they also have trouble dealing with all three puzzles that started this chapter: deception, impoverishment, and deprivation.

Desire theories assert that what's good for you is getting what you want. This is a very popular view, especially among economists, since it seems to make you the authority about what's good for you. On the plus side, experience machines aren't a problem for desire theories, since you won't *actually* be getting what you want. You'll merely think you are. But desire theories have trouble explaining mistakes. Generally, it seems obvious that people often want things that aren't good for them, like desiring a date with someone who turns out to be a jerk, or wanting to be a lawyer. Nor can they say that there's any deficiency in the seemingly impoverished life of a scratcher, or a slave who embraces his servitude. Likewise in some cases of deprivation, where the person has no desire for the missing goods (as in Syndrome X).

List theories identify well-being with a list of objective goods. For example: knowledge, achievement, friendship, and pleasure. If you are lacking something on the list, then your well-being is compromised, even if you don't want or like it. List theories have the advantage that you can put whatever seems important on the list, making short work of most problem cases. They have the disadvantage that this can seem pretty arbitrary, and not very illuminating about the nature of well-being.

None of these objections is clearly decisive: all these views continue to have smart defenders. They either reject the intuitions we've been discussing, think the alternatives are even worse, or try to modify their account to deal with the intuitions. Desire theorists, for example, often claim that only informed and rational desires count. But the basic worries have not been decisively rebutted, and the modified theories have serious problems of their own.

Eudaimonism for moderns: self-fulfilment

Let's come back to the eudaimonistic approach. Perhaps we can find a theory that shares Aristotle's focus on fulfilling our natures,

but isn't so strongly objectivist. In his justly famed essay on the value of individuality in *On Liberty*, British philosopher John Stuart Mill portrayed a more modern, individualized ideal, which we might call *self-fulfilment*: living in accordance with *who* you are—the self. On the ideal of self-fulfilment, well-being is a matter of your individual personality, however eccentric that might be.

What's normal for humans, on this view, is irrelevant for what's good for you, just as what's normal for bulls doesn't matter for Ferdinand's well-being. What matters is what you are like. Perhaps you were born gay; that's who you are. It shouldn't matter whether heterosexuality is the norm, or the characteristically human orientation. What counts is that individual's personality, and a gay person can thrive just as surely: by living in accordance with who he is, and so achieving self-fulfilment.

I won't try to offer a complete theory of self-fulfilment here, but philosopher L. W. Sumner may have pointed the way for happiness to figure in such a view: he defines well-being as *authentic happiness*. To be authentically happy, your happiness must be grounded in your life, and reflect who you truly are. Experience machine happiness isn't authentic, because it isn't genuinely rooted in your life. Also inauthentic is the happiness of 'happy slaves' and brainwashing victims, whose happiness reflects values that aren't genuinely their own.

The notion of authenticity may lie behind common worries about technologies for human enhancement, like 'morality pills' to make you nicer, or genetic engineering to make your children smarter: such manipulations might undermine authenticity. They might, for instance, make your actions or emotions less fully *yours*. This question could receive a lot of attention in coming decades.

Whatever else self-fulfilment involves, I would suggest it includes authentic happiness. Perhaps it also involves success in the things you care about—the values or commitments that shape your identity. Being a parent or physician, say, may be part of your identity. So you do well, in part, by succeeding in being a good parent or doctor.

Even this might not give us a complete theory of well-being, but it should be enough for us to see where happiness might fit into the larger picture. Whatever the right theory of well-being, happiness is clearly important for human flourishing.

Who's to say?

> Study: New Yorkers Unhappiest People in America (Because We Work Hard and Read Books, Unlike Lazy, Stupid Hicks)
>
> A recent headline in the *Village Voice*

The study in question did indeed suggest that people in Louisiana, and every other state, are happier than New Yorkers. Does that mean Louisianans are *better off*? Some will say yes, some no.

But no experiment can fully settle the matter, because this is a dispute about values. New Yorkers might value achievement more, while Louisianans may value enjoyment more. *Strivers* versus *enjoyers*; the ant and the grasshopper . A philosophical theory of well-being might be able to settle the question: if the right theory tells us that achievement is more important for well-being than enjoyment, then New Yorkers might stand vindicated: they are better off than the Louisianans.

But 'values' are pretty mysterious. Unlike electrons and elephants, nobody's quite sure what values are, where they come from, or

whether they really exist at all. Why should we trust the opinions of philosophers spinning theories about them from the armchair? You might think there's no settling the New York/Louisiana debate. It's just a matter of opinion.

Here is a short answer, just to reduce the sceptic's fears and keep us on track: I will assume, for the purposes of this book, that values are entirely a product of the human mind. We project value onto the world. Things are actually good, bad, right, or wrong insofar as we would deem them to be so, under the right conditions.

I do not think there is a unique set of 'right' values, or that all reasonable people everywhere will fully converge on the same set of values. To some extent, the right answers will be relative to the population you're talking about. But there may yet be fairly sharp limits on the range of values that can hold up under reflection: *reflectively sustainable* values. And even if there are multiple right answers, there may be lots of unambiguously wrong answers.

For example: many people will tell you that only happiness matters. But even a moment's reflection on experience machine cases or scratchers tends to cause people to drop that opinion like a hot potato. This is some evidence that people are simply wrong to think that only happiness matters; even they don't believe it when they stop to think about it.

Or take moral opinions about the treatment of animals. Many Americans today hold something like the following constellation of opinions: eating pigs and cows from the typical supermarket is just fine; treating dogs and horses in the same manner is terribly immoral; and hunting deer is also wrong. I'm not sure what the right answers are about the ethics of meat-eating, though I am inclined to think that a diet including moderate amounts of meat from humanely treated animals is morally acceptable. Where I

live, to blow Bambi's brains out with a .30-06 and gnaw on his bones is positively doing the environment, and people, a favour. It may in fact be the most humane and environmentally friendly meal you'll have all year. (Growing crops kills myriad small animals, and factory farmed meat from the supermarket is an environmental, health, and humanitarian nightmare.)

You might disagree with me. No matter: I challenge the reader to reconcile the initial set of opinions. There is, I submit, no non-crazy way to make them consistent. On this issue, many people's moral attitudes are an incoherent mash of maudlin sentimentality and feeble rationalization.

Philosophical reflection can do a lot of good in cases like these, helping us to clear out the cobwebs between our ears and think more clearly and intelligently about our values. Sometimes we will converge on a single answer, as happened in the modern era, when virtually all intelligent, reflective human beings came to accept ideals of human equality. Only in enclaves trapped in the Dark Ages do we find people still convinced that slavery is OK. So there are probably some universal values owing to our common human nature, even if not all values are universal. Where disagreement seems intractable, we may simply have to admit that there is more than one set of reflectively sustainable values. Maybe neither liberals nor conservatives are wrong; perhaps both represent solutions that reasonable people can take toward the complexities of life. But that hardly means that anything goes, like fascism.

In short, making value judgements does not require us to get into anything occult or mysterious. And we can allow lots of room for relativity and plurality without becoming rank subjectivists who think anything goes. We can still maintain that some ways of living are better than others.

Chapter 7
Getting outside oneself: virtue and meaning

'Must get lonely here, J.F.'
'Not really. I *make* friends. They're toys. My friends are toys. I make them. It's a hobby. I'm a genetic designer.'
Pris and J. F. Sebastian, *Blade Runner*

Two legacies

Sometime in 1889, my great-great-grandfather Jacob Tuteur disappeared. This was unfortunate timing, as his young wife was then pregnant with their son, Edward. No one is really certain what became of Jacob; perhaps he was murdered. More likely, he simply took off and abandoned his family. (There is some evidence he spent his last days, long after, in a Texas nursing home.) That, at any rate, is what Edward believed. His bitterness at the apparent betrayal, combined with many strokes of bad luck, ultimately left two people dead, another life ruined, and many others hurt. All told, Jacob Tuteur's disappearance left a trail of suffering that spanned at least four generations. As far as his known descendants can tell, that is his sole legacy, all that is left of the man. We know nothing else of him.

Another great-great-grandfather, Billy McClure, raised the woman who would become Edward's wife, Zada. She in turn did the lion's

share of bringing up my father. Billy was a self-educated man of considerable erudition, known in Southern Ohio for formidable debating skills. (What I wouldn't give for his library, which his God-fearing wife mostly consigned to the flames on his death.) He was known as well for honesty and generosity. Family legend has it that Billy could walk into any bank and get a loan on a handshake. Those qualities may have cost him the family business, a couple of general stores and a small country inn, as he apparently extended credit to too many folks who weren't able to repay him. As a result, my father was born into poverty. I do not know how much of Billy's thinking made its way into this book, though some of Zada's views can be found in the last chapter. But he left his descendants a great trove of cultural and spiritual capital, helping sustain the family through some of the same poverty and other hardships that broke Edward. Four generations of real wealth, and counting.

Neither of these men may have been particularly *happy* during their lives. But in the final reckoning, this does not appear to be the most important thing about them. More important, I think, is what they did, what they contributed. The advantages they left, or failed to leave, for those who came after. Whether they acted well, or badly.

The priority of virtue

Well-being, we saw, may not necessarily involve virtue: it may be possible for bad people, like Genghis Khan, to flourish. But this hardly means that virtue isn't important.

Not that it's a bad bet from the perspective of self-interest. Most parents seem to recognize this, and try to raise their children to be decent people, partly because they think honesty, fairness, compassion, and loyalty will serve them well. As a general rule, people don't like to hang out with untrustworthy, heartless reprobates. On the positive side, we saw in Chapter 5 that caring

and doing for others tends to bring greater happiness. At any rate, most people do in fact have moral commitments: we value honesty, loyalty, kindness, and justice. To act against those values may be to make ourselves failures on our own terms. For most people, a life of immorality probably tends to exact a high price.

Still, there is no guarantee that immorality won't sometimes make a person happier, or even better off. Nor that the bad person won't do pretty well, at least by conventional standards. Aristotelians and others convinced of the intrinsic benefits of virtue tend to find such concessions worrisome. Sometimes, it seems, the concern is that we can't take virtue or morality seriously enough if we admit that people can profit from immorality. But that doesn't follow at all. In fact very few serious thinkers fail to give virtue pride of place in thinking about the good life.

Virtually all ethical philosophers agree on something we might call the *priority of virtue*: broadly and crudely speaking, the demands of virtue trump all other values in life. Acting badly is out of the question, even if that would make us happier or otherwise benefit us. This is basically a consensus position in philosophy, though of course philosophers disagree about what virtue involves. For the great majority, it includes acting morally, and even apparent exceptions tend not to advocate acting badly. Nietzsche for instance, was no fan of conventional morality, but he did not counsel against living admirably. And many philosophers would allow that nonmoral reasons sometimes outweigh moral reasons. If you discover that keeping your promise to meet some friends at the movies will mean losing your job, it's OK to break the promise. But, at the very least, we must not act badly.

The ancient debate over whether virtue necessarily benefits us is interesting, but it can also be somewhat of a red herring. Whether it benefits us or not, most parties can agree that virtue, including morality, is our top priority.

A right to be happy?

All this talk of 'virtue' can seem a bit dry. So let's pause to consider what it means for the pursuit of happiness. Obviously, acting badly in the name of happiness is out of the question. Here's one way that can play out.

'I have a right to be happy.' On hearing these words, one may want to duck: what follows is rarely good news. When someone says something like this, it tends to be so transparently aimed at rationalizing some sort of seedy behaviour that we aren't likely to take it seriously. Yet the claim is often heard all the same, at least in these parts. Is there anything to it?

In a word: no. No one has a right to be happy. Such a right is nowhere to be found in the American Declaration of Independence, which speaks only of its pursuit. And few philosophers have ever posited a right to be happy.

Let me qualify that a bit. If one means 'I have a right to be happy' in the same sense that one says 'I have a right to chew gum', then of course we have a right to be happy. Nothing wrong with being happy. But that's not what people mean when they say this: rather, they mean it in the same sense that one tells the boss, 'I have a right to get paid', after fulfilling the terms of employment. The person is claiming an entitlement to happiness: something he deserves, and which the world, or someone, owes him.

It is questionable whether anyone deserves much of anything, except to be treated with respect. Be that as it may, the idea that happiness is owed to anyone is deeply implausible, and few serious thinkers have claimed any such thing. A right to the necessities of happiness, perhaps, but not a right actually to be happy.

The mistaken assertion of a right to be happy is an example of a broader error, namely a belief in cosmic entitlements. For

instance, that one deserves a reward merely for being virtuous. Not from anyone in particular, just . . . the world. A common reply to any mention of environmental concerns, for instance, goes something like this: 'I work hard, so I deserve to have nice things.' Perhaps there's genuinely nothing wrong with, say, an Arizona homeowner purchasing an extremely wasteful watering system for her lush desert lawn. But the idea that the individual *deserves* it is not terribly compelling. For most of us, hard work is a given, not something we get a prize for.

Life is not fair. Some people, through no fault of their own, will fail to find happiness. Some will be stuck in marriages that don't make them happy, yet aren't bad enough to justify putting their children through a divorce. Just as others, too young, drop dead from a heart attack. No one is entitled to be happy. But even the unalterably unhappy may still lead good lives, and many of them do. We will return to this in the final chapter.

Another kind of mistake: it is possible to make too much use of the rights one actually has. A man buys a piece of land, for example, then ignores the neighbours' pleas and proceeds to build a monstrous house that blocks a prized view from nearby businesses, driving away customers and otherwise annoying everyone around him. Much of the time he operates noisy machinery that shatters the peaceful environment that drew many other residents to the area. As a result, some of the neighbours have put their homes or businesses up for sale.

The reader knows exactly what the man said in response to his neighbours' entreaties: 'I have a right to do what I want with my property.'

This is a curious justification. The man may well be correct about his rights. He may have violated no legal code. Nor perhaps was anyone morally entitled to prevent him from doing it, or to exact

compensation from him. At any rate, the man is calling on a perfectly ordinary understanding of rights. Let's grant him his view, then, and concede that he indeed acted within his rights in building his beastly abode. Is that any defence?

Consider a brief list of some of your rights, so understood. You have a right not to visit your wife in the hospital. You have a right to be callous, insensitive, and inconsiderate. You have the right to annoy everyone around you. You have the right to tell your kindly grandmother she looks like the back end of a mule. You may have the right to let your neighbour starve, though you have food enough to share. You have, in short, the right to be a deplorable, despicable, contemptible jerk. You have the right to be a terrible person and lead a terrible life. But of course you wouldn't be *justified* in doing any of these things.

What makes living with each other bearable, and civilization possible, is the willingness of all parties to *limit the exercise of their rights*. Arguably, to invoke a right to do something is merely to declare that others may not forcibly stop you from doing it, or demand recompense after the fact. Obviously, if the only constraint we put on our behaviour is to avoid doing things that might warrant the use of force or compensatory proceedings against us, life will rapidly become, as the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) might have said, 'nasty, brutish and short'. A society in which 'I have a right to' counts as a justification for doing something is in deep trouble.

Perhaps because this sort of thing has become somewhat of a problem, contemporary English vernacular has a special name for people who act as badly as they have a right to, and it has become quite popular. They may do no one strictly an injustice, paying all their bills, telling no lies, and so forth. They might even be, otherwise, good people. But they are very inconsiderate, and very hard to live with. We call such people assholes.

One should not be an asshole in the pursuit of happiness.

Meaning: connecting with what matters

A puzzle

I've been stressing the importance of morality, but acting and living well goes far beyond moral goodness. We don't just admire people for being good, but also for exercising such homely virtues as friendliness, wit, or resilience. Or, simply being skilled in the art of living. 'She really knows how to live' is a pretty high compliment. Growing up, one of the harsher criticisms we could receive was that we were acting soft, weak, spoiled—unable to handle our business. Or, half-jokingly, 'You're not worth the powder it'd take to blow you up.'

Another crucial part of living well has to do with *meaning*: very roughly, connecting with people and things that matter. We want not just to be happy, or good. We also want to pass our lives in meaningful, worthwhile pursuits. We've seen that such activities can make us happier. But beyond that, they are simply worth doing, quite apart from the happiness they bring.

In recent years the question of a meaningful life has become especially interesting to people with children. The reason? According to some studies, having kids doesn't make us happier. It may even be a downer. These studies seem to have hit a nerve with many parents, who are not generally keen to think that their darling spawn have made their lives worse. For years we've been clubbing our childless friends over the head with tales of the delights of parenting, so this is a little embarrassing.

Now those studies could be wrong, and some researchers claim they are. But they probably aren't *that* wrong. At least, not in this part of the world. (It might take a village to raise a child, but many folks have little more than an under-rested spouse, if that, to help

keep the little ones entertained, loved, disciplined, clothed, and fed.) A lot of parents were happier when they could just go out for a drink at night, and also didn't need one. Still, those of us with kids can't shake the conviction that our lives are *much* better for it—happier or not. Either we are in the grip of an unshakeable delusion, or kids benefit us in some other way than just making us happy. What could that be? An obvious thought is that they contribute a great deal of meaning to our lives. Let's see what this involves.

The roots of meaning: appreciating versus liking

The importance of relationships and activity for happiness, we saw, reflects our status as social creatures and as agents: lovers, and doers. The importance of meaning for happiness reflects a third aspect of human nature: we are also *valuers*. We do not just want or like things, like dogs do; we also value things. To value something is to see it as mattering, as something you ought to want: as grounding reasons for you to respond to it in certain ways. For example, you probably don't just prefer to be a person of integrity. You value integrity. Which means you see integrity as something you should maintain—not simply because you like it, but because it is worth maintaining. When you fall short and sacrifice some of your integrity, you don't just feel frustrated. You feel ashamed or guilty: you failed to measure up.

You can want or like something without valuing it. A smoker trying to quit may yet want a cigarette, but regard herself as having no reason at all to want one, or to smoke one. Or: I like Cheez Whiz. (A uranium-yellow synthetic spray 'cheese' in an aerosol can.) It tastes good to me, but the pleasure of it is a cheap, meaningless pleasure. I don't see Cheez Whiz as particularly deserving of my appetites. It would never occur to me to try to get someone else to appreciate it. *I* don't even appreciate it. I just like it, the same way my mutt likes his kibbles. It's junk food.

But then I sit down to a meal of some outstanding barbecue. To pull this sort of meal off, I realize, is no easy feat. The preparation is subtle, clearly the work of a talented cook. I like the ribs, yes. But I also *appreciate* them, as well as the artistry of the chef. To feed this creation to my dog, who cannot appreciate it and might at best regard it as a really tasty kibble, would be scandalous. I might try to explain the virtues of this preparation to a friend who's a newcomer to barbecue, hoping she too will come to appreciate it as I do. This is not just pleasant but a rewarding, satisfying meal. All the more so if shared in good company.

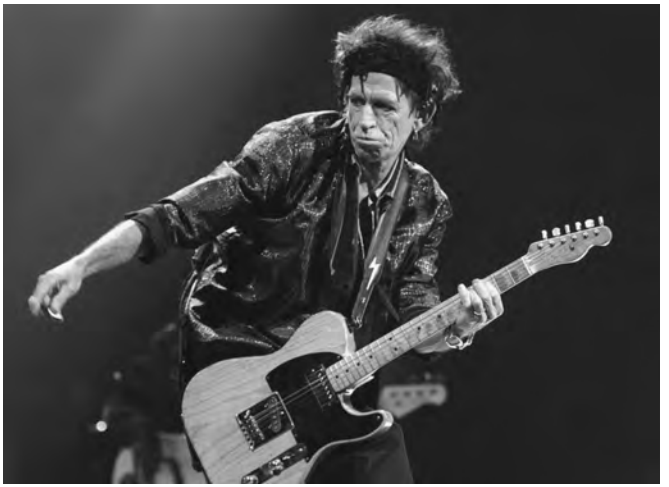
While we don't usually talk about dinner as a meaningful experience, neither would we consider such a repast to be a cheap, meaningless pleasure. (There's a reason Jesus wrapped up his life with a meal, and it wasn't The Last Drive-Through.) It is pretty meaningful to have the privilege of sharing a well-executed meal in good company.

The difference between *appreciating* and *liking* marks a critical difference between human and merely animal enjoyments, between the fulfilling and the merely pleasant. In appreciating things, we experience them as valuable, as mattering and worth wanting. We do not merely feel good about them, the way a dog likes his chow. Appreciation, we will see, appears to be central to a meaningful life.

Meaning in life, subjective and objective

Let's begin with the subjective side of meaning: feeling like your life is meaningful. Seeing your life as meaningful, I would suggest, involves *appreciative engagement with what you see as having merit or worth*. Any kind of excellence or beauty, for example, or simply the intrinsic worth that a human being has. To put it in plainer language, our lives seem meaningful to us when it feels like we're engaged with people and things that matter. Our lives feel worthwhile to us. This is a bit loose and could use further argument, but it should be good enough for our purposes.

To illustrate: Stephen Darwall, a philosopher whose work strongly influences me here, offers the example of Daniel Golub, a concert pianist who is rapturously lost in his virtuoso performance of a great piece. That is a model of appreciative engagement with merit: he recognizes the excellence of the music and the performance, and takes joy in connecting with those values. Such experiences are highly meaningful. Personally, I prefer this example (Figure 13):



13. Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones

Suppose your life *feels* meaningful to you. Does that mean it really is meaningful? Imagine you're a demented monarch who takes great satisfaction in carrying out absurd and cruel policies that strike you as really important. From your perspective, you're connecting with things that matter. Could this be a meaningful life? Philosophers divide on this question, but it seems a little extreme to call such a life utterly meaningless. Even if your goals are completely worthless, they still seem meaningful to you. So

why should we insist that your life has no meaning at all? Subjective meaning probably counts for something.

Still, wouldn't your life be a lot more meaningful if you were engaged with things that actually did matter? Part of a meaningful life is just doing things that are in fact worthwhile. When people cite Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa as exemplars of meaningful lives, they probably aren't thinking about how it seemed to those individuals. Rather, the mere fact that they devoted their lives to great accomplishments makes them meaningful. Any life dedicated to worthwhile ends is meaningful.

So meaning can arise both from connecting with what seems valuable to you, and from connecting with what is actually valuable. Call these *subjective* and *objective* meaning, respectively. The most meaningful lives will combine subjective and objective meaning. In the central case of meaning, then, *what makes life meaningful is appreciative engagement with merit or worth*. Philosopher Susan Wolf makes a similar point when she writes that 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness'. Lives can have some meaning without the subjective component, say when we do good things without really appreciating their value. Likewise without the objective aspect, as when we are deluded about the worth of our activities. But the meaningfulness of our lives is diminished when either component is missing.

Why meaning matters

It seems obviously important to lead a meaningful life. But it is not so obvious *why*. How does meaning make our lives better? We saw in Chapter 5 that meaningful activity is a major source of happiness. In fact I suspect that our lives can only be emotionally fulfilling when they seem meaningful to us. We might think of emotional fulfilment as a mixture of joy and attunement that arises when we appreciatively engage with what we see as valuable. Joy, due to the recognition of good things happening and being connected with them. And attunement, due to the

recognition that one is doing, or being, what one ought: a sense of completion or, well, fulfilment. It is not clear how you could achieve this state without feeling like your life is fairly meaningful.

Still, meaningful pursuits do not always make us happier. Sometimes they are difficult and stressful. An artist, researcher, or politician might lead a highly meaningful life, yet not be particularly happy. And then there are the children: they don't always make us happier, even as they add meaning to our lives. How, then, do we benefit?

One possibility is that the experience of meaning just is a good experience to have. Not just because it involves pleasure, but simply as a positive experience in its own right. Perhaps an experience can benefit us either by being pleasant, or by being meaningful or rewarding.

A more familiar thought is that meaningful lives tend to be more *successful*. In doing things we find meaningful, we achieve a measure of success in things we care about. Being a good father or friend. Helping others, creating beauty, or pushing the boundaries of human knowledge or athletic achievement. Such successes seem to make our lives go better for us, quite apart from any happiness payoff.

Finally, even when meaningful pursuits don't benefit us, they can still be worthwhile. Many a political dissident has paid a steep price for their efforts, and some no doubt would have been better off doing something else. But their struggles may add greatly to the meaningfulness of their lives, benefit or no, simply because they have so much merit.

Summing up: if I am right, then *a major part of the good life is connecting with what really matters*. This contributes centrally to making our lives fulfilling, meaningful, and worthwhile. Variants of this ideal probably arise in all the major religions. Saint Thomas

Aquinas, for instance, saw the human ideal as union with God—the beatific vision. Our goal, in essence, is to connect as closely as possible with the good.

Meaning and modern life: appreciators and consumers

Let's see how these points might apply to our everyday lives. The ideal of connection is radically different from the ideal of simply getting whatever you happen to want, perhaps the standard view among moderns since Hobbes. In the picture we've been discussing, which Darwall traces to Aristotle, humans are valuers who seek to connect with the things they ought to desire. The world's value does not simply depend on our whims, but is something we discover. We remind ourselves to keep our eye on the ball, not letting our desires become detached from the things that really matter. And we educate and cultivate ourselves, in part so that we may better appreciate the worth of things, enriching our lives in the process. In short, the ideal of connection counsels us to seek a life of appreciative engagement with value: to be an *appreciator*, as we might call it.

In the Hobbesian view, reflected in mainstream economics, we are brute desirers who wish simply to get our fill. Or at least to keep the pangs of hunger at bay—*Homo gastropodus*, a stomach with legs. Like clever dogs chasing ever more kibble, we treat our desires as simply a given, not something to be scrutinized, reflected upon, and improved. The Hobbesian sees the world as something to be used and consumed, its value depending wholly on the individual's whims. You don't connect with other people; you contract. Or, if you're a demented genetic designer like *Blade Runner*'s Sebastian, you synthesize. Appreciation doesn't enter into it; you just *want*. The familiar term for this beast is 'consumer'.

I first began distinguishing consumers and appreciators in my years at a vacation spot, where I noticed a divide in the way tourists approached the place. Many, the appreciators, arrived with an open

mind, adapted themselves to where they were, and enjoyed the place for what it was. Others, the consumers—'touroids' was the local term—seemed to regard the locale simply as something to amuse or entertain them. 'What, no miniature golf?' 'Why can't I get a decent cappuccino around here?' 'I'm bored, there's nothing to do here.' Never mind that they were in one of the most beautiful locations on the planet. Family burial plots were routinely trampled in search of a quaint photograph, 'no trespassing' signs notwithstanding. To see what I mean, observe some vacationers at another spot in Figure 14 as they extract souvenir photos from Buddhist monks taking their daily walk.

Few things, I suspect, can more thoroughly drain life of meaning, dignity, or joy than having this sort of outlook. It is better to be an appreciator than a consumer.

Luckily, few people have fully embraced the grim Hobbesian perspective in their lives. Connecting with value happens in our work, sports, the arts, nature, and other encounters with beauty, hobbies, good works, and most of all our connections with other people. In fact, probably most activities we like to do confer some meaning. In a market economy, most paid work is worthwhile and

14. Tourists photographing monks, Luang Prabang, Laos

meaningful to some degree, as long as your dealings are honest. One of the more meaningful episodes of my youth was simply earning a paycheck and paying the bills. At age 16, I packed up and went to another state, where I rented a bed for the summer and paid my expenses clearing tables in a restaurant. Just providing for yourself is a pretty meaningful act. If you sell shoes, you're not only providing for yourself and your family, but also offering a valued service to your employer and your customers. Your paycheck reflects the value you provide for others. All this is worthwhile and meaningful. (Admittedly, in many jobs the *sense* of meaning may be fairly weak, since the fruits of your labour may be pretty far removed from your daily experience.)

Similarly, you might see something to admire in a well-played game of football, and so find playing it to be meaningful and fulfilling. You might find just *watching* football on television to be fulfilling, if in so doing you are not just having fun but appreciating the skill of the athletes. Is this any different from appreciating a ballet or opera? Naturally, actually doing the activity tends to be more fulfilling than merely appreciating someone else's performance of it. We can participate both as agent and observer.

Perhaps the most important form of appreciative engagement is *social* engagement: talking and doing things together. Doing things for others. Unless you are a psychopath, you cannot help but see value in other people and in responding appropriately to them. Indeed, people may seem to most of us to be the *chief* source of value. Given the complexity of human sociality, our interactions with each other demand tremendous sensitivity, discernment, skill, and sophistication. If it doesn't always seem that way, it's because humans are so good at it. Even something as basic as good conversation is an art, requiring considerable intelligence and practice.

Just hanging out with friends can be highly meaningful and fulfilling. Doing things for them, even more so. Since the great

majority of people have social lives, this suggests that one need not pursue great accomplishment to lead a perfectly meaningful, fulfilling life. It may be that few people truly fit the stereotype of the mindless consumer leading an empty, meaningless life.

Summing up: the place of happiness in a good life

I cannot confidently enumerate all the values that factor into a good life. But I have suggested that happiness is part, but not the whole, of human well-being. Beyond well-being, it is still more important to act well: virtue is our first priority in life. Leading a meaningful life contributes both to well-being and to virtue.

Does this mean happiness isn't important? Of course not. Health isn't the only thing that matters either, but no one denies the importance of health. Recall our fictional communities, Eudonia and Maldonia, from Chapter 4: would you consider it unimportant which community you lived in? Happiness isn't everything, but still it matters—rather a lot. A society that resembles Maldonia has some pretty grave defects.

This chapter and the last have emphasized how distinct the elements of a good life are: happiness, morality, and so forth. Sometimes they can pull in different directions. But for the most part they do not. By and large, the ways of living that bring happiness also tend, by any reasonable measure, to be *good* ways of living.

Consider the young woman pictured in Figure 15. Just from looking at a photograph, we cannot be certain that she is happy, or a good person. But I suspect she strikes *you* as happy, and good. As a general rule, people who are selfish, shallow, or mean do not look like this. For the most part, I think, they do not look happy at all.

Dr Thomas Mettee, a family practitioner in Cleveland, Ohio, was one of the happiest-seeming men I have known. As with very

15. A young Tibetan woman

many of the happiest people I've met—all of them, actually—much of his happiness derived from his concern for others. Indeed, leading a life of service to others. When he walked into a room, everyone's spirits lifted. He could have you laughing on your deathbed.

Mettee saw what was unique in each patient, and he seemed instinctively to know what you needed, what needed to be said. He could deliver a stern lecture on the necessity of losing weight, or quitting smoking, and not make you feel defensive in the least. He recognized that families need care and wise counsel just as much as the patients, and I am sure he helped to keep many families working together through the hardest passages of life. Nightly house calls, if called for. If need be, he would bend the rules to get a patient what she needed, perhaps commandeering

some hospital equipment to allow her to die at home, in her own bed. If a patient had a favourite flower, he might place it on her chest in her final minutes, the petals rising and falling with her slackening breath. When the blossom ceased to move, the gathered family would know that she had passed on.

Three nights ago Dr Tom himself passed away, I hope in the care of one of the many physicians he trained. Though it is only February, the flowers he sent for our garden—daffodils, my mother's favourite, and tulips, my father's—have already begun peeking up through the soil.

Chapter 8
A good life

'Yes, we're happy…We could all use a little more money, but we have what we need, and what we don't have, God takes care of.'
'What would you do if you had more money?'
'Probably buy bigger houses…But on the other hand, we probably wouldn't meet like this every afternoon. So, maybe not.'

Three women sitting on cement blocks in front of their houses, Monterrey, Mexico. Average household income, 'perhaps $500 per month'. From Dan Buettner, *Thrive*

What makes for a good life?

To put the pursuit of happiness in its proper context, we need some notion of what a good life looks like. One of the more noteworthy features of a good life is that, like a good play or a pleasant visit from the in-laws, it eventually draws to a conclusion: you die. This is probably not something you are looking forward to, but neither is it such a terrible thing. If the old never died, the young would soon find things pretty crowded, and get really tired of hearing the same stories over and over again. And if you alone gained immortality, you would soon find things pretty lonely and weird, as the world leaves you behind. We don't know what happens when we die, but I suspect you aren't planning to end up

someplace uncomfortably warm. If there's no afterlife at all, then it's going to be pretty much like it was before you were born. That wasn't so bad, was it?

Before your time comes, you may look back on a long life and take stock. Did you have a good life? This is the really important question, the one you really want to get right. But how can you tell? What counts as a good life?

It is surprisingly hard to define a good life. Or maybe not so surprising. But let me venture a suggestion. I'm not sure it's correct; in fact I'm not aware of many similar discussions in the literature, so these waters are not as well-charted as one might expect. But it seems a reasonable starting point.

Let's say that a good life is a life you could reasonably affirm. Put another way, *a good life is a life that you could justifiably be satisfied with*. (I am being brief here, leaving a more detailed argument for another time.) Call this a 'justified affirmation' account of the good life.

There may be other reasonable ways to think about 'good lives', serving different purposes. When setting goals for oneself, or one's government, it may make sense to focus on a more demanding notion of the good life: a life worth aspiring to. This would be a 'justified aspiration' notion of the good life.

Here, though, I am interested in the way we evaluate lives as they are lived, or when looking back on them. The question is, when are we justified in affirming, or being satisfied with, our lives? As the last two chapters explained, there seem to be at least two fundamental parts to a good life: whether your life is good *for* you, and whether the way you lead it is good. Well-being, and virtue.

We saw in Chapter 3 that it may not be very important whether you are *actually* satisfied with your life. But here the question is

whether you have reason to be satisfied with your life. Whether you *could* reasonably take such an attitude. This is a question about how your life measures up, not your state of mind. And that could be important even if it doesn't matter so much whether you actually do have the attitude.

Interestingly, for your life to be good for you, it does not have to go well for you; you don't need to fare well, or do well. You don't need a high level of well-being. Your life just needs to be a good thing for you to have had. For this, it may suffice if your life is *worth living* for you: better than having not lived. But this seems a bit weak: a life just barely worth living seems at best to be okay, acceptable, or maybe tolerable. So let's say, to count as a genuine good for you, your life has to be *well* worth living for you: substantially better than having not lived. This is vague, but we shouldn't expect precision here.

So one part of the good life concerns your *well-being*. The other part, very roughly, is the ethical part of it, or *virtue*. Have you conducted yourself well? Have you chosen and acted well? Choosing and living well isn't just a moral thing: it's more broadly a matter of living sensibly and wisely. This might include being prudent in your personal affairs, maintaining your dignity, getting the most out of life, and so forth. If you live very well, we might say you lived *admirably*.

All that said, morality is clearly the most important part of the picture, and the most important thing to get right in a good life. We already saw this in Chapter 7, but let's examine the point a bit closer. In thinking about good lives, it can be helpful to apply the 'eulogy test': imagine you're delivering the eulogy for a person. Make it a dry run to an empty room so you don't have to worry about offending anyone. Would you say that he had a good life?

As a general rule, people tend not to say that bad people had good lives. If you think so-and-so was a moral degenerate who treated

people like dirt, you are not very likely to think of him as having had a good life. Even if he were wealthy, happy, and admired by many, having essentially got away with being a horrible person.

On the flip side, think of someone you consider to have been a really good person, who conducted her life courageously, kindly, justly, and in an otherwise morally admirable way. Most likely, you would also deem her to have had a good life. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill suffered greatly from depression. Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered at age 39 after a not particularly cushy career leading the civil rights movement. During the prime of his life, Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison. None of them had particularly enviable lives. Yet these are the sorts of people who tend to get cited as *paradigms* of good lives.

When we talk of good lives, are we just talking about *morally* good or virtuous lives? Certainly not. Think again of the eulogy test: is it not relevant, when summing up a person's life, whether she enjoyed it? Whether she was happy, or miserable? Whether she succeeded or failed in her important goals? Mandela seems to have had a good life, at least given the standard narrative of things. But the fact that he spent nearly three decades in a prison cell, after which his marriage crumbled, at least prompts one to pause and think about it. It would have been an even better life had he been able to accomplish great things without so much suffering.

Now imagine a very kind, courageous, and honourable person who does good works for others, but endures an endless stream of horrors: excruciating illnesses, ostracism, and public humiliation. Watching her children die one by one. A lifelong depression that frequently leaves her contemplating suicide. And an early, lonely, painful death. So few were the consolations of this life that she would rather never have been born. Her goodness as a person counts for a lot, yet it would be hard to call this a good life. On the contrary, it sounds like a very undesirable life, a life one would be hard-pressed to affirm.

A good life may not require doing or faring well. But it seems one must do well enough to make life well worth living. And most of all, it requires acting reasonably well. A good life is a life well-lived, and well worth living.

Prospects for a good life

There is a happy moral to this account of the good life: the good life is not hard to get. The well-being side of the equation, after all, is very undemanding. Even the average Charlie Brown, for whom things rarely go well, can still have a life well worth living. Most of the time, life is awash in small pleasures: almost every hour brings pleasant smells, pleasing sights and sounds, agreeable sensations, amusing thoughts. This is not always so obvious, because we are so used to it, and because we are wired to respond more strongly to the bad things. (This is called 'negativity bias'.)

Yes, there are times when the suffering overwhelmingly trumps the pleasures. Indeed when no consciousness at all might be preferable. For some periods, life may be such that it genuinely wouldn't be worth living, if that's all the future could bring. Yet no one reaches old age and lies on his deathbed thinking, 'if only I had killed myself when I was 17. Suicide really was the answer.' I've not heard of it, anyway. Eventually the pain subsides, age mellows us and gives us a better sense of proportion, and we realize how good it is to be alive.

Since the well-being part of a good life is so easily met, the chief obstacle to a good life, for most of us, is our own choices. We are far more likely to undermine our lives by acting badly than by being unhappy or unsuccessful. If you do badly by your family, cheat people, are selfish or just plain mean, you will have a much harder time saying honestly that you're satisfied with your life.

The other side of this, though, is that *the most important element of a good life is wholly in your control*: it is your choice whether to

act well. For the most part, whether you have a good life is up to you. You may or may not find happiness. But you can handle life's slings and arrows with goodness, dignity, and grace.

I would suggest that most people do, and consequently have good lives: lives worthy of affirmation. This may be the real lesson of the high rates of reported life satisfaction around the world: perhaps most people are satisfied with their lives because they have good *reason* to be. It does not mean they are happy or even doing well. It just means they recognize their lives to be good, and appreciate it. If anything, perhaps *more* people should be satisfied with their lives. Maybe many people fail to recognize how good their lives really are.

So most people have lives well worth living, and arguably conduct themselves reasonably well: mostly doing right by their families and friends, honouring their debts, earning an honest living, fulfilling their obligations—leading decent, dignified lives. Even those hobbled by severe disabilities can choose to handle them well. They may also bring joy, meaning, and inspiration into the lives of those around them. However modest your achievements, you can take satisfaction in knowing that you handled your responsibilities, knew something of love, and took in a bit of Earth's, and humankind's, splendour.

For my own part, most of the good lives that come to mind involve average folks leading pretty ordinary lives. (Though if you think about it, even the most ordinary human life is a pretty extraordinary thing.) In fact good lives may be inversely correlated with accomplishment and fame: notoriety and extraordinary achievements tend to require a single-minded devotion that can compromise more fundamental elements of a good life, like family relationships. I've met a good number of accomplished people, very impressive in their fields. But more than a few of them have come across as pretty unimpressive human beings, whose families I do not envy.

The homemaker who shepherded her family over the decades with discernment, sensitivity, wisdom, patience, and a sharp wit may pass unremarked by the wider world. But I would much prefer that my children go on to lead lives like hers than Woolf's, Wittgenstein's, Van Gogh's, or Hemingway's. Those of us observing from a safe distance should be glad of the great men and women whose fruits we enjoy. But that doesn't mean we should want to live like them.

Setting priorities

Knowing the criteria for a good life is a far cry from knowing how to get there. So how does one put the claims made in this book into practice? What does our discussion suggest about what our priorities should be?

There's really no general answer to this question, because each of us has different problems and different needs. Anyway, I have no expertise in advising people about their lives. Still, it seems a waste to have come this far and not at least have a conversation about what our priorities ought to be. Each of us is different, but not that different. All human beings face a lot of similar problems, and have a lot of similar needs. Many of our values are common, as well. Consider how you can become friends with people in any part of the world, and how we can all enjoy many of the same stories and films. Nobody watches *Star Wars* and thinks Darth Vader is a really terrific guy.

So here, for what it's worth, are a few suggestions on the most important items to bear in mind—areas where it is easy to make mistakes that make your life worse. They will not apply to all persons at all times, but they might apply to most. While these reflections draw on my philosophical training and knowledge of the scientific literature, it is not expert counsel, nor will I offer any real argument for the list. These are just suggestions, based on my sense of where the most significant practical concerns lie. You'll

Conclusion

Summing up: Engage yourself with meaningful activities that interest you, but don't overdo it and forget to relax. Make time for the people you love. Keep a lid on your debts. And make it come out even.

And, I would add: make it easy for yourself to do these things by putting yourself in a context where they tend to come naturally. Surround yourself with good people who seem to you to have their priorities straight. Avoid careers that will put you in bad company. If most folks around you aren't doing a very good job of it, you'll find the going a lot harder.

Suppose, then, that you live as wisely as can reasonably be expected. Will you be happy? Maybe, but that's only partly in your control. But the chances are excellent that you'll have a life well-lived, and well worth living. A good life.

> Just being alive, having a wonderful family, good friends, watching the sunrise morning after morning—that's what makes me feel good. I think people take their lives for granted. Some just haven't hit that part of their lives where they stop and say, 'I am such a lucky person to have the life that I have'.
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> Sgt. Michael A. DiRaimondo, in a letter home from Iraq, shortly before being killed in action