**Chapter 7: Morality Aims at Human Well-Being**

At the end of Chapter 3 I claim that a key substantive element in our pre-theoretic conception of morality is the notion that morality mostly aims at human well-being. The claim is that morally correct actions and morally valuable character traits are often understood to be correct or valuable largely because they either promote, or are constitutive of, human well-being.[[1]](#footnote-1)1 This element of our conception strongly coheres with (i) our belief that some kinds of lives are better for us *qua* human beings than other kinds of lives; (ii) our belief that morality is connected in an important way to what benefits and harms human beings; and (iii) the idea that much of ethics centers around the question of how one should live.[[2]](#footnote-2)2 Human well-being, we noted, is importantly different from individual well-being. Yet there is also a vital connection between the two: we seem to believe that individuals cannot truly flourish unless those around them are flourishing, and that human flourishing occurs only when the individuals in a society are flourishing.[[3]](#footnote-3)3

In this chapter I shall argue that if human well-being has as important a role in our conception of morality as claimed, then we have another reason to reject the realist’s second core tenet—the claim that moral facts and truths are independent of our evidence for them. The moral realist holds that what makes a moral judgment true is something other than the beliefs or attitudes we have—whether as individuals or groups of individuals—regarding the object of judgment. However, if we often judge the moral value of an action or character trait based on its non-accidental relation to human well-being, and if what constitutes the latter is in some way determined by us, then the realist’s second core tenet is clearly false. The task, then, is to show that what constitutes human well-being is partly an evaluative matter.

But before taking up that task it will be helpful to say a bit more about this notion of human well-being that I am claiming is such an important part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality. For, in spite of what has already been argued for at the end of Chapter 3, the realist might deny that much of morality aims at human well-being, or he might maintain that we should not conceive of morality in this way. If so-conceiving of morality is indeed problematic, then the fact that human well-being might be an evaluative notion poses no threat to the realist.

I won’t try to give a full response to this realist strategy. Instead I will simply comment on some of Tom Scanlon’s arguments for downgrading the importance of well-being’s role in moral thought (Scanlon 1998: Chapter 3[[4]](#footnote-4)4). Commenting on Scanlon’s discussion will give us a better idea of what I think we take to be involved in the notion of human well-being, and hopefully, a better sense of why understanding morality in relation to it is important. With this out of the way, we can then look at some of the reasons for thinking that human well-being is very much an evaluative notion.

Scanlon mostly argues against the importance of *individual* well-being. Even so, some of what he says about individual well-being bears on our notion of *human* well-being, since the latter has close connections to the former. It is also important to see why many of Scanlon’s objections against the use of well-being do not apply at all to our conception of human well-being.

Scanlon does not deny that ideas about well-being can figure in our moral thinking in valuable ways (1998: 110, 138, 140, 215).[[5]](#footnote-5)5 What he rejects is the thought that much of morality is understood, and can be best understood, in connection with a conception of well-being that is not already shaped by moral assumptions (109, 110). The individual well-being that he speaks of is supposed to be of this nonmoral sort: “It represents what an individual has reason to want for him- or herself, leaving aside concern for others and any moral restraints or obligations” (109).

Since ancient times moral philosophers have been attracted to the project of grounding morality in an entirely nonmoral conception of well-being. They have hoped that such a conception might get us a fairly strong kind of objectivity for our moral judgments. For instance, because the typical individual cares a great deal about their well-being, we would have a way to rationally appeal to those who ask, “Why be moral?” (137). Relatedly, if morality could be founded upon an entirely nonmoral conception of well-being, the likelihood increases that the rationality of virtue will be demonstrable from an external standpoint. In more recent times philosophers have also hoped that an entirely nonmoral conception of well-being would admit of the kind of quantitative comparisons that the utilitarian needs to make (Scanlon 1998: 137).

Although Scanlon doesn’t explicitly say so, he clearly rejects the view that empirical facts about well-being can provide an objective foundation for morality. Yet (oddly enough, but perhaps to his credit) this is not one of the reasons he gives for thinking that well-being is less important to our understanding of morality than many have claimed. His main reason for downgrading the importance of individual well-being is the belief that it is not basic or fundamental to much of our understanding of morality. The notion of well-being, he claims, is not involved in the content of many moral requirements, nor is it what we should look to in order to justify many of those requirements (138-141). He also claims that a conception of what makes one’s life go better plays only a minor role, if even that, in our practical deliberations (109); one reason this is so lies with the fact that well-being is not a ‘master value’ (108, 127, 142)—i.e., something in terms of which the (moral or prudential) value of everything else is to be understood. Another reason has to do with the abstractness and indeterminacy of individual well-being. It is hard to judge whether something contributes to one’s well-being if one doesn’t know what constitutes that well-being; and we won’t be in a very good position to determine the latter until our central aims, or ground projects,[[6]](#footnote-6)6 are chosen (131).

Scanlon’s arguments are more plausible if we understand individual well-being as he does, and take it to be entirely nonmoral in content. But to the extent that his arguments rest on this understanding, they fail to apply to our notion of human well-being. For the latter clearly has moral content (something I aim to show in this chapter).[[7]](#footnote-7)7 The subjective ingredients that I will argue are part of our account of human well-being can rightly be seen as moral content, or the injection of moral beliefs, for they are part of our conception of well-being because we have decided that they ought to be. We could conceive of human well-being differently than we do.

Scanlon also points out that a notion of well-being has moral content as soon as we try to make it a foundation for our moral claims. We need to recognize that “the claim that the possibility of suffering a loss in well-being is something that has force in moral argument is a substantive moral claim” (215). This observation applies to our notion of human well-being as well. It has moral content in this *second sense* just in virtue of the fact that we give it the status that it has in our moral thinking. By taking the concept to have an important role in our moral thinking, we are saying that human well-being is morally valuable. There simply is no way to justify the view that morality ought to aim at human well-being in terms of some set of empirical facts about human well-being, or in terms of any other set of empirical facts.

However, by admitting that our notion has moral content, Scanlon will say that I have just proved one of his key points: namely, that the concept of well-being is not as important as often supposed because it is not basic or fundamental to much of our understanding of morality.[[8]](#footnote-8)8 Some of the most important moral norms and principles, Scanlon maintains, have no connection to well-being; indeed, they are what we actually rely on to shape our understanding of what counts as being better off (110). For example, even when we use “moral principles whose content involves overall assessments of how well-off various individuals are . . . [say] principles for assessing the justice of social institutions and policies . . . [the notions of well-being reflected in these principles] are shaped by moral ideas arising from the particular moral questions that they are supposed to answer” (138-39). In addition, Scanlon suggests that if we understand morality solely in terms of some notion of well-being, we are forced into saying that all moral value is teleological in structure and that well-being is a master value (108, 126-27, 142). He adds that it is “an important strength of contractualism that, in contrast to utilitarianism and other views which make well-being the only fundamental moral notion, it can account for the significance of different moral notions, within a unified moral framework, without reducing all of them to a single idea” (216). (I take it that Scanlon will say that we give due consideration to the different moral notions involved in the morality of right and wrong when we adhere to the justifiability constraint.)

My claim, recall, is not that it is part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality that we understand *all* of morality as “aiming at” human well-being. The claim, rather, is that we understand a large part of morality to aim at human well-being.[[9]](#footnote-9)9 And I am assuming that many of us believe that this is the best way to understand a good part of morality—that something is crucially lost, for example, if we take a Kantian approach, or even Scanlon’s Kantian-like approach, to *that* part of morality. It is enough to put the realist on the defensive if we can show that there is reason to think we are justified in this belief, and that there is reason to think that this conception of human well-being is not an entirely objective notion. In what way, then, is Scanlon’s contractualist approach unsatisfactory? Why think that his position on well-being is lacking? What, according to him, are the moral norms or principles that are more fundamental than well-being, and that are used to shape our conception of well-being? I will respond to all of these questions, but start where Scanlon does, and that is with how agents engage in prudential deliberation.1[[10]](#footnote-10)0 If there is reason to think that Scanlon is wrong with respect to how we make use of a notion of individual well-being in our practical deliberations, we may also have reason to think that his reasons for downgrading well-being won’t apply to human well-being, seeing how the two types of well-being are so closely connected.

We should not understand well-being as a master value, Scanlon claims, because it is clear that other things are intrinsically valuable, and not valuable solely because they might promote well-being. We can see this, he argues, if we consider what goes on in the mind of the agent who is engaged in prudential deliberation. Let’s follow Scanlon in distinguishing between ‘everyday’ decisions about what to do and ‘larger-scale’ decisions that have to do with the overall direction that one’s life takes (as in deciding “what career to pursue or whether or not to be a parent” (126)). The notion of well-being might figure into an agent’s deliberations at both of these levels. Scanlon denies that it figures importantly at either level, but I think he is wrong in both cases.

From the perspective of an agent who is facing an everyday decision, Scanlon argues, “the idea of well-being plays little if any role in explaining why we have reason to value” things like enjoyment, friendship, the avoidance of illness and injury, or doing what promotes success in achieving our aims (126). We don’t value these things because they make our life better (127); it would be strange for us to say, in reply to the queries of others, that we seek enjoyment because “A life that includes enjoyment is a better life” (126), or that those of us who are philosophers work hard at philosophy because doing so contributes to our well-being (127). We value these things, rather, because we believe them to be intrinsically valuable (127).

In making this argument Scanlon is assuming that the proponents of well-being deny that these other things are intrinsically valuable; he sees them as claiming that enjoyment, friendship, and the like are valuable only insofar as they contribute to well-being. But it is strange that Scanlon relies on this assumption, since he himself makes it clear that one needn’t understand well-being in this way (127, 142). What does well-being amount to if we cannot say that certain things are constitutive of it? if it is entirely distinct from everything that might contribute to it? What prevents the proponents of well-being from saying that something can both contribute to overall well-being and itself be valuable?1[[11]](#footnote-11)1 Is it because there are times when being courageous isn’t conducive to individual well-being? or meting out justice doesn’t appear to be conducive to human well-being? I am not convinced that these types of cases are as problematic as some have made them out to be.

I see as more problematic the idea that *there is nothing more to say* about friendship, enjoyment, and the like than that we value them for their own sake. To my mind this is tantamount to saying that there is no need, from either a prudential or moral standpoint, for individual agents to think about how these things fit together to make for a cohesive, fulfilling life (or for a more cohesive and fulfilling life). Also, to say that we value friendship, enjoyment and the like only for their own sake is to ignore that we naturally desire to value these things in a way that makes sense in terms of the overall shape and direction of our lives.1[[12]](#footnote-12)2 Scanlon admits that these goods contribute to an individual’s well-being, but denies that this is of any importance to why we pursue them. But while it may be true that our everyday decisions about what to do are often not *consciously* guided by whether or not something contributes to our overall well-being, it does seem that well-being nearly always *indirectly* plays a crucial role in those everyday decisions, and in two distinct ways. One way is in a counterfactual sense: we wouldn’t value friendship or enjoyment or avoidance of injury and illness, etc., or we wouldn’t value these things in the way that we do, if it were the case that we thought they typically detracted from our individual well-being, if we thought that pursuing these things generally made us worse off.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3 In what sense, though, is this counterfactual present in our deliberations, if it is not consciously present?

Scanlon argues that we think about what makes us better or worse off, but only in a very localized sense, not in terms of an overall life. He says we go for things like enjoyment and friendship because we see value in them directly, and not because of how they fit into some larger picture of what would make one’s life go well. We don’t go for them after having thought about what an overall life would be like with or without them. This description of an agent’s practical deliberation in everyday decision-making seems accurate as long as we are viewing it in isolation from all previous deliberation that the agent has engaged in. But looking at one’s deliberation in such an isolated way doesn’t reflect how we are often engaged in life, even at the everyday level. It is generally the case, I think, that people will, at some point in their lives, have thought about how individually valuable goods like friendship and enjoyment fit into a larger picture of things; people who have the chance do tend to give some thought to their life as a whole—what they would like the shape of that life to be, what kind of person they would like to be. We are all inclined to do this because of a deeply held belief that some kinds of lives are better for us than other kinds of lives. It is also clear to many of us, I think, that the less sense we have of what the overall shape of our life should be, the more difficult it will be for us to choose our other ends in life and to properly coordinate them.1[[14]](#footnote-14)4 I agree with Scanlon that this is not a *perspective* that we often consciously take up when faced with everyday decisions. Even so, this prior reflection that I speak of, reflection from just such a perspective, deeply affects how we deliberate at the everyday level, since that prior reflection can largely determine how we value things.1[[15]](#footnote-15)5 Even if we suppose, for the sake of argument, that the typical agent doesn’t engage in this broader reflection, we surely think that the prudent agent ought to, if only to avoid pursuing conflicting goals. And it would seem that an overall sense of what makes for a good life certainly comes into everyday decisions in the counterfactual sense, or that it ought to do so, by way of having given shape, over time, to our dispositions.1[[16]](#footnote-16)6 The counterfactual constraint that I speak of is thus indirectly present in the kinds of everyday decisions that Scanlon refers to if we have engaged in much prior reflection regarding what makes for a better or worse life.

I think it is even true to say that we often value friendship, enjoyment, philosophy, or whatever exactly because we consciously think these things will somehow make our lives go better. What would be strange is for a person to say, when asked why they value some particular friendship, “This friendship is valuable to me; end of story.” We generally don’t expect them to launch into a long story about what constitutes their individual well-being, but only because we take it for granted that if a person goes for something in a serious way, they see it as prudentially valuable, and because we can often understand why they see it as valuable.

A second way in which our conception of individual well-being plays a crucial role in practical deliberation is by consciously entering into our larger-scale decisions. When a person needs to make a decision that will have a major impact on the overall shape or direction of her life, we would expect that person to consider how what she decides to do will affect the overall shape or direction of her life. In fact, we would expect her to side with the choice that in her view leads to an increase (or, as the case may be, avoids a decrease) in her individual well-being. It seems to me that this is what people actually do when they are knowingly making larger-scale decisions: they consciously think about how their choice might affect their well-being. This is true in spite of the fact that we have only a very general sense as to what does or does not contribute to our own individual well-being. We don’t need a fully determinate conception of well-being in order for the belief that ‘some things typically make our lives go better for us’ to play an important role in how we structure and organize our lives. (Scanlon makes our notion of well-being out to be quite an empty one, and this is a good part of the reason why he thinks we won’t rely on it, either in our everyday decisions or in our larger-scale decisions.) Because we care about the overall shape and direction of our lives, we will use whatever knowledge we have about what typically makes a life go better for a person when we make the larger-scale decisions. And when our understanding of what makes a life go well overall enters into our larger-scale decisions, that understanding also gives shape to our everyday decisions. For many of the everyday goals that we set for ourselves become goals for us only because of the larger aims and projects that we have. Our well-being hinges on success in our larger aims and projects, but success in the latter requires success at the everyday level. This is why the value of things at the everyday level changes for us according to the nature of our larger aims and ground projects.

Although Scanlon agrees with this last point,1[[17]](#footnote-17)7 he denies that our larger-scale decisions involve a notion of well-being in the way I have suggested (130-131). When we adopt a “comprehensive goal,” he says, we choose it with a view to what will make for “the best life”; what guides our choice, in other words, is the *choiceworthiness* of the life that includes such a comprehensive goal, and “the question of choiceworthiness is not the same as the question of well-being” (131). Because Scanlon takes well-being to be a narrower notion than choiceworthiness (112-13), he believes that there might be other reasons for an individual to prefer a life than the well-being that it offers one. When Scanlon distinguishes between choiceworthiness and well-being, however, he is understanding individual well-being largely in terms of experiential quality and material and social conditions (111-113). This is a much narrower conception of well-being than the one he later employs (124-25); he later tells us that “[individual] well-being depends to a large extent on a person’s degree of success in achieving his or her main ends in life, provided that these are worth pursuing” (124). He sees this as a “fixed point” that “any plausible theory of well-being would have to recognize” (124), and adds: “This component of well-being reflects the fact that the life of a rational creature is something that is to be *lived* in an active sense—that is to say, shaped by his or her choices and reactions—and that well-being is therefore in large part a matter of how well this is done—of how well the ends are selected and how successfully they are pursued. [A third fixed point1[[18]](#footnote-18)8 that needs to be included in any plausible theory of well-being is the following:] many goods that contribute to a person’s well-being depend on the person’s aims but go beyond the good of success in achieving those aims. These include such things as friendship, other valuable personal relations, and the achievement of various forms of excellence, such as in art or in science” (124-25).

Once we have this broader, and to my mind more plausible, conception of well-being, it is hard to see how, from the agent’s perspective, there is a distinction between choiceworthiness and well-being.1[[19]](#footnote-19)9 What other things are there that make a life choiceworthy but don’t have to do with well-being? Should we say that Vincent van Gogh’s tortured life is very much choiceworthy (given the reputation he has come to have in the world) but for reasons unrelated to the notion of well-being as outlined by the three fixed points? Is a life choiceworthy if it includes a superabundance of material riches? (It is interesting to note that Scanlon’s second conception of well-being doesn’t even hold a place for material and social conditions.) It seems to me that choiceworthiness is not a broader notion than the more plausible conception of individual well-being; we won’t say that a life is choiceworthy, or more choiceworthy than some other life, if it didn’t contain something that we greatly value. And once we see great value in something, it becomes–almost by definition—important to what would, in our view, make our life go better.

Scanlon will fault this argument for relying on too broad a notion of well-being. He insists, remember, that our conception of individual well-being is a nonmoral one. This gives him the space he needs in order to maintain that “it makes sense to say that a person had good reason to choose a certain plan of life even though it involved a lower level of well-being—was worse from the point of view of the person who lived it—than some available alternative” (131). For example, someone might choose such a life in order to fulfill an obligation to care for a relative (131). Notice, however, that as soon as we try to understand individual well-being separately from the well-being of others, and separately from all that we value morally, we run into all sorts of problems; we must now see morality as something that is potentially alien, and potentially opposed, to individual well-being; we must now reject the belief that individuals really only truly flourish if those around them are flourishing. I cannot think of circumstances under which we would have an obligation to care for another when doing so truly threatens our well-being;2[[20]](#footnote-20)0 or circumstances under which others would have an obligation to care for us when doing so severely detracts from their well-being. Furthermore, it is not only extremely difficult to make sense of the person who chooses a course in life that they think will make them worse off; we also morally disapprove of such a person if they are working with the same notions of “worse off” and “better off” that we are. How, then, could they have an obligation to knowingly choose a life that makes them worse off? Finally, we do not value things in isolation from everything else that we value. The value we attach to something is partly, or even largely, determined by the value we attach to other things.2[[21]](#footnote-21)1 I think we have to conclude that Scanlon’s distinction between well-being and choiceworthiness is untenable; from the standpoint of any commonly accepted normative framework, we cannot make sense of the person who knowingly chooses a life that in their view will make them worse off.

But Scanlon also offers another reason for saying that larger-scale decisions do not involve any thinking about what makes a life go well overall. Larger-scale decisions cannot be grounded in a notion of individual well-being, he says, because what constitutes our well-being will be too abstract and indeterminate at the point in time that we are making such decisions (131). Because so much of an individual’s well-being depends on the central aims and ground projects that she makes her own, Scanlon thinks that it simply doesn’t make sense to, and that individuals in fact don’t, consider how their larger-scale choices will affect their future well-being. But this clearly seems false, and is in fact a prescription for madness. Most of us do consider how larger-scale decisions affect the overall shape and direction of our lives, and we do so because we care deeply about our lives, and because we have some sense of what typically makes a person’s life go better or worse. (I think that many of us make efforts almost everyday to be better informed in this respect.) Since it is very much a normative notion, a great deal can be said about what typically constitutes individual well-being without getting into the specifics of a person’s central aims or ground projects. The experiential quality of one’s life is just as important whether one is a philosopher or a carpenter, a musician or a farmer.2[[22]](#footnote-22)2 The same goes for succeeding in one’s aims, having healthy friendships and healthy children, having opportunities to pursue one’s aims, and in general, having practical wisdom. What we know about the things that typically make a life go better or worse will, for many of us, greatly influence the choices we make when faced with larger-scale decisions.2[[23]](#footnote-23)3 And to the extent that that is true, a notion of individual well-being has an important, albeit indirect, role in our everyday decision-making.

Thus far I have argued that a notion of *individual* well-being has a more important role in our practical deliberations than Scanlon maintains. This concept is not so abstract or indeterminate that we find it irrelevant when trying to decide what to do, or when trying to determine what is prudentially valuable. If I am right in suggesting that we generally care about what makes a life go better or worse, and in particular about what would make our own life go better or worse, it will automatically be the case that some conception of well-being enters into our deliberations in a nontrivial way. We won’t choose central aims and ground projects—things that can take up a good part of our lives and structure so much of them—without giving careful consideration to how those aims and projects might affect our well-being. We acquire some idea of what that effect might be by noting the experiences and lives of others, by examining the lives of fictional characters, and by honestly assessing ourselves.

It is true, as Scanlon says, that what constitutes an individual’s well-being will depend a lot on the choices they have already made, or that have been made for them. But this won’t mean that a conception of well-being isn’t important in our practical deliberations. We just saw one reason why this is so. Here is another: it seems that most people highly value being able to “make sense of” their lives; we value a life that can be described by, or fitted into, a coherent, non-episodic narrative; we would like to be able to see our lives as somehow meaningful.2[[24]](#footnote-24)4 It seems that, for many of us, being able to make sense of our lives (without engaging in self-deception) is actually partly constitutive of our well-being. This would explain why we try so hard to find value even in our mistakes and bad experiences, and why so many people believe that good can come from suffering (while maintaining, at the same time, that suffering is a bad thing). If we value the overall shape of our lives in this way, we will take into account, when making a larger-scale decision, how our decision *coheres with* the rest of our life. In this way a conception of well-being takes on a second role in our deliberations.

(It should be clear by now that the force of my arguments depends heavily on the assumption that we care deeply about our individual well-being and the overall shape and meaningfulness of our lives. It stands to reason that the more we care about our individual well-being, the greater the role it will have in our practical deliberations. If you reject this assumption, you will be far more inclined to accept Scanlon’s arguments.)

If my arguments about individual well-being are plausible, I think it becomes much harder for the realist to argue that a conception of *human* well-being isn’t important to our understanding of morality, or to argue that it shouldn’t be. Moral deliberation is one area of practical deliberation. Individuals do not truly flourish unless those around them are flourishing. A good part of morality has to do with what benefits and harms human beings. There is a great deal of overlap between what is prudentially valuable and what is morally valuable.2[[25]](#footnote-25)5 In conjunction with the arguments just made, all of these premises lend themselves to the conclusion that a conception of human well-being ought to have an important role in our moral thinking. It won’t do to argue that the conception is too abstract and indeterminate. Nor can one object that the proponent of human well-being is committed to seeing this notion as a master value.

Our notion of human well-being also has moral content. We are not saying that all justification ends in some feature of human well-being, as if claims about human well-being have some kind of privileged justificatory status (Scanlon 1998: 215). Also, in arguing against the realist we don’t need to claim that all moral principles and intuitions can be explained in terms of our understanding of human well-being (ibid., 215). We don’t have to reduce all of morality to claims about human well-being.

It would help, however, to say more about why we ought to think that human well-being is basic or fundamental to much of our understanding of morality. One way to lend further support to this claim (adding to the support already given at the end of Chapter 3) is by offering reasons for thinking that conceiving of morality in this way is an improvement over Scanlon’s contractualist approach to “the morality of right and wrong” (6), the area of morality that deals mostly with our duties to others (6). This would be a very large task if we were to do justice to Scanlon’s views. Here I offer only some brief thoughts.

The main weakness I see with Scanlon’s contractualism is that it provides us with no sense of the aim or purpose of the morality of right and wrong. (This was a concern I raised in Chapter 3.) The central feature of his contractualism is the justifiability constraint. This is one norm or principle that he claims is more fundamental than any notion of well-being. When we make moral judgments about matters of right and wrong, what we are primarily doing, Scanlon claims, is trying to base our judgments on reasons which others who are similarly motivated cannot reasonably reject. Presumably Scanlon is also claiming that as moral agents this is what we ought to do. One important virtue of this understanding, as we have already noted, is that it can make room for a variety of moral intuitions without reducing those intuitions to a single idea (216). But this virtue—something we might refer to as the view’s abstractness—is also its weakness. For the justifiability criterion is merely a formal constraint; as such, we cannot derive any substantive content from it. We aren’t told what is involved in being motivated in the proper sense. Nor do we know anything about the criteria by which we are to judge whether an agent is acting upon reasons which others, similarly motivated, cannot reasonably reject. (People might view some reason as justified or justifiable when it really isn’t.) I don’t think we will be able to answer these questions until we know something about the aim or purpose of morality, and until we know what distinguishes a moral concern from a nonmoral one.

In attacking the justifiability constraint in this way, I am simply applying one of the criticisms that Scanlon makes against our notion of human well-being to the constraint itself. Scanlon argues that well-being is not as important a notion as many like to think because, due to its abstractness and indeterminateness, it won’t be able to help us much in our deliberations. Yet I don’t see that the idea that the reasons we act upon ought to be justifiable to others will provide any greater help. In fact I am inclined to think that the justifiability constraint will provide fewer substantive guidelines than our notion of human well-being can.

I also think that we get a much better sense of the aim and purpose of morality when we understand it in terms of aiming at human well-being than when we understand it in terms of the justifiability constraint; this is true even for that specific area of morality for which Scanlon aims to provide a contractualist basis. Scanlon thinks that what motivates us to be moral agents who respect what we owe to each other is (simply? mainly?) the desire to act upon reasons that others will see as justifiable (Chapter 4, section 3). And when he says that “contractualism . . . can account for the significance of different moral notions” (216), the suggestion seems to be that it is the desire just mentioned which can explain why we value the various moral intuitions that we have come to value.2[[26]](#footnote-26)6 But might not this justifiability constraint prove too powerful? Aren’t scientists acting upon reasons that others, similarly motivated (in this case motivated to discover the mysteries of nature), will see as justifiable? Don’t scientists want their proposed experiments to make sense to those in a position to dole out research grants? Don’t scientists and mathematicians and those in business all want to employ reasoning which others, similarly motivated, will see as appropriate? The feature that Scanlon identifies as central to our understanding of morality looks to be a prominant feature of many other kinds of human practices. As such, it doesn’t give us an especially clear sense of the aim and purpose of morality.

Scanlon’s position is also vulnerable from the opposite direction. While it may be right to say that we naturally desire to act according to the justifiability constraint, it is implausible that this desire (or reason) *underlies* all the other desires (or reasons) that we see as important to moral motivation. For instance, I think that we naturally desire to flourish as individuals, and that we come to see relatively quickly in our lives that our well-being is connected to the well-being of others. But I don’t think we act from this desire or reason, when we aim to act morally, *because* it is justifiable to others. Rather, it is only a weaker counterfactual that is true: it is the case that we wouldn’t aim to promote human well-being if doing so wasn’t justifiable to others. And although significant, this counterfactual doesn’t entail any kind of privileged status for the justifiability constraint. For it is also true that we wouldn’t act according to the justifiability constraint (nor, it seems, according to any other moral norm or principle) if doing so wasn’t, to our minds, favorable to human well-being.

Perhaps Scanlon will reject this claim because it relies on a fairly expansive notion of human well-being. Work would have to be done, then, to show that this is how we do in fact understand human well-being, and that doing so is not as problematic as may seem.2[[27]](#footnote-27)7 One place we might start is by thinking about another moral principle that Scanlon claims is very much distinct from our notion of human well-being—distinct in the sense of not deriving any of its value from the latter. This is the principle of fairness. Scanlon writes:

Treating others fairly may make my life, and theirs, go better, but this is not my reason for believing it to be worthwhile. Rather, it is worthwhile because it is required by the more general value of treating others in ways that could be justified to them. Living up to the requirements of this more general value may also make our lives better, by making it possible for us to live in greater harmony with one another. But, again, this possible contribution to our well-being is not the only thing, or the most basic thing, that gives us reason to be concerned with what we owe to each other. One more basic reason is the fact that this is part of what is required by our value as rational creatures. (1998: 142-43)

Here Scanlon is actually talking about human, rather than individual, well-being, and he is arguing that we should also not see this broader notion of well-being as a ‘master value’. (My guess is that Scanlon will say that if our notion of human well-being is to do the work we want it to do, it will have to be a nonmoral notion. Or that, if we bring moral content into the notion, this only shows that the notion is not as fundamental as I am claiming.) To my mind, this argument is unconvincing. I doubt very much that we would value acting according to the principle of fairness if doing so didn’t typically promote human well-being. I find it far more intuitive to think in terms of what human well-being requires (as vague as that notion is) than in terms of what is required by our value as rational creatures. A Kantian understanding of the value of rationality requires that we tell the truth to the person knocking at our door and inquiring into the whereabouts of someone who is now hiding in our closet—hiding because the person at the door intends to murder them. We are supposed to tell the truth to the Inquiring Murderer, despite our knowing what his intentions are, because as a rational creature the Inquiring Murderer deserves to know the truth.2[[28]](#footnote-28)8 The force of these reasons escapes me, however.

In raising the example of the Inquiring Murderer, I don’t mean to suggest that Scanlon agrees with Kant about what one should do in such circumstances. I mean only to point out how counter-intuitive it is for us to hold that norms like those regarding fairness or truth-telling are more basic or fundamental to our understanding of morality than our notion of human well-being. One can perhaps correct this problem by offering a rich account of rationality, one that would preclude, say, our having to tell the truth to those with evil intentions. But that account of rationality, if it is to be successful against all such objections, will almost surely need to be shaped by our intuitions regarding human well-being. Making a solid case for this claim would require a fair amount of discussion, though. Among other things, we would have to look carefully at what it is that we see of value in principles of fairness, equal respect, etc. Are they best understood as basic? Should our notion of well-being be seen as basic? If a principle of fairness is basic and our notion of human well-being is also basic, how do we adjudicate between the two if they generate conflicting requirements?2[[29]](#footnote-29)9

While I think it true to say that we rely on what we generally refer to as ‘moral’ intuitions to help us shape our understanding of human well-being, I don’t think that these intuitions can be properly understood apart from human well-being. So I am reluctant to confer the status of ‘moral’ upon them unless they are seen as elements in a larger framework, the framework that I am associating with our notion of human well-being.

One last remark ought to be made regarding Scanlon’s arguments. We should not forget what Scanlon tells us at the beginning of his book—that, while contractualism is well-suited to the morality of right and wrong, there may be some other motivational basis for the other areas of morality (6-7). Given this qualification, he is in no position to fault the view that morality mostly aims at human well-being just because our conception of human well-being may not be able to provide a foundation for all of morality. One only needs to think of the persistent and powerful intuitive appeal of utilitarian views to believe it likely that human flourishing provides a motivational basis for a much greater part of morality than that for which the justifiability constraint might.

Let’s consider now some reasons for thinking that our conception of human well-being is evaluative in nature, i.e., that what promotes or detracts from human well-being is in an important sense determined by us.

We have already seen how our *use* of the notion is an evaluative matter. In defending the view that all or most of morality ought to aim at human well-being we will need to call upon other evaluative beliefs. (This is especially true if our notion of human well-being is itself importantly evaluative in nature.) It is not enough to say that many people, knowingly or unknowingly, just do understand morality as aiming at human well-being. The fact that this may be so doesn’t entail that we *ought* to understand morality in this way. I have offered a partial argument in support of this ‘ought’; that argument appealed to our intuitions (the way many of us already understand morality) and suggested that we run into greater difficulties if we try to approach morality in some other way. In any case, if we take human well-being to be morally valuable, and give this notion the status that I am claiming many of us currently do in our moral thinking, it is not because we are forced to do so. We are not forced to care about human well-being or to conceive of morality in terms of it.

What are some reasons for thinking that we could conceive of human well-being differently than we do? One way we might try to argue that this notion is evaluative is by pointing out how what constitutes it depends on the purposes for which we are employing it; we might say that what constitutes well-being will depend on one’s perspective. The evolutionary biologist, for example, may understand human flourishing mainly in terms of the ability of *the species* to adapt to its environment and produce viable offspring over a period of time—say thousands of years. The non-evolutionary biologist, on the other hand, may simply be interested in the current health of a certain population of individuals; flourishing would probably be mostly understood in terms of the physical and psychological health of individuals as well as the viability of the group, given its internal social dynamics and its relation to the ecosystem in which it exists. However, for the purposes of morality—for the purposes of trying to answer questions like, How should one live? or What kind of person should one be? or What do we owe to each other?—these conceptions of human flourishing won’t do. If a conception of human well-being is to give an account of moral reasons, of why a certain action is morally right or wrong or why a certain character trait is morally valuable, it will have to be capable, as Scanlon says, of providing reasons that we would expect a moral agent to be moved by (1998: 150). We can see then that the purposes for which we are employing the conception will partly, or perhaps largely, determine what constitutes it. Nonetheless, it doesn’t necessarily follow from this fact that the conception of human well-being that the moral philosopher needs is evaluative in nature. It could be that once the purpose is identified, or specified in enough detail, we will have a notion of human well-being that is not evaluative in the sense that concerns us.3[[30]](#footnote-30)0 So we should maybe look elsewhere for reasons for thinking that the human well-being that is such an important part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality is somehow determined by us.

The discussion of the previous paragraph alerts us to the importance of being clear about what our notion of human well-being is supposed to do for us. The more we know in that regard, the more we should be able to say about what constitutes human flourishing, and the more confidence we will have in our answers to that question. Since our intuition is that the purpose of morality is largely to promote human well-being, we look to our notion of human well-being to give us a clearer sense of the aim and purpose of morality. More specifically, we want our conception of human well-being to help us answer questions about what one should do and how one should live. These questions arise partly because we believe that some kinds of lives are better for us, *qua* human beings, than other kinds of lives, and because we care about the overall shape and direction of our lives. But to know what constitutes human well-being in this sense, we have to know something about the kinds of creatures that human beings are, or typically are. We have to know something about the nature of human beings.

We might start, as Aristotle did (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I ch. 7), by identifying features or characteristics that distinguish us from the other animals, for we want to know what makes for a good *human* life. It is a commonplace that moral agents do not live “like animals”. Knowing what sets us apart might help to explain why we believe that human flourishing involves something more than what we find in the conceptions used by the evolutionary and non-evolutionary biologists. Knowing what sets us apart might give us a better sense of what is essential to who we are. However, as Bernard Williams and others have made clear,3[[31]](#footnote-31)1 if we are seeking to establish the kind of objective foundation for our ethical claims that the moral realist needs, this approach to shedding light on human well-being won’t get us very far. For many things that are unique to us, such as engaging in war and practicing torture, clearly do not contribute to human well-being. We will thus have to decide which of our distinctive activities or capacities are morally relevant. But if we believe that morality mostly aims at human well-being, our only way of judging the moral relevance of a feature or activity, it seems, is by consulting our conception of human flourishing and whatever moral intuitions were used in shaping that conception. For the moral realist, this circularity basically defeats the point of identifying the “distinguishing marks of man” (Williams 1972: 55). But if we stop insisting that we must have the objectivity needed by the realist, we can preserve our intuition that much of morality aims at human well-being and still maintain the very plausible belief that we can acquire a better sense of what constitutes that well-being by thinking about what distinguishes us from the other animals. We avoid the problem facing the realist by recognizing that our evaluative beliefs partly determine what constitutes human well-being.

Of course the realist could say that our mistake lies in trying to establish a foundation for morality from a conception of human nature grounded in the distinguishing marks of man. The realist might agree that much of morality aims at human well-being, and that we ought to conceive of morality in this way; the realist might even agree that the kinds of creatures we are, or human nature, crucially determines what counts as human flourishing. He may agree to all this but deny nevertheless that human well-being depends on our responses to things in a way that conflicts with the second core tenet. For as we noted at the end of Chapter 3, it does seem that certain actions clearly promote human well-being (e.g., educating our children and seeing to it that everyone is immunized) and that other actions clearly detract from it (severely limiting individual freedom), and that this doesn’t depend on what we think about these actions but is so simply in virtue of the kind of creatures we are. But while this is a position that may appear to have some initial plausibility, or that we might *hope* is defensible because of the objectivity it could get for our ethical claims, a little reflection shows just how hard it would be to defend it.

We saw some of the reasons why at the end of Chapter 3. I argued there that, because individual well-being is such an important part of human well-being, the latter will also, it seems, need to depend on our responses, beliefs, and desires. Human well-being needs to make room for the ways that we find things to be valuable: our health matters to us, for example, but not always so much that we won’t risk climbing Mt. Everest. If our notion of human well-being doesn’t somehow take into account the way we value things, it won’t provide us with satisfactory answers to how we should live our lives.3[[32]](#footnote-32)2 The reasons for acting in certain ways that emerge from our account of human flourishing must be reasons we can be moved by; our concern is what constitutes a good human life, not some other kind of life. So if an account of human flourishing is to be able to do the work we want it to do, it will have to make a certain amount of room for our evaluative beliefs. The only way I see this condition being met is if our conception of human well-being is shaped by those evaluative beliefs. (We would want it to be shaped by those of our beliefs which have undergone a great deal of critical scrutiny.)

The realist will reject the view that I am defending because it seems to entail an unacceptable relativism. How do we know which evaluative beliefs ought to shape our conception of human well-being? I am saying that we only have our judgment to go by, a judgment that draws upon human experience and sensibilities. The realist will insist that this doesn’t give us the kind of objectivity that we expect our ethical claims to have. But the problems facing the realist who tries to ground our ethical claims in an entirely external account of human nature (i.e., one that is not shaped by any evaluative beliefs we might have) seem even more daunting. As we just noted, if we don’t bring our ethical views into our conception of human well-being, or into our understanding of human nature that this conception is constructed from, then that conception won’t have the relevance we want it to have to our ethical thought.3[[33]](#footnote-33)3 It won’t be at all clear why we should care about morality if it is founded on something which is so external to us—something completely independent of our beliefs and desires, as well as independent of our responses to the objects of our moral judgments. It won’t be at all clear how the realist can argue from facts about human nature or human flourishing to normative ethical conclusions.

The realist will also have to explain why we ought to think that the kind of external account he needs will be capable of determining a single kind of ethical life for us (Williams 1985: 52). Even if we can identify what our *basic needs* are—“needs we all have just by being human” (Griffin 1986: 41)—in terms of an external account, we will still need to say what kind of significance these needs should have in our own lives and the lives of others. For human beings, flourishing is not simply a matter of basic needs being met. We must also consider how important these needs are in light of our aims, interests, and commitments. As the Mt. Everest example suggests, we won’t always think that basic needs have greater priority; we think that the consideration they deserve partly depends on the value we place on other things.

Understanding morality in terms of human flourishing also brings up the notion of *real interests* and the question of whether some action or good is really in the interests of an individual (cf. Williams 1985: 40-47). What reasons are there for thinking that we can identify the real interests of individuals in terms of an external account of human nature? Again, what we have in mind here is an account of real interests that is specific enough to determine a single kind of ethical life for us. The most plausible candidate I can think of is something along Aristotelian lines, where we measure individual well-being primarily in terms of the extent to which, by exercising rational control over one’s appetites and desires, one comes to fully realize their capacities without internal conflict. Suppose this can be defended as part of an external account. The account identifies what we might consider to be in the real interests of individuals. But it clearly needs a lot more flesh on it if it is to provide us with all the ethical constraints that we need. For as it presently stands, we cannot say that the flourishing mafioso who is at peace with himself and his actions is any less well-off than someone like Mother Theresa.3[[34]](#footnote-34)4 We need a way of saying which capacities should be developed, and how they should be developed. I don’t see how an account can get us this and still remain external, or how an external account can provide the needed constraints while still avoiding the kinds of problems that Williams draws our attention to.

If our account of human well-being is to justify many of our ethical claims, we would expect it to be evaluative in nature. This is so, anyway, if we are trying to argue deductively to an evaluative conclusion. Deductive arguments to evalutive conclusions won’t go through without one or more evaluative premises. We saw in Chapter 2 (in the section entitled “The is-ought thesis”) that the realist can say that the inference is nondeductive (some form of inference to the best explanation, say), or that we can employ nonanalytic moral bridge premises. But as regards the second strategy, I can’t see any reasons for thinking that the required moral bridge premises exist. They have to be premises that are independent of our evaluative beliefs. And if they have the required independence, it is no longer clear that we will find them relevant to ethical thought or capable of moving us. As for the first strategy, the realist will say that the best explanation of why we have the moral evaluative beliefs we have, those of our moral beliefs that we take to be reliable anyway, is the existence of moral facts and truths. To defend this position for a particular moral belief, the realist assumes the truth of moral realism.3[[35]](#footnote-35)5 Suppose this assumption is granted: what will the argument be? What are the strictly empirical facts surrounding human well-being that will enable us to defend our reliable moral beliefs? Here, too, the realist will have to say why it is that we should care about morality (unless he espouses externalism), why we ought to think that the premises relied on are relevant to the conclusions that are reached, and why our account of human well-being constrains us to a single kind of ethical life. I am not as optimistic as the realist that these conditions can be met.

One further remark is worth making about real interests. We believe that it is generally in the real interests of individuals to be able to express their autonomy and choose the ends that they aim at. But will it make sense to value autonomy as we do if we find an entirely external account of individuals’ real interests which is specific enough to determine a single kind of ethical life? It is understandable why we might desire an external account that is also specific. If we could find such an account, it would spare us much of the hard work involved in arriving at a considered judgment about what one should do or how one should live. But if such an account is available for our ethical claims, and if we can know what is in the real interests of individuals without consulting their evaluative beliefs, then personal liberty and individual autonomy appear to have only instrumental value. And this, I think, is a result that we will strongly resist.3[[36]](#footnote-36)6 If we have lived what we consider to be a good life, we think that part of the value of this life comes from the fact that we were partly responsible for its shape and direction. One would think then that an important measure of human flourishing is the extent to which human beings are free to exercise their autonomy. Sure, we want our fellow human beings to be ethical agents; but an external account suitable to the realist’s needs entails that there is but one kind of ethical life. This in turn would seem to mean that there is but one set of real interests for human beings (morally-speaking). Exercising one’s autonomy may be one of these interests, but it can hardly have the status we currently give it if there is just one way for us to flourish. (One measure of the extent to which we value individual autonomy is found in the difficulty we have imagining human beings flourishing if they are severely limited in their aims and desires. See (Griffin 1986: 67).)

To know what constitutes human flourishing, we have to have some understanding of human beings. We have to have some understanding of human nature and what it is that makes us human. But what we are interested in is an understanding that is relevant to our ethical concerns. Some of this understanding will emerge, I think, if we reflect on what distinguishes us from the other animals. But it won’t be the distinctiveness of the DNA that we carry, or any other trait of this sort, that is relevant. What is important and relevant are the beliefs we have about the sort of life we would want to, and can, choose for ourselves (cf. Nussbaum 1995). Therefore the question regarding what makes us human (and hence, regarding what constitutes human well-being) is, in this context, an evaluative one. As Martha Nussbaum observes, “to find out what our nature is seems to be one and the same thing as to find out what we deeply believe to be most important and indispensable [to our being human]” (1995: 106); even to say what is essentially human from a strictly metaphysical standpoint will, it seems, require us to draw upon evaluative premises (1995: 94).

Suppose we set aside issues of kind membership and essential nature and ask about human flourishing directly. What contributes to or detracts from it clearly looks to be an evaluative matter when we consider the kinds of questions we are trying to find answers to: Is the education of people sometimes more important than their access to material goods? Should government support the arts when there are still members of society who haven’t enough to eat? What should the balance be between individual freedoms and national security? How important is economic equality? political equality? freedom of expression? property rights? There are many such questions, and ones of an even more specific nature. My sense is that, the more specific the question, the more likely it is that we will have to rely on our evaluative beliefs and individual judgment, for the less likely it is that a fully external account will have the resources to provide an answer. If an external account did have the resources, it would mean that our evaluative beliefs and judgment have no real authority even with very specific matters in our lives. The worry about relevance, in other words, crops up even more forcefully.

This concludes my argument in support of the claim that, if our pre-theoretic conception of human well-being is to be capable of doing the work we want it to do, it will have to be shaped by our evaluative beliefs. The main problem with external accounts is that the moral reasons they provide us with won’t be relevant to our ethical concerns, to our conception of how a life should go; and without this relevance, such reasons will fail to be capable of moving us. What we need are reasons for caring about morality. Such reasons can be available to us if we conceive of morality as largely aiming at human well-being, and if we take there to be a great deal of overlap between human well-being and individual well-being. Morality would lose its importance and authority for us if the well-being it aims at has no room for the interests and needs of individuals or the interests and needs of groups of people. Since many of those interests and needs arise from our evaluative beliefs, and since it seems reasonable to think that human beings do not flourish unless there is room in their lives to care about what they already deeply care about, it would seem that our notion of human well-being will have to be shaped by at least some of our evaluative beliefs. Again, the beliefs we would want it to be shaped by are the ones we find ourselves holding onto most deeply.

Notice how, as individuals, we rank the ethical value of things, and determine if they have any ethical value at all, not by referring to some external, objective standard, but by referring to *our conception* of a good human life. Because we value consistency and coherence and a life without internal conflict, the value we find in something depends on what it is that we already value and the degree to which we value those things. We don’t value things in isolation from the other things that we value.

The argument that I have offered is almost entirely one of showing why the burden of proof is on the realist. But the burden is not a light one. I suppose the realist could try to argue that the best explanation for our most deeply held evaluative beliefs is the existence of mind-independent moral properties (see Brink 1989). (In this case we should avoid referring to these beliefs as evaluative.) But this will still leave the realist with the problem of explaining why we should care about morality or how it is that morality is relevant to our lives.3[[37]](#footnote-37)7

1. 1 Or sometimes an action is seen as morally correct because, compared to the other actions available to the agent, it detracts least from human well-being. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 For example, ethical reflection leads us to raise questions like, What kind of person should I be? and What is the best way to get along with others? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 Relatedly, while we don’t think that what is morally valuable is coextensive with what is prudentially valuable, we think that there is a good deal of overlap between the two types of value. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 Unless otherwise noted, I will be commenting only on the arguments Scanlon offers in his book, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard UP, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 Scanlon writes: “there certainly are some moral principles whose content involves overall assessments of how well-off various individuals are. The clearest examples are principles for assessing the justice of social institutions and policies. Applying these principles often requires us to make comparative judgments of how well-off different people are, or would be under alternative policies, . . .” (1998:138). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 Scanlon doesn’t talk about “ground projects”, but I think he would agree with my use of this phrase that I borrow from Bernard Williams. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 As we just noted, the main appeal of an entirely nonmoral conception of well-being, presumably, is that it might provide an objective foundation for our moral claims, one that would satisfy the realist’s second core tenet. But here I am trying to argue that our moral claims are unavoidably subjective in nature if the concept of human well-being has as important a role in morality as it seems to have, and subjective in a way that we have to reject the realist’s second core tenet. So while it is not very helpful, for the purposes of this discussion, that Scanlon argues against a conception of individual well-being that I reject (I reject it because I think that any adequate conception of individual well-being will have moral content; I assume that individual well-being is inextricably linked to human flourishing), and that Scanlon is attacking a way of understanding morality that I reject (we view morality as largely aiming at human flourishing, not individual flourishing), it is very suitable to my purposes that Scanlon is not downgrading the importance of well-being because he thinks it fails to provide us with an objective foundation for morality, for I don’t think a notion of well-being can get us this either. In spite of that inability, I am still saying that our notion of human well-being, and individual well-being for that matter, is more important than Scanlon maintains. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8 This response applies only to the first sense in which we might say that the notion of well-being has moral content. For any notion or set of ideas that has a central role in our understanding of morality will have moral content in the second sense. It would be ludicrous to downgrade the importance of a notion simply *because* it is key to our understanding something. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 My own view, though, is that we maybe ought to understand all of morality as aiming at human well-being. I am inclined toward this view even for matters involving the treatment of animals and the environment. The way we might connect these matters with human well-being is through questions of the form, “Do we want to be the kind of people who destroy all of the natural ecosystems?” “Do we want to be the kind of people who treat animals brutally?” I see this, anyway, as a important line of research, if only because we want our values to cohere. It is inconsistent to say that one cares about human life while also saying that caring for the environment is not that important. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10 Scanlon doesn’t explicitly say that he is describing the way agents engage in prudential deliberation. Maybe he will say that he is simply offering a description of non-moral and non-prudential practical deliberation. If Scanlon can persuade us that the agents he describes are not engaged in prudential deliberation, we may have reason to accept his description of those agents. I will be arguing that a notion of individual well-being is important to prudential deliberation, not some kind of non-moral and non-prudential practical deliberation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11 By now it should be clear to the reader that I am of the view that nothing is intrinsically morally valuable, at least not in a way that would satisfy the realist’s second core tenet. Scanlon talks about things being intrinsically valuable but also rejects the realist’s second core tenet. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12 James Griffin writes: “We want the whole activity, the unstopping succession of desire and fulfilment, to be itself aiming at something, and something that is not trivial and not a mere means. That is, I think, the characteristic aim of a reflective intentional being” (1996: 54). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13 It is not clear to me how we can even make sense of a person’s behavior if we deny Aristotle’s observation that everyone, in their voluntary actions, pursues what they perceive to be good. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14 Here I am borrowing directly from what Julia Annas says about why some of the ancient Greek thinkers valued the notion of a ‘final end’, or *telos*. See (Annas 1993: 33-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15 Suppose, for example, that one has to decide the following: is friendship so valuable that one should lie to the authorities in order to protect a friend? [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 16 Perhaps we should say that Scanlon is not so much misdescribing an individual’s practical deliberation in everyday decisions as failing to fully describe it. Also, one reason we differ in opinion on the importance of well-being from a first-person perspective has to do with the fact that I am seeing friendship, enjoyment, and the like as being constitutive of individual well-being. I thus find it more difficult to say that some notion of well-being does not have an important role in an agent’s everyday decisions. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 17 Scanlon writes: “. . . most people do have (relatively) comprehensive goals . . . defined by careers, friendships, marriages and family relations, and political and religious commitments. Many of the specific goals that we set out to achieve in action are goals that we have reason to pursue at least partly because of their relation to more abstract goals of this kind, and succeeding in these more specific goals, or failing to do so, has special significance for the quality of our lives in virtue of this relation” (1998: 122). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 18 The first fixed point is that “certain experiential states (such as various forms of satisfaction and enjoyment) contribute to well-being, but well-being is not determined solely by the quality of experience” (124). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 19 Nor do I see how one could argue that there is a distinction between the two from some other perspective. Just as we don’t say that a particular person’s well-being is whatever they say it is, we won’t say that something is choiceworthy simply because we say it is. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 20 Here it is fair to talk about well-being as something objective, since this is the understanding of individual well-being found in Scanlon’s fixed points; for instance, we are told that the ends a person pursues must be worth pursuing before success in achieving those ends can contribute to one’s well-being. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 21 True, some people see as a sign of intelligence the ability to “keep things in their separate boxes” and they might apply this to the area of values, too. But the person who is capable of being a kind, gentle, and responsible father while also being a brutal overseer in a concentration camp is deeply troubling to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 22 In saying this, though, I am assuming that this experiential quality needn’t be measured in exactly the same way. What counts as a good experience to us will depend in part on the other things we value. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 23 Granted, such knowledge won’t do as much for those who have little opportunity to choose a direction in life. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 24 I take it that this is one of the main attractions of religion; it offers us a way of making sense of our lives within a larger scheme of things. It is supposed to help us see our lives as meaningful whatever the conditions we face. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 25 My sense is that most of what contributes to individual well-being also contributes to human well-being; and most of what contributes to human well-being also contributes to individual well-being. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 26 He is also concerned to understand morality in such a way that we avoid a version of Prichard’s Dilemma (Chapter 4, pp. 149-150). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 27 Those who reject the position I am defending will probably want to reject the description offered above (in Chapter 6) of the virtuous agent’s reasoning, in syllogistic form. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 28 See Kant’s essay, “On a Supposed Right to Lie From Altruistic Motives.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 29 This last question reminds us of why it is that we would like to say that there is a single principle or idea at the heart of morality (or we might say, at the heart of our understanding of morality), something that can be seen as having pre-eminent status among all the rest of our moral intuitions. For what we want is a systematic approach to practical deliberation, one that allows us to be consistent in our judgments. What we would like to have, in other words, is a moral theory. If no such systematic approach is to be found, I think it becomes harder for us to argue in support of the objectivity of our moral value judgments. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 30 I see this possibility as very unlikely, though. This would be the case only if there is no room for rational disagreement about the purposes for which we are employing this conception of human well-being. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 31 Williams identifies some of the problems we face if we try to establish an *objective* foundation for morality based on the distinguishing marks of man.

    There are [three] general objections to the procedure of trying to elicit unquestionable moral ends or ideals from distinguishing marks of man’s nature . . . First, a palpable degree of evaluation has already gone into the selection of the distinguishing mark which is given this role, such as rationality or creativity. If one approached without preconceptions the question of finding characteristics which differentiate men from other animals, one could as well, on these principles, end up with a morality which exhorted men to spend as much time as possible in making fire; or developing peculiarly human physical characteristics; or having sexual intercourse without regard to season; or despoiling the environment and upsetting the balance of nature; or killing things for fun.

    Second, . . . this approach bears out the moral *ambiguity* of distinctive human characteristics . . . For if it is a mark of a man to employ intelligence and tools in modifying his environment, it is equally a mark of him to employ intelligence in getting his own way and tools in destroying others. If it is a mark of a man to have a conceptualized and fully conscious awareness of himself as one among others, aware that others have feelings like himself, this is a precondition not only of benevolence but (as Nietzsche pointed out) of cruelty as well: the man of sadistic sophistication is not more like other animals than the man of natural affections, but less so . . .

    Third, if we revert to that particular case of the *rational* as the distinguishing mark of man: there is a tendency for this approach to . . . emphasize virtues of rational self-control at the expense of all else. There is no reason why such an outlook should *inevitably* follow; . . . it involves a false and inhuman view of the passions themselves as blind causal forces or merely animal characteristics. (1972: 59-61)

    Williams also discusses a fourth problem, what he calls the “Gauguin problem” (1972: 56-59). Even if we agree on what the distinguishing marks of man are, it may be that a single life cannot properly incorporate, or express, all of them (this is an issue that the *Nicomachean Ethics* raises for us: can one properly exercise the civic virtues while also fully engaging in theoretical inquiry?), or we may have little reason to believe that everything identified as distinctively human, and valuable, will be compatible with what we generally understand to be the demands of morality. We highly value artistic creativity and scientific achievements, for instance, but these sometimes seem to have to come at the expense of morality. Gauguin was a great artist, and his creative genius flourished in Tahiti, but he abandoned his wife and children to go there. Picasso’s total commitment to his art seemed to prevent him from seeing the need to be more considerate of others, particularly the women in his life.

    Despite all of these objections, I think it is still valuable to think about the distinguishing marks of man, and which of these may be morally relevant. What we want to avoid is the thought that we can provide an objective foundation for morality on the basis of the features we have singled out. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 32 Some of the reasons why this is so have been spelled out in Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 33 Here I am paraphrasing Martha Nussbaum’s summary of some of the points Bernard Williams makes in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. See (Nussbaum 1995: 89). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 34 So-described, the account will be difficult to defend as external since it involves the normative notions of ‘rational’ and ‘fully realizing’. But for the sake of argument, let’s say that it is an external account. Given the normative notions it contains, it should be better-suited than most other external accounts to do the work we want it to do. But even though it probably is better in this respect than most other external accounts, it still cannot specify a single kind of ethical life. We could add to the account to make it more specific, but I am not sure we can do so as we need to without making it into an internal account. For instance, our Aristotelian account needs something like the following assumption if it is to come closer to being ethically palatable: a person cannot fully realize their capacities unless those around them are also able to fully realize their capacities. By itself, this assumption is not so problematic; we can perhaps still defend the account as external. But now it becomes even clearer that there needs to be limits on the kinds of capacities that are suitable for development. And it doesn’t seem that there is some external measure of human flourishing by which we can determine what those capacities should be. It seems, rather, that we will need to make evaluative judgments regarding which capacities are suitable for development. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 35 In Chapter 2 we saw this to be David Brink’s position. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 36 We might resist it on account of our believing that one of the most distinctive features of human beings is their capacity to choose the ends they aim at and the means of aiming at those ends. What ultimately matters, though, is the fact that we value this capacity and the freedom to exercise it. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 37 The realist will have to respond to the kinds of problems raised by Williams in his 1972 and 1985 books, by (McDowell 1995b), by (Griffin 1986), and by (Nussbaum 1995). There are also many others who have written on the subject of well-being. I didn’t bring many of the points raised by McDowell and Griffin into my discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)