

Richard Kraut

*on philosophy as a  
guide to well-being*

Philosophers disagree about whether philosophy can teach us much about human well-being. A long Western tradition, whose roots lie in Plato and Aristotle, holds that philosophical methods, skillfully and wisely deployed, can yield substantive conclusions about what is ultimately worthwhile. For example, according to Aristotle, the best sort of life for a human being will assign a central place to activities that make excellent use of practical reason and the social emotions that are responsive to reason.

One of the distinguishing features of the modern period in philosophy is the abandonment, by some of its most im-

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portant figures, of that high ambition for moral theory. Thomas Hobbes provides a striking example. In *Leviathan*, he says: "There is no such *finis ultimus*, utmost aim, nor *summum bonum*, greatest good, as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers." His point is that philosophical reflection is powerless to pass judgment on the worth of someone's ultimate aims; they therefore cannot be found defective, except insofar as they might conflict with each other. As he says, "Whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desires, that is it which he for his part calleth good." There is no basis, he thinks, for criticizing "the object of any man's appetites," and so we must let stand that man's designation of that object as good.

The idea that there is no standard for the assessment of ultimate aims – some rational method for deciding which among them are good and which bad – became the orthodoxy of the modern period. "Ultimate ends . . . can never . . . be accounted for by reason," David Hume says in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Similarly, when in *Utilitarianism* J. S. Mill asks, "What proof is it possible to give that pleasure is good?" he replies that the only test of a thing's desirability is the fact that it actually is desired.

All of these philosophers – both the ancients and the moderns – are, in a sense, engaged in the task of saying what human well-being is. Their disagreement concerns whether sustained and careful reflection has a role to play in guiding human aspirations. Hobbes, like the "old moral philosophers" he opposes, has his own answer to the question of what is good for us. He holds that what is good for someone is the satisfaction of that person's appetites. Mill likewise argues that pleasure is the only thing that is desirable in itself, because everything

we desire for itself gives us pleasure when we attain it. So Hobbes and Mill are as interested as were Plato and Aristotle in the question of what is good for human beings. But unlike their ancient predecessors, they see no room for philosophical methods to criticize the ultimate ends that someone is pursuing. Mill looks instead to the voice of discriminating experience as a guide to life: to decide which of two kinds of pleasure is more desirable, we can do nothing but determine the preferences of those who have experienced both kinds. (And if there is disagreement, he claims that the majority is more likely to be correct.)

If one wants to find, among major twentieth-century moral philosophers, defenders of a theory about what is good that is closer to the views of Plato and Aristotle than those of Hobbes, Hume, and Mill, to whom should one look? Two leading figures of the early twentieth century proposed a view that has some kinship to the classical approach to well-being. G. E. Moore (*Principia Ethica*) and W. D. Ross (*The Right and the Good*) hold that careful philosophical reflection can arrive at a conception of what is good, and that such a conception can serve as a standard that is independent of what we seek, want, or find pleasant. Ross, for example, believes that if we carefully perform a thought experiment, we will see that virtue and knowledge are good – whether or not they lead to pleasure or the satisfaction of desire. Imagine two worlds: in both, the inhabitants experience the same amount of pleasure; but in one world people possess and exercise the moral virtues, whereas in the other they are full of moral deficiencies. It is clear to our rational faculty, Ross insists, that the world containing moral virtue has a higher degree of intrinsic goodness. We can thus see that the moral virtues are indeed good,

and that their goodness does not consist in their being pleasant or the objects of desire.

Unfortunately, regardless of whether we find Ross's astonishingly simple argument persuasive, it does not really establish any thesis about what human well-being is. The topic of well-being has to do with what is good *for* someone. To say, for example, that being a just person is a component of well-being is simply a way of saying that if someone is just, that is good for him, not because justice is a means to something else, but even apart from its consequences. But Ross's thought experiment does not show that justice is good *for* the person who has this virtue, and is not intended to do so. He, like Moore, is not interested in well-being at all. He is talking about what he calls good "sans phrase" – or what Moore sometimes called "absolute" goodness. So they stand at some remove from the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. They uphold the power of philosophical reflection to detect objects of aspiration that are independent of pleasure and the desires we already have. But they do not claim that possession of those objects is good for anyone. On the contrary, they think that moral philosophy would be utterly misguided to take anything but an incidental interest in whether such moral virtues as justice are good for those who possess these qualities. The question that Plato places at the heart of his *Republic* – is justice good for the just person? – is one they decline to address, because they do not take that to be a proper topic for moral philosophy.

Turning to the later years of the twentieth century, we find in the moral and political philosophy of John Rawls a conception of well-being whose roots lie in the modern dissenters from the classical tradition. Taking the Victorian English philosopher Henry Sidgwick as his prin-

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principal guide, he holds, in *A Theory of Justice*, that “the good is . . . the satisfaction of rational desire.” Or, as he puts it, “a person’s good is determined by what is for him the most rational long-term plan of life given reasonably favorable circumstances. A man is happy when he is more or less successfully in the way of carrying out his plan.” The rationality of a plan is, roughly speaking, a matter of its internal consistency. Rationality is not meant to serve as a substantive basis by means of which to assess the worth of someone’s ultimate ends; it is rather a matter of the adjustment of one’s ends to each other in a coherent schedule of activities. So, for Rawls, what matters for well-being is not the content of what we pursue, but our degree of success in attaining it.

Since it can be good for someone, according to this way of thinking, to pursue goals that are normally (and rightly) regarded as morally objectionable, Rawls claims that there is a type of reason that must be given priority over what is good: moral rightness. No matter how good it may be for someone to own slaves, for example, or to violate the rights of others, the fact that it benefits him should count for nothing in our deliberations. In fact, Rawls holds that even if owning slaves did a great deal of good for a large segment of the population, that should carry no weight at all. The total amount of goodness should not be our practical goal; the utilitarian principle of good-maximization, favored by Mill, Sidgwick, and the other classical utilitarians, should not guide our personal conduct or the design of political institutions.

What Rawls has done, in effect, is to recognize that the conception of the good that guided a distinctive tradition of modern moral philosophy, from Hobbes to Sidgwick, cannot be the sole

or even the principal objective of our practical thinking. We are to pursue the good (that is, the achievement of our rational plans, whatever they are), but only within the boundaries of what is right. His distinctive contribution to moral and political philosophy was to propose a standard of rightness – namely, the agreement of hypothetical contractors – that is not itself a matter of satisfying whatever desires people happen to have. Well-being, in other words, is a reflection of our diverse individual tastes and highly variable preferences. Moral principles must therefore rest on something that does not vary so greatly from one person to another. Rawls’s affirmation of the priority of rightness over goodness stands in marked contrast to the Platonic-Aristotelian thesis that what is good for human beings must be the fundamental starting point of practical reasoning.

Rawls’s priority thesis rests on his commitment to the distinctively modern conception of well-being that runs through Hobbes, Hume, and Mill. It is because he thinks that well-being varies according to our preferences and plans that he takes goodness to be weightless in comparison with rightness. But is he right to suppose that “the good is . . . the satisfaction of rational desire”? Something close to the Platonic-Aristotelian alternative continues to thrive. Derek Parfit, for example, gives, in *Reasons and Persons*, respectful attention to what he calls “Objective List Theories” of well-being, which he contrasts with “Desire-Fulfillment Theories” and “Hedonistic Theories.” The best theory of well-being, he suggests, might be one that combines these alternatives. Such a theory might say that “what is good for someone is to have knowledge, to be engaged in rational activity, to experience mutual love, and to be aware of beauty, while

strongly wanting just these things.” That idea bears a strong similarity to Ross’s thesis that knowledge and virtue are good (although, he insists, they are good ‘sans phrase’ rather than good *for* someone), and also to Aristotle’s thesis that well-being consists in excellent rational activity. What they have in common is the conviction that careful philosophical reflection can vindicate a standard, other than mere internal consistency, for assessing the value of our goals. Philosophy, so conceived, can guide the formation of our aspirations.

It should be clear that this philosophical debate has to do not with *subjective* well-being (that is, happiness, or a sense of fulfillment), but with *objective* well-being. All parties to it, ancient and modern, agree that we can be wrong about what is good for us. (Hobbes thought that Aristotle was wrong to conclude that what is best for us is the excellent deployment of reason and emotion.) To say that the topic under discussion is objective well-being is simply a way of expressing the commonsense thought that what someone believes about what is good for human beings could be wrong, and is not made right simply by the fact that it is believed. Subjective well-being is a fit object for psychological experiment, since it is a state of mind. But to speak of our objective well-being is to enter into the business of evaluating our lives. It is a normative and not a purely empirical enterprise.

The philosophical debate about well-being continues. James Griffin, for example, defends a theory that follows Parfit’s lead by combining elements of an “Objective List Theory” and a “Desire-Fulfillment Theory” in his *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*. Philippa Foot proposes, in *Natural Goodness*, an approach to well-being that is consciously patterned af-

ter Aristotle’s. By contrast, L. W. Sumner, in *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, plumps for a theory that identifies well-being with what he calls “authentic happiness,” and is a close relative to hedonism. My own thinking about these matters puts me firmly in the camp of Plato and Aristotle. The suggestion I make, in *What is Good and Why*, is that the notion of flourishing – that is, the development and exercise of inherent biological powers – can serve as a powerful organizing idea for the articulation of a theory of well-being.

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