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“The Problem of Well-Being: Respect, Equality, and the Self”

by

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Introduction

I will argue that we humans are *built for inequality*. Inequality across individuals, to be sure. We are descended from social apes for whom group membership, group exclusion, and social hierarchy are fundamental facts of life. But in an especially deep sense, I want to suggest, we are built for inequality across time.

Some puzzles about well-being—at least, the sort of well-being that appears to matter to people when asked about their current feelings or overall satisfaction with their lives—can be resolved in light of this profound fact about us. The upshot is, I believe, that some rethinking is needed in ethics about *both* equality and well-being. Better understanding the sources of our motives and of our sense of well-being, and the ways in which our aspirations, motives and well-being are tied to inequality will, I think, lessen in some ways the moral importance of equality as such. It will likewise shift the way we should think about the relation of morality to well-being—whether one is a consequentialist, like myself, or simply someone who recognizes a *prima facie* duty of beneficence or self-concern. Consequentialism has always, I believe, been a good candidate for “a morality of respect for persons”. One interesting result of the reflections below, if sound, is that this case can be made even stronger. All this sounds impossibly ambitious. It is.

To begin, I’d like to express a few reservations about the notion that equality has intrinsic moral or non-moral value.

Some reservations about the inherent value of equality

Equality of material well-being. Imagine two worlds, Favored World Alpha and Favored World Beta, far distant from one another but not entirely outside the bounds of possible causal contact. They have no knowledge of one another. Alpha and Beta are favored worlds because fortune has smiled upon them. The inhabitants have more than enough to

meet their needs, plenty enough to satisfy their wants, and yet more besides. Life on both Alpha and Beta has its usual ups and downs, of course, and there are illness, injury, death, and broken hearts in both worlds. But the level of misfortune and misery in each is about as low as one could imagine attaining with a population of intelligent beings with tender feelings.

Turns out, people in Beta have a 1% higher material standard of living than those in Alpha. Perhaps a slightly higher proportion of Beta-dwellers has a strong interest in material production and accumulation. They have a slightly different work-leisure trade off as a result, and thoroughly enjoy this rhythm of life. They would be in fact be very slightly stressed by working *less*. Beta has an average work week of 35.35 hours vs. 35.00 hours for Alpha; as a result, Alpha dwellers have 2.2 televisions per capita, for example, while Beta dwellers have 2.222 per capita.

Suppose you were told you had a choice. You could push a button and make the next generation of Alpha-dwellers a tiny bit more motivated toward material production and consumption, which would result within two generations in equalizing material well-being with Beta, or you could refrain from pushing this button. Would there be anything to be said in favor of pushing it? Of course, *if* this would make those on Alpha 1% happier, that would be an argument for it. But people on Alpha are already about as happy as could be. So we are simply supposing a change in *material* well-being, the result of a slight shift in preferences, but a constant level of preference satisfaction.

Or, leaving preferences unchanged, imagine that you face a different choice: you could push or not push a button that would make production processes on Beta 1% *less* efficient. This, too, would equalize the worlds in material standard. The desires of Beta-dwellers would be somewhat less satisfied, but only very marginally. Their overall happiness might be essentially unchanged, or it might fall a tiny amount. Would there be any moral or non-moral good realized by the equalization? Could it offset even this tiny loss in happiness? Of course, if Beta-dwellers were more materially prosperous *at the expense of* Alpha-dwellers in some way, then leveling Beta's standard downward might have a moral rationale. But the rationale could be a matter of the injustice of exploitation rather than equality as such.

Equality of happiness. Once again, imagine Alpha and Beta to be Favored Planets, as before. Now imagine that Alpha and Beta have equal material well-being, and that Alpha- and Beta-dwellers are all about happy as we can imagine intelligent beings ever being, *except*: Beta-dwellers differ from Alpha-dwellers in a tiny genetic detail, the result of which is that they are naturally are capable of a slightly more intense sense of well-being when fully pleased—in much the same way that, for certain people, the *taste* of certain foods or enjoyment of chocolate is more intense. As a result, life on Beta is just a bit happier than life on Alpha. This difference, we suppose, is entirely unearned and “arbitrary” in that sense from a moral point of view. Suppose you could push a button and change this gene on Beta, so that dwellers on the two planets would instead experience essentially the same intensity of enjoyment level of happiness. Would there be anything to be said for this? Of course, you might think that the loss in intensity of good feeling on Beta would swamp this equality gain and argue against pushing the button. But the question is not the *magnitude* of this equality gain, but whether there would be *any* such gain that could even slightly offset the Beta-dwellers loss in happiness. Of course, if one could push a button and change the gene on *Alpha*, there would be a good rationale for doing that. But the rationale could be that Alpha-dwellers would be happier, not that they would be the hedonic equals of Beta-Dwellers.

Equality of respect. It might seem obvious that equality of respect is intrinsically morally valuable, but this may be because we are thinking of inequalities only in a range of cases, where other dimensions of value also vary. Try to suppress all such variation. Back to Alpha and Beta. Alpha-dwellers and Beta-dwellers again show a genetic difference. Those on Alpha respect each other, just as those on Beta do, but the *amount* and *resilience* of respect is greater on Beta, again owing to a minor genetic difference. People on both planets are only mortal after all. Like us they can be pushed by stress, disappointment, or fear to fail to respect others fully. Ideal conditions exist, however, for the rapid disappearance of such disrespectful thoughts once they appear. Individuals on both planets have the wherewithal for restoring their equilibrium and going on to live secure, prosperous, healthy, satisfying lives, so that the undertow exerted on respect for others fades. But there is, I said, a slight genetic difference. Beta-dwellers are slightly

more resilient psychically, and so it takes a little bit *more* stress, disappointment, or fear to lead them to adopt an attitude of disrespect. Moreover, they bounce back from such episodes slightly more quickly. Suppose you could push a button and change this gene on Beta, thereby equalizing the respect shown for others on the two planets. Would there be anything to be said for this? Of course, if you could push a button and change the gene on *Alpha*, there would be something to be said for that, since then people on Alpha would show *more respect* for one another. But then rationale could be *increasing* respect, not equalizing it.

You're probably fed up with Alpha/Beta examples. So think of Earth. Suppose there is a genetic difference among actual humans that is normally expressed in differences in the resilience or intensity of the respect they have for others. People with the **R** allele, say, are harder to push into disrespect for others out of stress, disappointment, fear, etc. than those with the **NR** allele.¹ Now this is also an *inequality* in respect. **R** individuals will, for example, feel and show respect for others in conditions where the **NR** individuals around them fail to do so. Suppose that otherwise **R** individuals are no happier or more prosperous than **NR** individuals—perhaps those more easily pushed into disrespect also have more gratifying experiences of *restoring* their respect for others, say. The inequality, then, is limited to respect. Suppose there is no treatment to replace the **NR** allele with **R**, but there is a button you can push to eliminate the **R** in future generations. Would there be anything to be said for that? A systematic inequality in respect would be eliminated. Of course, there might be something to be said for looking for a way to make the **R** allele universal. But then the rationale could be *increasing* respect for others.

Equality of reciprocal respect. One might be tempted to say that what matters is not so much equality of respect *en gross*, so to speak, but equality of *reciprocal* respect, i.e., respect of particular individuals for one another—agent-centered respect. However, the genetic difference in the example above would lead to inequalities in respect in reciprocal relations between those who differ in at this genetic site who happen to be siblings,

¹ Currently, there is speculation that the neurological system regulating the concentration of neuropeptide Y explains some differences in emotional resilience in the face of stress. See Sherman (2006).

spouses, co-workers, friends, fellow soldiers, teammates, etc. Would there be anything to be said for pushing a button to eliminate the **R** allele from the next generation in order to restore greater equality of respect in reciprocal relationships?

Sick of genetic fantasies? Set them aside. It seems to me a simple fact, readily observed, that individuals differ in the amount, resilience, intensity, comprehensiveness, univocality, awareness, and efficacy of the respect they have—or even *can* have—for others. Just think how much individuals differ in the amount, resilience, intensity, comprehensiveness, univocality, etc. of their *self-respect*. And self-respect is one of the key factors in an individual's capacity for resilient and univocal respect for others. The result, I am sure, is that actual reciprocal relationships, even those of the most intimate or lasting kinds, often in fact exhibit inequality in the resilience, intensity, etc. of the respect one individual feels or shows—or even *can* feel or show—for the other. This sort of unequal respect exists, I think, among those who love one another, admire one another, care for one another, even are willing to die for one another. Suppose you could push a button and guarantee that these differences in temperament would disappear in future generations, creating a more perfect equality of respect in reciprocal relations *but* at the expense of lowering the resilience and intensity of many individuals' self-respect and respect for others. Would there be anything to be said for that? Of course, if we could “equalize upwards” there would be a lot to be said for that. But then the rationale could be *greater* reciprocal respect.

Some puzzles about subjective well-being

Enough arm-chair philosophy for now. We now need to turn to the question of well-being. Actually, we cannot turn directly to that question, since I will be discussing some important empirical results, and psychologists work not with the normative notion of well-being or happiness, but with something more readily measured, *subjective well-being*. Subjective well-being is usually assessed by posing to individuals questions of global life satisfaction (“How well would you say your life is going?”) or ecological momentary assessment (contacting people at random intervals and asking, “On a scale where zero is *very sad* and five is *very happy*, how would you rate your current mood?”).

There is, as you can imagine, a very large literature on appropriate ways to conduct such sampling, the meaning and validity of its results, the role of cultural variability in how the questions are understood, the influence of social expectations and norms of response, and so on. To avoid such controversy as much as possible, I will not be working on the fringe of this research, but considering some of its best-studied, most-replicated results. Even so, caution is needed whenever one is tempted to elide observations of subjective well-being into claims about objective well-being or happiness.²

The results of this research are often described as counter-intuitive, and perhaps you already know many of the most surprising findings. Let me, however, rehearse some of the puzzling results most relevant to our present concerns.

Material standard of living and subjective well-being. The material standard of living in the United States has, in real terms, more than doubled since World War II. Yet average subjective well-being, measured in various different ways, has not budged. If anything, it seems to have fallen slightly. One might be tempted to put this down to the peculiar political and cultural trajectory of the US, except that the same phenomenon has occurred in Western Europe, where the real material standard of living has more than tripled, and Japan, where it has more than quintupled. (See fig. 1.)

Looking across a wide swath of nations in 1990 or 2005, say, one sees an overall trend from low per capita GDP and lower average subjective well-being to high per capita GDP and higher average subjective well-being. But many countries with half or even one third the GDP per capita of the richest countries enjoy equal or higher average subjective well-being. (See fig. 1.)

Looking within a country, increased material standard of living makes a notable contribution to subject well-being when individual or family income is below the level of

² In what follows, I will be drawing on a large body of work on subjective well-being. For a systematic overview, see D. Kahneman, *et al.* (eds.), *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonistic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999). Other sources from which I will draw include: E. Diener & E.M. Suh, *Culture and Subjective Well-Being* (Cambridge: MIT-Bradford, 2000); B.S. Frey & A. Stutzer, *Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Human Well-Being* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); M. & I.S. Csikszentmihalyi (eds.), *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

reasonable sufficiency (which can be quite low in some countries), but above this level there is only a slight correlation with income gains once controlled for other variables. In one large-scale study of Switzerland, average subjective well-being increased as individuals moved upward from the first to the fourth income quintile, but actually dropped a bit in the fifth quintile. (See fig. 2.)

Suppose instead we look at individuals over time. Ask an average individual earning the median income in a well-developed country how satisfied she is with her life. Suppose her answer is typical, say, 3.5 on a scale of 5. Then ask her what would make her happier. Her list, if it is like almost everyone else's, will assign importance to "Getting a raise". Typically, individuals claim that a raise of 10-15% would make their lives happier overall. Now observe what happens when this average individual receives a 10-15% raise. Her subjective well-being, if typical, will record a noticeable gain immediately upon learning of the raise, and will remain above 3.5 for some time. But 12-18 months later, individuals who have received such raises are typically back at the same level of subjective well-being as before the raise.

Perhaps a raise of this magnitude is just too small to make lasting difference? Look at a sample of people who have won a lottery, 12-18 months afterwards. Their average subjective well-being is 3.8 on a 5-point scale—barely different from the population average.

The contribution of income and material wealth to subjective well-being is real for the large portion of the world's population that is below the level of reasonable sufficiency. And this is a fact of the first importance for moral theory and egalitarianism. But the classical utilitarians appear to have been right about the diminishing marginal utility of money, although the scope and magnitude of the phenomenon, especially at the level of national income (the power of a more prosperous economy to lift the average well-being in society), would probably startle even them. (See fig. 3.)

Relative material or social condition. Perhaps what matters, above the level of reasonable sufficiency, is less absolute material level than relative material level. That would help explain why the average does not budge over time. There is lots of evidence

that people are powerfully oriented toward comparison with others—within the family, neighborhood, workplace, or society as a whole. Most of us apparently carry around in our heads numerous implicit reference classes of individuals or groups to whom we compare ourselves regularly but mostly tacitly.

Gains relative to a reference group, like gains relative to one's current condition, have a positive effect on subjective well-being. Losses relative to them have a yet more powerful negative effect. But even as absolute gains and losses have their strongest effect early on, these effects tend to disappear over time.

What appears to happen is that, over time, we construct our reference groups relative to our *current* position. This makes sense, of course. I might be thrilled to be recruited to a top department with a large raise, but within a year or so my comparison will no longer be my former colleagues, but those I see and work with every day. So my relative gain is transient because my comparison class has accompanied me in my move upward. According to the social-comparison literature, individuals asked to name their peers typically choose a cluster of individuals in roughly similar circumstances, yet 10-15% better off in professional, social, or material terms. We are always, then, *aspiring upward* in some degree. However, we cannot seem permanently to surpass our reference group and thereby achieve *enduring* standing as “relatively well-off” or happy, since a 20% raise, say, will eventuate in a re-identification of my peers. One might expect that at least those entering the top ¼ % of income earners, say, CEOs at Fortune 500 companies, have one *some* firm confidence of relative success. But apparently one of the notable outcomes of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, the Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act of 2002, which was intended in part to stop runaway CEO compensation schemes by making total CEO compensation known to stock-holders, was to cause an “arm's race” among CEOs. Naturally, like the rest of us, successful CEOs presumably saw that those they deemed their peers were receiving (what else?) 10-15% higher compensation, and so demanded like treatment from their Board of Directors on threat taking their success elsewhere. As a result, the upward movement of CEO compensation over the last few decades, which has taken CEO compensation from roughly 20 times entry-level salaries to over 200 times entry-level, has not reversed itself.

A similar adjustment of comparison classes occurs in the downward direction as well. An elderly individual no longer able to manage brisk walks, but still capable of walking without assistance, ceases after a while to compare her condition daily to her younger self, or to younger people in her neighborhood. Instead, she will compare herself with nearby others of her age. This is sound policy. Comparing herself eternally with 30-year-olds would be no guide as to whether she is doing well in maintaining mobility *given her age*. To measure that she needs as her tacit comparison class others of approximately her age and like circumstances. By tacitly selecting within that group those who have somewhat higher mobility, but not those who run marathons at 90, she implicitly gives herself a realistic incentive to maintain her level of mobility as high as possible without becoming daily discouraged.

Health, aging, and subjective well-being. If income and other familiar material measures do not seem to be significant contributors to one's perceived quality of, or satisfaction with, life, perhaps these are not material *enough*—we should look at health and aging, factors that affect one's basic, everyday capacities and activities.

This certainly is how we view health and aging. Many people, for example, are averse to undergoing medical examination or testing because they are afraid of finding out that something is wrong with them, thinking that a diagnosis of breast cancer or heart malfunction would be crushing, and would destroy their sense of well-being. Similarly, in our society especially, “growing old” is widely feared. Politicians trying to drum up support for their legislation will speak with genuine pathos of the need to protect “our nation's most vulnerable populations, the poor and the elderly”.

But again, measures of subjective well-being do not support these views. People being tested for serious diseases greatly overrate the impact a diagnosis of disease will have upon them. People who are studied one or two years after a major health crisis, such as surgery for cancer or heart problems, tend to report levels of subjective well-being essentially similar to the population average. Many with chronic illness do likewise, although their day-to-day variability often is greater. Even those suffering serious disability as a result of an accident tend, after a year or so, to have levels of

subjective well-being fairly close to the population average. In one study, paraplegics reported an average life satisfaction of 3 (2.96) out of 5.

One especially puzzling result, it seems, is that people's recollected sense of how painful a medical condition, recuperation, or procedure was appears to be relatively uninfluenced by the *duration* of the pain. In a series of experiences, for example, recollected pain seemed proportional to two features: the level of the greatest pain experienced (the "peak") and the level of pain experienced during the final stages (the "end"). A *longer* version of a given painful procedure thus might be judged *less* painful if the final stages were less painful than the final stages of the shorter version of the same procedure. "It's best to just get it over with", therefore, seems to be an untrustworthy bit of folk wisdom.

Also untrustworthy is folk wisdom about growing old. Despite our fears, aging (controlling for other factors) appears to have minimal impact on subjective well-being on average. Indeed, average subjective well-being is remarkably constant across the life span, from the adolescence onward. According to some measures, its low ebb—which is only slightly below its peak—occurs during what is sometimes seen as the "prime of life" or "peak of one's professional career", the forties and fifties. (See fig. 6.)

Climate, religion, family, friends, employment, social status, etc. So what *does* matter in a durable way for subjective well-being?

Not climate. People in reliably sunny, warm climates do not report higher subjective well-being on average than those in northern, gray, cold climates. People in very stable, temperate climates report somewhat less day-to-day variability than those in climates that go from freezing winter to hot summer. But even day-to-day measurements of subjective well-being seem not to be reliably weather sensitive, for all we talk and worry about "bad" vs. "good" weather. The conviction, shared by northerners, that they would be happier in sunny, mild climates, and that long, dark winters make for an unhappy population on the whole, seems to be an illusion. Despite Seasonal Affective Disorder, the northern European countries, whose latitude corresponds to Labrador and Hudson's Bay, report the highest average subjective well-being—higher, even, than more temperate European countries with comparable GDP per capita

Not Lutheranism. Despite Calvin Trillin's comments about "unbecoming displays of merriment" among the Puritans, and despite the seeming logic by which those embracing less dour, more forgiving, and more boosterist religious would tend to report themselves as happier, it is the countries where rigorist Protestantism prevails that lead the world in average subjective well-being. Not Catholicism, either. The predominantly Catholic countries of Latin America—where the population is more observant than in the predominantly Catholic countries in Europe—show very buoyant average subjective well-being compared to other countries with comparable GDP per capita.

Not having children, being married, or getting lots of dates. Childless couples do not report lower subjective well-being in their post-child-bearing years, and women typically experience a mild decline in subjective well-being after marriage. If one asks college students to report their subjective well-being *before* asking them "How many dates did you have last month?", the correlation between reported well-being and frequency of dating is essentially zero. If, on the other hand, you ask for a report of subjective well-being just *after* asking about dates last month, the correlation jumps up. In general, salience effects and temporally recent experience markedly influence reports of subjective well-being.

Not passive consumption, leisure, watching TV, etc. In an ecological assessment of moment-to-moment reports of well-being, those randomly contacted while watching television, consuming a restaurant meal, or doing discretionary shopping did not report higher subjective well-being than they typically did if contacted at work, preparing a meal, or doing dishes. If anything, the reports tended to be somewhat higher when contacted at work, cooking, or doing housekeeping. The highest reports—so-called *optimal experience* or "flow"—occurred during highly engaging, active, self-directed pursuits in which individuals exercised a range of their abilities: dancing, skiing downhill, having a night out with friends, doing hobbies, and (perhaps most interestingly) doing volunteer work or otherwise helping others without monetary reward. According to one happiness researcher, the most reliable way to enhance someone's momentary well-being is not to give him a fine meal or a trip to the beach, but to give him a chance to do volunteer work.

Political freedom *does* seem to matter, showing a stronger correlation with subjective well-being than GDP per capita, according to some measures. All the same, a gain in political freedom, such as that which occurred in a number of former Eastern Bloc countries, may yield a relatively brief increase in subjective well-being that is followed by a massive decline if other social factors do not also improve. (See fig. 4.)

Prolonged unemployment also seems to have a very strong affect on subjective well-being in the most developed countries, especially among mid-career males. In such countries, for a man in his forties or fifties to be laid off and endure long-term unemployment is ranked among the very highest stressors by physiological and psychological measures. Effects on subjective well-being reflect this. (See fig. 5.)

“Personality type” matters, though increasingly the literature has reduced the list of characteristics that count as “personality types” to a handful, for example: introversion/extroversion, neurosis, aggressiveness, optimism/pessimism, and affective range. Unsurprisingly, optimists and extroverts report higher subjective well-being than pessimists and introverts. What may be more surprising is that the variability each will typically experience over the course of a week, ranging from a low on Monday to a high on Saturday, with a precipitous decline on Sunday (“Sunday, bloody Sunday”), is greater than the overall difference between these personality types. (See fig. 6.)

Also important are remaining physically and mentally active, engaging in self-determined activities, and having more two or more intimate friendships, rather than one or none. Just as political freedom seems to matter, so does “social freedom”. Those in “out groups” or on lower rungs in societies divided by a strict hierarchy of caste, ethnicity, or religion, experience lower subjective well-being greater than that which their economic condition alone would normally yield.

Preliminary observations

One widely-accepted conclusion from the above observations (and many more like them) is that individuals appear to have characteristic “set points” for subjective well-being—a “default”, “ground state”, or “psychic equilibrium” to which they tend to return if perturbed upward or downward, at least under normal conditions. These set

points differ from individual to individual, but typically are relatively stable over a lifetime. There appears to be a considerable genetic contribution, at least in the normal range of conditions. Identical twins reared apart, for example, show a higher correlation in their average reported subjective well-being than do fraternal twins reared together or same-sex siblings.

Moreover, the set point of almost all individuals is not “neutral”, so to speak, but positive. (See fig. 7.) Partly, some believe, this is a “reporting effect” or matter of “maintenance of self-schema”. Famously, if you ask people about their driving skill on a scale of zero to 10, and the average of the answers will fall not at 5 (or 10, it is worth noting) but at 7.5. Ask us how our friends and associates would rate us in such valued characteristics as intelligence, helpfulness, sense of humor, and judgment, and most of us will report scores systematically higher than those our friends and associates actually give us when they are queried. And as we noted above, ask us to identify those who are our peers, and we tend to identify those 10-15% more prosperous, successful, or popular than ourselves. The notable exception to such rose-colored self-perception: depressives give self scores that more accurately accord with those others give them. This suggests a somewhat different explanation of the positive set-point than self-bias. It might be that a “user illusion” of being “better than average” or “better than one is” is essential to maintaining our normal level of motivation and activity. (This functional explanation of the positive set-point will be explored further, below.)

Positivity aside, what would explain the phenomenon of a set-point itself? It is hypothesized that just as our senses tend to habituate to a constant stimulus (the ticking of a clock, a room’s distinctive smell) and our systems habituate to regular dosage with drugs, our sense of well-being “habituates” to changes in our life conditions—in income, health, age, prestige, family situation. For minor changes habituation is fairly rapid. Often Tuesday’s minor disappointment is “left behind” by Wednesday or Thursday. “Things will look brighter in the morning,” we console others and ourselves after minor setbacks. And the “buzz” or “after-glow” of a success often trails off within a few hours or days. Of course, large changes—a major career success or setback, a serious accident, aging, marriage or divorce, winning a lottery, childbirth, etc.—may take a number of months or even a year or two before habituation is complete. This mechanism, it is

supposed, accounts for the transience of most changes in individual well-being. (Why this mechanism? Again, we will be exploring questions about functionality, below.)

Transience also helps explain why we are so vulnerable to the “hedonic treadmill”. A gain in income is an attractive goal because it promises an increase in happiness and a reduction in frustration. So we work for a raise. We then habituate to our new income, and once again a gain in income is an attractive goal because it promises to enhance our well-being. Since each gain in income *is* accompanied by a gain in subjective well-being, it is rewarded (albeit temporary). Income stasis, on the other hand, carries no comparable reward once habituation sets in. The result is a perpetual motion machine—we endlessly seek a raise in order to increase our happiness, but inevitably end up no happier for it. We might think of this as the “front-end illusion” of desire-satisfaction—viewed from the “front end”, what we desire promises a gain in well-being. We like this idea, and so are motivated to attempt to satisfy the desire (or remove frustrations to it). As the desire is satisfied, we do experience a “shot” of well-being. When habituation causes this well-being to disappear like water in sand, we do not blame satisfying the desire (*that* felt good), but the fact that we are not *now* satisfying the desire (e.g., for more income). So the carrot draws the donkey forward, although in this case (and in actual animal training, by the way), the forward steps each are rewarded with a bite of carrot, and failure to step forward is punished without need for an external stick—internally generated frustration does the job once the enjoyment of the bite is over.

You would think that living with someone for 30 or 40 years would give you a good idea of what will make that person happy. It should, and probably often does. But “living together” seems not to work so well when you are that very person. The “front-end illusion” always confronts the individual face-on—even if others who know her will say, confidently, “She really thinks that taking this new job in California will make her happier. But I’ll bet she’ll be just as happy, and just as unhappy, there as she was here. She’ll just be her same self—only with palm trees and traffic jams.” The same “front-end illusion” makes certain losses or setbacks from which we typically *do* recover seem unbearable in prospect. To be denied tenure, fail to have children, or be diagnosed with cancer seems in prospect to be the end of the world. But as one acquaintance of mine puts it, we learn in retrospect that only the end of the world is the end of the world.

Subjective well-being as emotional intelligence

Now our own central question can be put: can a deeper explanation be given—can we understand *why* subjective well-being has a set-point structure, and how this in turn relates to the nature of normative well-being? I will claim that it is only because subjective well-being *has* a set-point structure that it can play the role it “should” in our psychic economy. This role, I will contend is essentially the same as the role Aristotle envisaged for pleasure and pain in the *Nichomachean Ethics*:

Pleasure and pain are ... the standards by which—to a greater or lesser extent—we regulate our actions. Since to feel pleasure or pain rightly or wrongly has no little effect upon conduct, it follows that our whole inquiry must be concerned with these sensations. [NE 1105a3-5]

Subjective well-being has a *regulatory* role in our psyches. For this reason, it is of the first importance what we take pleasure in or pain from. Again, Aristotle:

The pleasure or pain that accompanies people’s acts should be taken as a sign of their dispositions. [NE 1104b8]

Once we know what will bring a person an experience of subjective well-being or ill-being (consciously or unconsciously), we know essential features of how he or she is likely to act (or unlikely to act) in a given circumstances.

This point about regulation is, of course, true in spades for animals governed by natural appetites. But things do not stop there. Animal trainers can succeed in teaching old dogs new tricks because they can *redeploy* the animal’s reward system on behalf of an externally-imposed behavioral agenda. This they do by changing the *reinforcement schedule* of the animal—associating pleasure with certain acts, pain or frustration with others. Animals, as a result can learn behaviors that are otherwise utterly unprecedented for them—an elephant balancing on a small sphere, in defiance of its every instinct about how to stand or move, or a hungry, discontented lion cowering before a small, mustachioed man in a top hat, in defiance of its every instinct about how to contend with hunger and weak mammals trying to push it around.

In humans, subjective well- or ill-being are attached not only to “natural” aims or conditions, or those imposed from without by parents or other would-be trainers, but to aims or conditions that exist in our imagination. As Napoleon is reputed to have said:

Imagination rules the world.

Better than anyone, perhaps, Napoleon knew how an evocation of an imagined glory—“*Pour la France!*”—could lead men, in defiance of instinct *and* experience, to march straight into cannon fire.

Depending upon what we find subjective well- or ill-being in, then, we may be angels or devils, murderers or medics, brave or cowardly, innovative or conservative, generous or stingy, or, more likely, some of each. We would, in fact, be prisoners to our “natural appetites” and fantasies were it not for the *intelligence* of our “well-being” system, its capacity to learn and unlearn—often despite us and our intentions.

Let me introduce this intelligence by using an analogy, first with an “unintelligent” or “normal” regulatory system, then with an intelligent one. In a normal regulatory system, a force, usually large, is regulated by a monitor, usually small. Thus the trajectory of a massive aircraft carrier displacing thousands of tons is regulated by a tiny device called an auto-pilot. How can so puny a force rule over a force with the power to overrun it in an instant? The auto-pilot contains a gyrocompass, a spinning device that records a fixed direction throughout the voyage. Given a course setting by the captain, the auto-pilot is turned on. It is connected to a set of switches that control two servo-motors. When the ship drifts very slightly to one side or another of the course, the gyrocompass records an “error signal”, indicating a deviation to one side or the other from the compass course originally set. Correspondingly, it turns the servo motors on or off depending upon whether the ship needs a bit more helm to port or to starboard. The gyrocompass continues to provide feedback throughout: Is the deviation from the set course increasing?—The servo motors give it a bit more helm. Is it decreasing?—The servo motors gradually bring the helm back to toward the midline position. Once the ship returns to course, the “error signal” ceases altogether, and servo motors shut down until the next deviation from course is detected. Large ships, commercial airplanes, and round-the-world solo sailors usually are guided by an auto-pilot—most of the time, it can

be much more minutely attentive to small shifts in course, and much smoother in response, than even an attentive human.

In this system we see the basic elements of regulation: a set-point value, a monitor providing positive or negative feedback concerning the state of the system relative to the set-point, an automatic connection between this information and corresponding control of the system state, and continued monitoring to determine whether this control operation is succeeding in restoring the set-point value. Our machines and our bodies are full of such homeostatic regulators.

But here is a somewhat more intelligent regulator. Again, a nautical analogy. On a racing sailboat there are many meters—for course sailed, apparent wind angle, wind velocity, speed through the water, etc. But one meter is of special interest to the person at the helm or those crewmembers who are trimming the sails. Not the speedometer, as one might expect, but the “delta meter”. When the boat is traveling at a *constant* speed, fast or slow, the meter reads zero. A sensitive meter, its needle will swing from zero into the positive zone if the boat picks up even a small amount of speed, and the greater the increase, the more positive the reading. If, on the other hand, the boat slows down to a large or small degree, the needle swings correspondingly far into the negative zone.

The helmsman and sail trimmers constantly monitor this meter, experimenting with minor adjustments to the helm or the sails. A sail trimmer, say, eases the jib-sheet very slightly. If the delta meter swings positive, she’ll stop, and watch to see if it settles back to zero or stays positive. If it settles back, she will try easing a wee bit more and watching the effect. If it stays positive, she keeps the sheet right where it is until the needle starts to settle back. Then she might try easing it a bit more. Or, noticing a slight shift in the apparent wind, she might instead try hauling it in, all the while watching the meter. Or she might stop moving the sheet and let the helmsman experiment with slight alterations in course. Or she might notice competitors catching up, study their sail trim, and trim accordingly. But not without checking the meter.—It’s no good adjusting one’s sails to look like the other boats if that in fact slows your boat down. Each boat is different, each sails in slightly different air. And races aren’t usually won by imitating the competitors, but by anticipating them.

I call this regulatory system intelligent because it is not wed to *any* set point as such. The zero point of the delta meter does not correspond to a certain velocity, but to the *change in speed*, the first derivative of velocity. From the standpoint of the sail trimmer, working on the margin, absolute speed loses significance, so long as she is doing what secures every possible gain in speed at that moment, and what avoids every possible way of slowing the boat down. She will do her job perfectly if she does that. In effect, we can see her as *learning* at each moment what speed to seek, adjusting this to constantly-changing circumstances. She is rewarded by a positive reading when she makes a good move, punished by a negative reading when she makes a bad move.

The system is intelligent in another way as well. She has eyes and a brain. She can look to see what else is happening on the boat, what the other gauges are reading, how the wind feels on her cheek, or what the competitors are doing. And she can ask herself if there is something she isn't thinking of, or some larger change that is needed—perhaps tack on a windshift or change headsails. Moreover, if the needle suddenly swings positive or negative, she can attempt to judge whether this is attributable to sail-trim or to some other factor. A positive delta reading when the wind is picking up may not tell her she has the right angle of trim, so she must monitor windspeed and begin making her own adjustments to see if she can strengthen this positive reading.

You will no doubt already have guessed how I will use this analogy. Consider our “happiness system” as akin to a delta meter. It is keyed not to our absolute rate of movement through life (income, accomplishment, etc.), but to whether we are making more or less progress in attaining the goals or desires of the moment. Giving a public lecture, one monitors audience response. Uncomprehending looks, jokes that fall flat, chins that drop to the chest—these are “error signals”, communicating the message, “Try something different—explain more clearly, change the example, stop being so monotonous”. Restored eye-contact, clearer expressions, a bit more shared mirth at minor asides, the occasional nod—these signal, “This is working, keep going, develop this example”. But this doesn't require any active tallying of faces or electronic meter read-out. A speaker caught up in her talk may need a clock to keep track of time, but she *feels* the audience response. It feels *bad* and *frustrating* when faces frown, eyes won't engage, and note-taking stops (the standup comedian says: “I was *dying* out there”); it feels

reassuring and *encouraging* when you audience seems to be following closely (the comedian: “I had them with me, I knew I could bring them along with me where I was going”); it feels *great* and *empowering* when you suddenly get the sense that the audience is really “with you”, excited to see where you’re going next, rocking along with your humor (the comedian: “I was knocking ’em dead”). And these feelings directly influence behavior, rewarding that which leads to positive affect, discouraging that which leads to negative affect and encouraging that which seems to be working. Famously, an audience can conspire to induce in the lecturer certain behaviors—e.g., stand on one side of the room, raise or lower her voice—by coordinating their positive and negative responses.

Support has grown in psychology for a “dual system” model of the mind, in which two systems—one fast, intuitive, affective, and often unavailable to introspection, the other slower, more deliberate or stepwise, and more consciously accessible—run constantly in parallel.³ Social information and information about what is propitious to, or unfortunate for, our goals is taken up extremely quickly, rapidly coded with positive or negative affect, and then fed into two further paths—one toward emotion and motivation, and the other toward cognition and judgment. In both cases, the “affect priming” colors and frames subsequent mental responses and action. (See illus. A.)

We can see this “affective system” at work in a particularly clear way as a result of a series of experiments on macaques.⁴ These macaques were strapped into seats with a feeding tube in the corner of their mouths, watching a blank screen. Randomly, a squirt of sweet juice would be sent to them. Figure 8a shows a recording of the activity in their dopamine neurons, the firing of which is associated with positive affect, and the involvement of which is fundamental in learning and in regulating emotive, cognitive, and motor response. At the outset, the dopamine neurons show only tonic firing—the macaque is bored but not restless, like someone watching run-of-the-mill television—until the unexpected arrival of the juice (R). Then there is a spike of activity immediately afterwards, which tails off in a standard response curve. No more juice, for now at least.

³ The seminal work is Zajonc. For a summary, see *The New Unconscious* and Bargh and Chartrand.

⁴ Schultz, et al.

The macaques are then trained to expect a squirt of juice 1.2 seconds after a light comes on. The timing of the light is random, but once it comes on, juice invariably follows in 1.2 seconds. Figure 8b shows how their dopamine neurons behaved after they have acquired this conditioned response. It is immediately noticeable that the positive spike has shifted forward from the arrival of the sweet juice (R) to the arrival of the light signal, the conditioned stimulus (CS). This makes sense from the perspective of information. The flash of the signal, which occurs at random and so is never anticipated, is “good news”, since it means that juice is now on the way in 1.2 seconds. Life is suddenly looking up. When the juice arrives, however, it is exactly at the moment and in the quantity as expected, so that is “no news”—going forward, things aren’t looking up or down. The macaque should take good news into account when it *is* news, lest he be unprepared, and then should not send himself the signal that things were better than expected if they turn out to have been exactly as expected. That would be to “double count”.

Does this mean the macaque does not even *notice* or *enjoy* the juice? Does he even care whether it receives it, since he gets all the pleasure for thinking it is on its way? Try *failing* to provide the squirt on cue. What happens? This is shown in figure 8c. The tonic firing of the dopamine neurons abruptly stops, exactly 1.2 seconds after the light signal. This is an “error signal” to the macaque—his expectation was not fulfilled. The result is a “negative” reward, punishing the erroneous expectation. Keep up this extinction schedule, and the macaque’s will cease falling for the light signal by forming an expectation that will be dashed. (Gone but not forgotten. If the reward is restored, the animal need not be re-trained to have the corresponding expectation. Because reward was involved, memory is keen and quickly rekindled.)

Here we see the intimate connection between learning and reward, and the crucial role of expectations and information-sensitivity. This system is at work all the time, in macaques, in us, shaping expectations, producing good or ill feeling, encouraging or discouraging our responses, driving action.

Humans have the capacity to invent their own ideas—or soak them up from advertising or friends’ recommendations—about what to expect from certain choices or goal-directed activities: ordering the sashimi special, writing a poem, inviting someone

for a date, doing the laundry, exercising, trying to get across town at 5:00 p.m., volunteering for the infantry, etc. These ideas create expectations *without any history of reward*, and therefore can lead to motivated goal-seeking even in the absence of any prior experience. A compelling description of a meal in a newspaper restaurant review can lead the reader to invest time and expense in obtaining such a meal, even before a forkful has been tasted—and even if that forkful will turn out to be a disappointment. When the expectation is met, exceeded, or disappointed, our affect-learning system can then swing into action. Moreover, it does this, and has its influence on us, whether we ask it to or not. We cannot help but feel disappointment and frustration when the sashimi is tasteless, our poem is rejected without comment, or a bus is missed (even to make a rendezvous we dreaded). We will almost always be pleased if the laundry is finally done, or we receive an unexpected bit of praise, or are able to jog one more lap around the park than we could the day before. All these feelings are real, even if transient; what’s more, we learn something from them.

One of the most notable features of the research on subjective well-being is that people’s reports are heavily influenced by the most recent events in their day. Even answers to “How satisfied are you with your life?” will register an up-tick if someone worrying about tenure has been complimented on his new hair-cut, and a marked decline if someone at who has recently been named a Distinguished University Professor has just spent all morning trying without success to solve a computer problem and then walked into a discussion section unprepared and unable to generate any spark of interest in the week’s reading.

This seems bizarre until we realize that it is of the nature of positive and negative affect as learning systems to be transient and highly sensitive to immediate circumstances, like a delta meter. Neurological and behavioral evidence suggest that animals maintain and constantly update a “value map” of their surroundings, complete with associated expectations for given actions. Humans have been found to do something similar in the face of risk, again, mediated by the affect system. Individuals who have lost the connection between affective and cortical regions of the brain owing to a lesion or injury do less well at noticing, calibrating, and responding to risk.⁵

⁵ Damasio, et al.

A similar misfortune would befall someone whose affect system lost its sensitivity to local events, and simply kept track of gross well-being. If, for example, a salesman became lastingly buoyant and blasé about all lesser successes or setbacks because he last month he finally received the big raise he sought, he would to that extent stop the constant process of conscious and unconscious learning and adjustment that has made him a successful salesperson in the first place (how to address this client to put her at her ease, when to stop pushing a particular sale and move on to another item, etc.). Similarly, whether someone should feel happy about learning that her salary is \$45,000 per year should depend not upon the absolute value of that amount—which surely is important in many respects—but upon whether her salary for the previous year was \$43,500, \$45,000, or \$46,000, or whether the average raise that year for someone in her rank was \$250 or \$2500. Otherwise, this potentially very informative signal will be lost on her.

The “happiness system” is likewise not pegged to particular goals. It can be redeployed on behalf of whatever goals we decide upon, but also can become a subterranean mechanism for learning goals we never decide upon—goals that “discover us”. Whenever experience goes better or worse than expected (consciously or unconsciously), a bit information is gained and an incentive or disincentive is induced. Millian “experiments in living” can be performed *by* living, often with unanticipated results. How many of us, after all, can explain just where the original impetus came from that led us down the paths we have chosen, or what factors were decisive at the various points along the way? In part, we “trust ourselves” to learn what suits us from the doing itself. Our goals and desires are thus not confined to an “endowment set” and their sequela or derivatives, any more than are our beliefs.

The delta-meter conception of subjective well-being would enable us to explain the following features:

- the tendency of subjective well-being to return to a set point
- change in subjective well-being typically arises from the *news* of an award, raise, medical diagnosis, new job, etc., and does not wait until there is a “material effect” on life; often, indeed, the material effect is significantly less potent in affecting subjective well-being than the news

- reports of subjective well-being are very sensitive to recent events
- subjective well-being varies over the course of a week, each workday being “news” about what to expect the next day, and how far one has advanced toward the week-end; Sunday registers the greatest change, and it is negative—Sunday *is* week-end, and so should be as enjoyable as Saturday, on might think, but Sunday is also *news* that the week-end is ending and tomorrow is Monday
- diachronic comparison typically matters more than absolute value or relative standing (when these are relatively constant)
- a painful medical procedure may be recalled as *less* painful if the pain endures somewhat longer but lessens toward the end, as opposed to abruptly stopping, since then more time is spent in the “positive” delta zone
- subjective well-being is informative about goal-attainment, and appears to regulate activity, encouraging some activities and pursuits while discouraging others (recall Aristotle’s remarks)
- there is a “front-end illusion”, leading to a “hedonic treadmill”, since individuals will work to attain positive delta readings even if attaining the goal does not itself constitute a higher hedonic state
- substances or activities that can “hijack” the “happiness system”, e.g., drugs and forms of gambling (e.g., slot machines) which “super-stimulate” the dopamine system, will become “super treadmills”, i.e., addictive, and tend to be destructive of other possibilities for systematic goal pursuit
- illnesses or drugs that chronically depress the “happiness system”, e.g., depression and drugs which depress dopamine responses, also chronically hobble successful goal-pursuit and undermine subjective well-being⁶
- institutions and activities that give individuals a sense of efficacy and control in goal selection and pursuit lead to greater average subjective well-being than those lacking freedom, choice, autonomy, or efficacy

⁶ As noted earlier, depression cannot be likened to a “zero” setting on a delta meter, since it does not send a signal “continue doing what you are doing, things are going well”, but rather flattens affect so that signals become indistinct and provide no affective force or direction. In this sense, more than a “self-bias” error is involved when people report their well-being as reasonably high on average. This is essential not only to maintain “self-schema”, but to maintain sufficient motivation to continue to be effective in goal-pursuit.

- activities that engage a large number of abilities to attain goals, and do so in a manner that provides a sense of self-directed efficacy, are experienced as “optimal”;⁷ passive activities producing pleasant sensations but no associated goal attainment are experienced as less enjoyable, and lose their enjoyment if simply repeated or continued
- nonetheless, people will spend large amounts of time in passive activities, even though more active pursuits would be more gratifying, because the “front-end” of active pursuits involving complex capacities is usually effortful, e.g., getting to the ski slopes, going out for a dance, and thus yields a negative momentary reading, while the “front-end” of passive activities like watching TV is often easy and effortless, even when one is exhausted
- narratives of challenge, danger, and overcoming are more compelling in fiction, the visual arts, and the performing arts than narratives where success is attained reliably, and according to expectation; this is especially so when these narratives encourage vicarious identification with the protagonist (said one Hollywood producer, “The recipe for a successful movie? Make an audience *really* want something, ... then give it to them.”)

Back to equality and social ideals

I would not claim to have given anything like an adequate sketch of a theory of subjective well-being, much less of happiness or normative well-being. Many more phenomena are involved. But already we can see some relevance for thinking about equality and normative social aims.

Let me begin with a modest assumption. Whatever else morality is concerned with in people’s lives, severally or collectively, it is concerned that they not be miserable. Indeed, it is concerned that they have lives in which they experience substantial rewards, i.e., have significant experience of subjective well-being. Starting from that assumption:

⁷ Compare the literature on “flow” experiences. Cf. also Aristotle on pleasure as functioning fully and efficaciously in accord with our nature.

First, egalitarians are clearly right to stress the importance of bringing everyone to a reasonable level of sufficiency—this is one clear way to promote subjective well-being on a social scale. However, egalitarians may be wrong about the value of *equality* of material condition as such if sufficiency is assured. Moreover, the discourse of ‘bringing everyone’ to a given level should be questioned. If this ‘bringing’ is a matter of passive receipt of transfer payments, then we have reason to think that it may meet material needs only. Rather, ‘bringing’ should be a matter of creating structures of opportunities, resources, freedoms, etc. that will enable people to work their way to sufficiency through meaningful, non-alienated activity—activity in which they experience some measure of participation in control, and some degree of challenge and accomplishment in developing and deploying their capacities. Moreover, the literature on subjective well-being suggests that meaningful work is not simply a self-referring matter—a sense that one is contributing to others appears to be of fundamental importance.

Second, egalitarians are clearly right to stress the importance of avoiding caste and class systems, racial hierarchies, and systems where individuals do not enjoy widespread political and social liberties. Such structural systems appear to lower average subjective well-being overall, even controlling for the fact that such societies tend to be relatively poor. Their negative influence on subjective well-being seems to be, if anything, *stronger* than economic inequality as such. This may not show that the root of the problem is inequality as such, however. In systems of caste or racial segregation, for example, those in the out castes or repressed groups experience not only *unequal* liberty, but also radical limitations on their horizon of possibility, and hence a pervasive lack of autonomy and self-efficacy. In the case of material well-being, inequality is still consistent with nearly everyone having abundant assets to make autonomous and effective self-development possible.⁸ In the case of caste differences or segregation, it is the very nature of these systems that they impose limitations which deny a substantial fraction of the population just these possibilities. Compare the fact that we systematically accord *children* less autonomy, social liberty, and political voice. Why is this inequality

⁸ This requires, however, that the differences in material abundance do not translate through social and political institutions into *de facto* differences in caste or social and political freedom or capacity to exert autonomous control over one’s life. For this reason, I think Rawls is wrong in thinking that greatest equal liberty, rather than greatest equal *value* of liberty, is the regulative norm agents in an original position would choose.

not an objectionable caste system or form of *de jure* segregation? Presumably because, if properly exercised, a system that presumes to pre-emptively protect and control infants and juveniles can yield *greater* potential autonomy and wider horizons of choice for these individuals as they mature. Moreover, there is no *failure to recognize the child socially* comparable to the failure of social recognition of out castes.

Third, there is something fundamentally wrong-headed in often-expressed goal to raise the level of happiness in society, once reasonable sufficiency has been reached. We must reject the image of a “rising tide” of well-being, e.g., as the result of a rising material standard of living. Given what we know about the function and dynamics of subjective well-being, it is simply bootless to try to “ratchet up” a social level of subjective well-being beyond sufficiency—just as it is bootless for individuals to imagine that getting a raise, having children, having a successful career will “ratchet up” their personal level of subjective well-being. Individuals, and therefore populations of individuals, will simply habituate to the new circumstances and return to the long-term average value.

This might seem to spell doom for the utilitarian enterprise—“futilitarianism”, perhaps. But in fact it liberates utilitarians from an ancient mistake, one they might have been spared by closer reading of Aristotle. Happiness is the transient product of experience and activity, not a cumulative goal. This is sometimes put in the literature by saying that the *integral* value of momentary subjective well-being over a span of time has no momentary reality—instead, what is real is a *differential* value. Utilitarianism liberated from this mistake leads to a theory much more egalitarian in import. For example, it can reject as psychologically unrealistic the claim that investing social surplus in encouraging human and social development for the poor—whether in this country or overseas—would necessarily mean forcing those now better off to accept a lower level of subjective well-being.

Fourth, although some utilitarian doctrines need revision, the conception of happiness advanced above by no means suggests that utilitarians must abandon the aim of “maximizing subjective well-being”. Just as it is an error to imagine “raising all ships” indefinitely, it is an error to think that because subjective well-being tends to return to a set point that the *transient* experience of well-being is pointless or empty. To maximize

well-being, at least above the level of sufficiency, *just is* to maximize these transient experiences. That is done not by maximizing enduring material resources, but by maximizing the ability of agents to engage in learning, efficacious pursuit of goals, shared projects, discovering activities that are intrinsically rewarding, etc.

As individuals, we tend to end up on a “hedonic treadmill”—marching ever forward in a given direction under the “front-end illusion” that we are continually approaching a life of greater enduring happiness. As a society, we appear to be marching forward on a “success treadmill”—vulnerable to a collective illusion that being successful will mean being enduringly happier, failing to see that it is *successes* but not *success* that we find reliably gratifying. Now *success* in our society is largely defined by a social scale that abstracts from all substantive accomplishment, namely, wealth and fame. *How* one becomes wealthy, or famous, is of instrumental interest. The salient accomplishment of all wealthy and famous people is that they are *successful*, and the wealthier and more famous, the *more* successful. Measurements of the subjective well-being of those in the top income fractions show no such “success effect”. Recently, some evidence is accumulating that the work demands of being a top executive, say, mean that such individuals spend more time than middle-income individuals in “mandatory” activities that aren’t particularly enjoyed (forced late work hours, travel, etc.) and less in “free” activities permitting personal development.⁹

What is lost on such individuals, and on our society perhaps, is the idea that *successes* can be had in every sphere of activity, and need not lead to an accumulation of visibility and material objects. Spending an enjoyable, active social afternoon with friends does not make one more of a *success*, but it is itself a success. Such successes, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend to yield a higher subjective well-being than the last ten work hours of a high-powered executive’s 60 hour work week. Why, then, are so many driven to make the choice to put in the extra hours rather spend time with friends and family? Well, which is the path to *success*? Certainly utilitarians should favor all the many ways that successes can be found in lives—especially those that do not require that others fail (as less wealthy, or less famous), and most especially those that are joint successes with others.

⁹ N. Schwartz, et al.

Fifth, meaningful, satisfying pursuit of goals *requires* the existence of inequalities. Think of the narrative structure of a popular epic, or a Hollywood movie. The most rewarding narratives involve facing serious challenges and surmounting them by struggling to meet these challenges. This same structure informs some of the most rewarding sorts of lives. To begin with much—an inheritance, say—and then draw this down in the pursuit of passive enjoyments is not the stuff of a happy life. This is the sense in which we are built as systems of *aspiration* and diachronic inequality. A world in which “no one suffers while others have enough” or “everyone has, from birth, equal standing in the eyes of others” or “everyone is endowed with durable respect for self and others” would be a world that could yield the drama of life only by being *perturbed*. The very best sort of world would be full of inequalities of various kinds—material level, educational or cultural attainment, standing, aspiration, status, scope of authority, influence, etc.—for these are key ingredients in the drama that gives meaning and importance to lives. What matters for well-being is the availability of *upward trajectories* through these inequalities by means of effort and accomplishment.

I do not mean this sound like a paean to “self-made men”, for there are no such. We should, however, recognize that one important area of human striving is *trying* to “make it on one’s own” and seeking great material accomplishment. The distributive principle I have in mind is not, “From each as she chooses, to each according to her work”, but the classic, “From each according to her ability, to each according to her need”. For scope to set and pursue goals, deploying one’s abilities in the face of challenge, *is* as much a human need as any.

This is in fact part of the essential structure of most games and sports—making something difficult to attain that otherwise might be a cinch (e.g., placing a small white ball in a cup located in the middle of a bit of manicured lawn), so that it becomes possible *only* through the development of a demanding skill. Children’s spontaneous play and beloved stories testify to this *need* for challenge as eloquently as Nietzschean hyper-ventilation. Moreover, as games and stories also show, these goals need not be individualistic or materialistic. In fact the literature on subjective well-being suggests that those strongly identified with individual and material success experience lower

overall levels of life satisfaction, even when they attain considerable high individual incomes.¹⁰

We should, therefore, frankly embrace the contribution inequality makes to our lives—not as an intrinsic value (any more than equality as such is an intrinsic value), but as an essential source of challenge, learning, and much of the dynamic that make lives rewarding. Inequality affords a matrix within which our efforts can gain traction in the face of obstacles and yield meaningful accomplishments. Mill defined utility in various ways, but one of the most convincing is “the permanent interests of man as a progressive being” (*On Liberty*). We are built to *be* progressive in the sense that our sense of *doing well* is tied to our sense of *doing better* or *doing more*.

What *are* our permanent interests as progressive beings? Particular goals and projects come and go, particular desires are satisfied or lost—what remains fixed is a being capable of finding the pursuit of ends intrinsically motivating (at least, when not chronically depressed), but who also can learn over time which ends are worth pursuing. The interests of that individual are, then, the permanent interests of humans as progressive beings, i.e., conditions favorable to: learning and experimentation, meaningful work, sharing knowledge and experiences, choosing one’s own aims, developing skills and abilities, obtaining necessary resources, working together with others on voluntary terms, critical reflection, developing emotional and social intelligence, forming and sustaining bonds of affection and friendship, and developing and sustaining respect for oneself and others. In short, creating the conditions for the formation of human and social capital and for its deployment in making progress. Here we see a rather close connection to Rawls’ notion of primary social goods—goods that facilitate the development and pursuit of life goals, independent of the particular content of those goals. The fact that utilitarianism could thus yield creating the conditions for autonomous self-development and self-realization as a core practical focus shows how its concern to discover and impartially promote what matters most to people can lead to a morality of respect for persons.

Sixth and last. Progress is a matter of inequality over time, of gains over our previous selves or those who have gone before us. Egalitarians sometimes say that no

¹⁰ Diener & Suh.

one should be asked to sacrifice, to endure hardship, to secure benefits for those who are yet better off. Yet this is not how we think of our own lives, nor is it how we think of the relation of our lives to the lives of our children, nor is it how we think of our relation to future generations. Speaking for myself, at least, I do not see it as unjust to demand that those alive today forgo various forms of consumption or degrees of freedom of action in order that future generations, whom we hope will be better off than we are now, can benefit. We prohibit private ownership and development of our most spectacular natural areas by setting them aside as national parks. We forgo short-term economic gains and tax ourselves with “inefficiencies” in order to protect rare species. We forgo consumption in order to contribute to a university’s capital fund knowing that the next generation of students will have educational facilities and experiences superior to our own. And we endure various hardships to earn and accumulate enough money or resources to leave an inheritance for our grand-children, even though we hope that this will help them have a better life in a better world than ours.

I believe that we would feel not only guilt but *shame*—a blow to our moral pride or self-esteem—if we came to a clear realization that we were bequeathing upon our grand-children lives of great hardship because of our insistence on a life of luxury. Part of our nature as “progressive beings” is a need to situate ourselves in a narrative arc extending over generations, searching for the kind of *meaning* this affords. In that narrative, we are not simply grubbing for ourselves, but enduring difficulties and overcoming challenges for the sake of a better future. We may eulogize someone by praising her commitment to equality among all mankind, but listen a bit longer and this same eulogy will praise her as well for the sacrifices she has made, the obstacles she has overcome, to help secure a better world in the future. If equality as such were intrinsically good, why is it impossible to eulogize someone successfully by praising his powerful commitment to equality across the generations—to insuring that no one in the present ever be asked to bear a burden for the sake of making those who will live in the future better off than ourselves?¹¹

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