

## WELL-BEING AS ENJOYING THE GOOD

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In this paper I want to explore a view concerning the nature of well-being whose basic idea I find rather attractive. I should say at the outset, however, that it is not my goal to defend this view, but only to examine it. Somewhat more precisely, what I am going to do is to raise a number of questions concerning this view, asking how best to understand and develop it. And although I am going to gesture in the direction of the answers that strike me as most plausible or promising, it remains the case that for the most part I won't have much to say by way of defense of these various suggestions.

Thus my goals are rather modest — mostly just asking questions. Still, limited in ambition as all of this may be, I hope that it is not without interest. For it does seem to me that the basic account of well-being that we will be exploring has a fair bit of initial appeal. So it is worth asking what a more fully developed version of the view might look like.

To locate the view in question, it might be helpful to start with a very quick survey of some alternative accounts of well-being, along with some familiar claims about their various drawbacks. (Perhaps I should say “apparent” drawbacks, because — again — it is not my purpose to defend these familiar charges, but only to rehearse them.) Suppose we start with hedonism, the claim that well-being consists solely in the presence of pleasure (and the absence of pain). The problem with this view, of course — indeed, the problem with all mental state views, which limit well-being to the presence of the right sort of experiences — is that by focusing exclusively on getting the “insides” right, we lose sight of the importance of getting the “outsides” right as well. A life spent hooked up to an “experience machine” is certainly not one in which I am well off, or at any rate not one in which I am as well off as I could conceivably be.<sup>1</sup> Something important is missing.

What's missing? Well, fans of preference theories suggest that what is missing is the actual objective satisfaction of my various desires. It might be, for example, that I want to climb the Alps. But although it is true that when I am on the experience machine I will think that I am climbing the Alps, I will have the same

experiences as I might have were I to climb the Alps, nonetheless the simple fact of the matter is that I am not climbing the Alps at all: all I am doing is floating around in the neuroscientist's tank. Thus my actual preference — to climb the Alps — has not been satisfied. Perhaps, then, well-being consists in the satisfaction of my various preferences and desires (not the mere “feeling” of satisfaction, but the actual obtaining of whatever it is that I actually want).

But our actual desires can themselves be stupid, ill-considered and misinformed. It might be, for example, that I want an X because I mistakenly believe that it will bring me Y. Surely in such a case the mere obtaining of X does nothing in and of itself to promote my well-being, despite the fact that the obtaining of X does constitute the satisfaction of one of my actual desires. If my desire for X is based on a lack of relevant information about the true nature of X (or, similarly, a failure to reflect on the implications of that information), then the mere satisfaction of my desire for X does not in and of itself leave me better off. Thus instead of focusing on my actual desires — desires which might be ill-considered and worse — perhaps we should focus on the desires I *would* have, were I fully informed, duly reflective, perfectly rational, free of prejudice and bias, and so forth.

But once we make the move to ideal preference theory in this way, a question inevitably presents itself. Why is it only the “ideal” preferences (the ones I would have were I fully informed, and so on) whose satisfaction contributes to my well-being? What is so special about the things I would want were I fully informed, perfectly rational, and so forth, such that having those things, and only those things, directly contributes to well-being? The natural answer seems to be this: these things are *objectively* valuable. That is to say, they are worth having in their own right. To be sure, a suitably idealized version of myself may well be able to recognize just which things do have objective value, and will desire them accordingly. But it isn't the fact that I would want them that makes them good for me to have; rather, I want them because I see that it is good for me to have them.

Suppose, then, that we move to an objective account of well-being, according to which there are certain goods — things that are objectively valuable — and well-being consists in the possession of those objective goods. It might be, for example, that knowledge, accomplishment, and being loved are objectively good, and one is better off to the extent that one has these things.

But if they are objectively good, then it seems that it would be good to have them even if one didn't particularly want them, indeed even if one had no interest in them whatsoever or, worse still, even if one actively disliked them. Thus, friends of an objective account of well-being seem forced to accept the unappealing claim that I could be extremely well off, provided that I have the right objective goods in my life, even though these things hold no appeal for me, and I am, in fact, utterly miserable. Understandably enough, the desire to avoid this implausible implication is enough to leave many running back to hedonism, at which point, of course, we have come full circle.

The view I want to consider occupies a dialectical space easily overlooked in the rush to take that last step. Instead of going all the way back to hedonism, and holding that well-being consists simply in the presence of pleasure, perhaps we could retain the thought that well-being involves various objective goods — things like accomplishment, or knowledge, or love — but insist nonetheless that one is well off only if one also takes *pleasure* in having these things. That is to say, I am well off if and only if there are objective goods in my life and I take pleasure in them, I enjoy having them. To accept this possibility is to conceive of well-being as enjoying the good.<sup>2</sup>

(Arguably, enjoying something shouldn't simply be equated with finding it pleasant. Indeed, some have suggested that the former needn't even involve the latter. So there will be wider and narrower versions of the view that well-being is enjoyment of the good, depending on how, exactly, one interprets the enjoyment condition. In what follows, however, I will assume that the relevant form of enjoyment is simply a matter of finding pleasure in the good in question.)

If we think of well-being along these lines then we accommodate the most attractive aspects of the earlier accounts of well-being. We recognize, along with the hedonist, the importance of pleasure in being truly well off. But we also recognize, along with those who accept objective accounts of well-being, that there is *more* to well-being than mere pleasure; my enjoyment is hollow or empty — of little or no value — if it is not properly “connected” to objective value. (Enjoyment is not enough, if what I am taking pleasure in lacks significant value, or is otherwise illusory.) In short, well-being requires getting both the “insides” *and* the “outsides” right: one must both possess objective goods and take pleasure in them.

This conception of well-being as enjoying the good has, I believe, some clear intuitive appeal. But obviously enough, all that we have in place at this point is a rather broad sketch of the basic idea. To be sure, that basic idea seems clear enough, so far as it goes, but any number of details remain to be worked out.

The most pressing issue, no doubt, concerns the exact list of objective goods. If well-being requires taking pleasure in objective goods, then our account of well-being will necessarily be incomplete until we can say something more about just which things possess genuine objective value (and why). But such a list (or theory) is far from all we need. It is important not to lose sight of just how much of our account of well-being would remain inchoate if all we were given was the requisite list of objective goods.

For example, if we say that well-being consists in taking pleasure in the objective goods that one possesses, then there are apparently *three* key concepts at play, yet we have only explicitly considered two of them. We have noted the importance of taking pleasure in the objective goods one has, and we have noted as well the importance of it being objective goods that one takes pleasure in. But what kind of weight, if any, are we to give to the idea of *possessing* the objective

goods that one takes pleasure in? Is talk of taking pleasure in the objective goods that one “has” a mere dispensable locution? Or does this language point to a third essential ingredient in well-being?

On the first alternative, we could drop talk of “having” objective goods, or “possessing” them. What would be truly important would simply be that one take pleasure in objective goods. Nothing would turn on whether or not I “possess” those goods, whether they are “mine” in any interesting sense. Suppose, for example, that I stop and admire a grove of redwoods. If we assume — as might well be the case — that the existence of a redwood is something with objective value, then if I enjoy the sight, does this increase my well-being? On this first interpretation, it would. The redwoods, let us suppose, are no more “mine” than anyone else’s; yet so long as I take pleasure in seeing them, this will constitute an increase in my individual well-being. If one finds this claim an attractive one — and I must confess that I do — then that provides some support for the first interpretation.

Alternatively, however, it might be that we need to take seriously the question of whether or not the relevant objective good is “in” my life, something that I have or possess. Presumably this need not be literal ownership, but still it might be that well-being requires the right kind of “having” of the given objective good, before the enjoyment of that good contributes to one’s well-being. It is easy to see how my own well-being might be increased through my enjoyment of my own knowledge or accomplishments, for example, but it is less clear whether the same should be said if I take pleasure in, say, the accomplishments of someone I have never met.

Of course, if we prefer this second interpretation, then we will need an account of what the possession or having of an objective good comes to. Admittedly, this may not be a pressing matter if the only objective goods are ones that are naturally understood as being automatically possessed by a given individual or group of individuals (as one possesses one’s own knowledge, or one’s own accomplishments). But if goods that are not automatically owned by someone (such as a redwood tree) can still come to be “possessed” in the relevant sense, and thus contribute to well-being when enjoyed, then we do still need an account of what possession here consists in.

It is worth noting, as well, the possibility that the relevant kind of possession may be something that can come in degrees. Perhaps objective goods can be in my life to a greater or lesser degree. If so, is there a minimal amount — a threshold amount — of possession that is required, before the enjoyment of the good in question can contribute to my well-being? Or, more plausibly, might the amount of well-being increase as the degree of possession of the given good increases? We’ll come back to this possibility later.

Suppose, then, that my life contains or possesses a number of significant objective goods, that I “have” them in the relevant sense (whatever that is). But imagine that I don’t, in fact, enjoy these goods; I take no pleasure in their possession. Since well-being consists in *enjoying* the good, I am not made better

off. That is, despite the fact that my life contains these various objective goods, *I* am not made better off.

Nonetheless, it might well be the case that my *life* goes better, that my life is a better life because it contains these goods.

In saying this, obviously, I am assuming that we can and should draw a distinction between two questions that we normally conflate: First, how well off is someone? And second, how well is their life going? The former concerns the level of individual well-being, the welfare of the given person; the second concerns the quality of their life. I believe — though I won't argue the point here — that we should be open to distinguishing between these two subjects.<sup>3</sup> Someone's *life* might be going fairly well, even though *she herself* is not particularly well off. That's the situation we have, I suspect, if someone's life contains objective goods, but the person takes no pleasure in their possession. Though such a life is hardly perfect, it might still be a rather good one all told (if, say, the person has accomplished a great deal); yet because they take no pleasure in the goods that they possess, the person herself is not particularly well off.

(What if the objective goods in question exist, but are not "had" by anyone? If this is indeed possible — and I am open to the possibility that it is — then to that extent the *world* may be a better place, but no one's *life* is the better for it.)

Should we say, then, that how well someone's life is going is a function of the objective goods that are contained in that life, but how well off the person is, is a function only of the pleasure that they are experiencing? No, to the second: pleasure is relevant to well-being, but it is not the entire story. I wouldn't want a life on the experience machine for myself or my children, even if it was a very pleasant one. And if someone *were* on an experience machine, I would not think that they were very well off. To at least a significant extent, well-being requires that one's enjoyment be properly connected to objective goods.

But what exactly should we say, then, about a life with pleasure, but without objective goods? Clearly, I am not *very* well off, if well-being is enjoyment of the good. But is a life of pleasure without objective goods of no welfare value to me at all? Or is it, rather, only of limited value? This, too, is a question to which I want to return.

This much, at any rate, is clear. According to the view of well-being as enjoying the good, one cannot be very well off unless one both possesses objective goods and takes pleasure in them. But this talk of taking pleasure "in" the objective goods that one possesses points to yet another complication that we have not yet considered. Presumably there must be the right sort of *connection* between the goods that one possesses and the pleasure that one takes.

First of all, and most obviously, presumably it won't do if I am enjoying my life and I also happen to possess various objective goods — *if* there is no connection at all between the pleasure and the goods. Suppose for example that I mistakenly believe that I have objective goods P, Q, and R, and I take great pleasure in this thought. Meanwhile, I do possess objective goods X, Y, and Z, but either I am unaware of this fact, or it gives me no pleasure. Here then I have both pleasure and an array of objective goods, but it seems to me that, despite

this, I am not very well off: there is no connection at all between the goods and the pleasure. At a minimum, then, we might say that well-being requires taking pleasure in the objective goods that I actually possess.

But this doesn't go quite far enough. For even if I do take pleasure in the goods that I actually possess, this might still be something of an accident. Suppose for example that I correctly believe that I have some good, G, and I take pleasure in this thought — but there is no connection between the *existence* of this good (or my possession of it) and my *belief*. It is really just an accident that my belief here happens to be correct. There is no causal connection (or perhaps, no causal connection of the right sort) between the existence of the good, and my belief that I have the good; hence no causal connection (or perhaps, no causal connection of the right sort) between the existence of the good, and my pleasure.

Here, too, I am inclined to say that I am not well off. Even though there is a sense in which I am taking pleasure in the objective good that I actually possess (since I take pleasure in the thought that I have G, and in fact I do have G), the relevant sort of connection between my pleasure and the good does not seem to be in place. In order to be well off, the good that I possess must actually be the *cause* of my pleasure. Indeed, it seems, it must cause the pleasure in the “right” or “appropriate” sort of way. (Bizarre causal chains that originate in the good in question and somehow miraculously produce the true belief, and thus the pleasure, presumably still won't do.)

What exactly does it take to have the right sort of connection between the pleasure and the good? This seems to me to be a complicated issue. In the typical case, I take it, something like the following happens: my pleasure in the good is caused (in the “appropriate” way, whatever that is) by my having a justified belief in the existence of the good, where that belief is in turn caused (in the “appropriate” way) by the very existence of the good. So my pleasure arises via a belief concerning the good. But what, exactly, is the relevant belief? I've just characterized it as a belief in the *existence* of the good; but I intended this as a mere placeholder, since it isn't actually altogether clear just what belief is normally required.

Suppose that X is an objective good, I recognize that X exists (and that I possess it), and I take pleasure in the fact that I possess X. However, I mistakenly believe that X is not an objective good at all, but rather something objectively bad. (No doubt it would be perverse or even vicious of me to take pleasure in the possession of something that I take to be objectively bad; but imagine that this is indeed the case.) In the case we are imagining, then, I am taking pleasure in X, and X is indeed an objective good, but I don't in fact believe this to be the case. Now when I think about this kind of case, it doesn't seem to me to display the right sort of connection between the good and my pleasure. So it isn't quite adequate to say that what we need is for my pleasure to arise via a belief in the existence of the good. Here, after all, I *do* believe in the existence of the good — X — yet for all that, the appropriate connection doesn't seem to be in place.

Should we say, then, that I must believe not only in the *existence* of the good, but also in its *goodness*? And must I then take pleasure not only in the existence

of the good, but more particularly, take pleasure in the fact that it is good (or that I possess something good)? That certainly would be an improvement, but I am inclined to suspect that this goes too far in the other direction, demanding more than is actually required.

We have stipulated that X is an objective good. Presumably, however, this is not a brute fact about X. Rather, X is good by virtue of having various features *by virtue of which* it is good. That is to say, X is good by virtue of its good making features, F, rather than its neutral features, N — let alone any bad making features, B, it might possess as well.

So now we can ask: in order for there to be the right connection between my pleasure and the objective good, must I actually take pleasure in the fact that X is *good*? That is, must I think to myself that X is good, and take pleasure in that fact? Or does it suffice if I take pleasure in its various *good making* features, F, without regard for the fact that these features do, in fact, make X good?

According to the first alternative, I must take pleasure in the good *qua* good, I must recognize its goodness and I must take pleasure in the *fact* of its goodness. But this strikes me as being an overly “intellectualized” or “moralized” requirement. In contrast, according to the second alternative, I am allowed to enjoy the good “directly”: it suffices for me to take pleasure in the good by virtue of the various good making features that it possesses. Indeed, I need not even think of the features *as* good making, I must merely respond to them appropriately, taking pleasure in X — by virtue of its having the particular features that it does.

Of course, I take it that even on this second alternative, it must indeed be the good making features, F, that I am responding to: I must take pleasure in X by virtue of *those* features — the ones that do, in fact, ground X’s goodness (whether or not I recognize this fact). If, perversely, I take pleasure in X by virtue of whatever *bad* making features, B, X may happen to have as well, that doesn’t seem to do the trick. And I imagine the same is true for X’s various neutral features, N, as well: it won’t suffice if I take pleasure in X simply by virtue of its various neutral features alone; rather, I must take pleasure in X by virtue of (one or more of) its *good* making features.

But having gone this far, we might well wonder whether there is any remaining requirement concerning belief at all. Isn’t it possible to simply respond *directly* to X’s various good making features, taking pleasure in X by virtue of its being F, without having any particular beliefs at all — simply reacting, directly but appropriately, to the F-ness of X? I am not sure whether such a case *is* possible, but if it is, then I am inclined to think that this too might suffice. If so, then even though beliefs of various sorts may *typically* be part of the causal path from good to pleasure, there is no actual requirement that this be the case: my pleasure can have the right sort of connection to the objective good without that connection going via any sort of belief at all.

(Suppose, however, that I am directly taking pleasure in X by virtue of its being F, but mistakenly believe that X is bad. Doesn’t this *undermine* the existence of an appropriate connection between the objective good and my pleasure? If so,

then even if it is true that I need not have the belief that X is good, there is still a requirement that I must *lack* the belief that X is bad.)

In light of the preceding discussion, it seems that it won't be a trivial matter to spell out what exactly it takes to have the right sort of connection between my pleasure and the goods that I possess. However, instead of trying to explore this question further, let us simply emphasize the fundamental point, that well-being does indeed require the *right* sort of connection between pleasure and good (whatever, precisely, that connection comes to), and move on. And to simplify the remaining discussion, hereafter when I talk of pleasure being taken "in" an objective good, let us simply assume that the relevant sort of connection — whatever it is — is in place as well.

In any event, this much is clear. If I am going to take pleasure in an objective good, the thing I take pleasure in must truly be good. In particular, I cannot be well off if I am taking pleasure in the possession of some X which actually — unbeknownst to me — lacks objective value. (Of course, if I mistakenly believe that X is good, then I may mistakenly *take* myself to be well off; but in point of fact, I won't be.) That, at any rate, I take to be one of the guiding thoughts behind the conception of well-being as enjoying the good: according to this view, well-being requires taking pleasure in things that are *in actual fact* objectively good.

But to say this is not yet to say whether the objective goods must also be *intrinsically* good. This is certainly one possible way to understand the view, but it seems to me that it is not the only possibility. An alternative would be to hold that well-being can also be increased (at least somewhat) even if the good in which I am taking pleasure is merely an *instrumental* good.

Is that right? Will it suffice if the good in which I take pleasure is merely of instrumental value? I am inclined to think it can. Of course even here the good in question must be genuinely instrumentally valuable: it won't do for me to simply mistakenly believe this. But provided that X really does have instrumental value, I think it may well increase well-being if I enjoy my possession of X. (I am, in fact, inclined to think this holds true even if we take a very broad reading of "instrumental value": something can have instrumental value not only by bringing about the existence of an intrinsic good or by preventing an intrinsic bad, but also by being *suitable* to do either of these, even if it is never actually put to use.) If I am right about this, then although well-being requires taking pleasure in objective goods, the goods in question can include merely instrumental ones, and not only intrinsic ones.

Very well. According to the view of well-being that we are exploring, someone is well off (or, at least, very well off) if and only if they are taking pleasure in objective goods (or perhaps: objective goods that they possess). Suppose so. Still, we need to ask: what exactly, on this account, does well-being *consist* in? Surprisingly enough, this is a question we have not yet answered. Our account tells us *when* someone is well off. But what is it, exactly, that comprises their well-being?

One natural suggestion is that well-being is simply the *pleasure* one takes in the (possessed) objective goods. Of course, on this view, not *all* pleasures will constitute (significant) well-being — only those pleasures taken in (possessed) objective goods will do so. Still, according to this first possibility, the objective goods one takes pleasure in are not themselves, strictly speaking, *part* of one's well-being. Instead, the requirement that one's pleasure be taken in objective goods is best understood as a restriction concerning *which* pleasures constitute well-being. On this first possibility, then, we might say that well-being simply is pleasure — provided that it is taken in an objective good.<sup>4</sup>

Alternatively, however, we could suggest instead that it is the objective goods themselves that constitute one's well-being, rather than the pleasure. Of course, even on this second view, these goods only constitute well-being when they are (possessed and) enjoyed. But on this second proposal the requisite pleasure is not itself a *part* of one's well-being; instead, the requirement that the goods be (possessed and) enjoyed is best understood as a restriction concerning *which* objective goods constitute well-being. We might say, accordingly, that well-being simply is the possession of objective goods — provided that one takes pleasure in this.

Between these first two alternatives, I am inclined to prefer the former, according to which well-being simply consists in pleasure — when that pleasure meets appropriate conditions. But there are of course still further alternatives as well. According to a third possible view, for example, both the pleasure *and* the objective goods are part of one's well-being. And I must admit that I am hard pressed to decide between our first view — according to which well-being consists in the pleasure alone — and this more complex alternative.

Instead of trying to settle this question, however, I want to move on, yet again, to a rather different sort of point. According to the account of well-being that we are exploring, well-being requires that I take pleasure in the good. But taking pleasure in the good is a form of virtue. Thus, it seems, well-being requires virtue!

In making this argument, I am, of course, presupposing a particular account of virtue, one which I find independently plausible.<sup>5</sup> The basic idea is this: virtue is simply a matter of loving the good. There are, of course, various ways in which one can love the good, but presumably one of them is to take *pleasure* in the existence of something good. Thus, taking pleasure in the good is itself a form of virtue. Accordingly, if we accept the view that well-being is itself simply a matter of taking pleasure in objective goods, then it immediately follows that virtue and well-being are tightly connected. Roughly speaking, well-being requires virtue. Put in slightly different terms, virtue is a necessary condition for being well off. Somewhat more precisely, *my* being virtuous is necessary for *my* being well off.

This is, I think, a rather surprising conclusion. So let me immediately qualify it. There are various kinds of virtue, and not all of them are required for well-being. For there are various ways in which one can love the good — and while each of these is a particular form of virtue, well-being, it seems, only requires one particular form. Presumably, after all, a love of the good might take the form of

*desiring* that some good exist, or of being *motivated* to bring about or sustain that good, and logically, at any rate, it seems that one might have either of these forms of love in addition to, or for that matter instead of, the form in which one takes *pleasure* in the existence of the good (or pleasure at the thought that the good will come about). So far as I can see, it is only the last of these — what we might call affective virtue — that is required for well-being. Thus, one need not possess the full range of virtues in order to have well-being. One need only have affective virtue.

Indeed, one need not even have the full range of affective virtue. Most importantly, while my being well off requires that I take pleasure in the goods that *I* possess, it does not similarly require that I take pleasure in the goods that *you* possess (but I do not). Clearly enough, if I fail to take pleasure in the fact that you possess some objective good then I am significantly lacking in a good many of the virtues. So one need not possess even the full range of affective virtue. What well-being requires, rather, is that I take pleasure in *some* goods (more particularly, at least some of the goods that I actually possess). Admittedly, this may be only one virtue among many — and the lack of the other virtues would certainly be a vice — but a virtue it is, for all that, for it is still a form of loving the good. So well-being requires at least some virtue; it is impossible without it.

Note, however, that even if “wide” affective virtue — taking pleasure in the goods had by others — is not required for well-being, it may still *increase* my well-being. At least, that would be the case if we relax the possession requirement on the objective goods in which one takes pleasure. If it suffices for an increase in well-being (as I believe it does) that one takes pleasure in objective goods, even if one does not “possesses” those goods in any significant sense, then it seems that it should increase my well-being if I recognize that you possess one or another objective good, and I then take pleasure in this fact. Thus, even if it is true that wide affective virtue is not *required* for well-being, it may help to enhance it.

But in any event, it appears that at least *some* affective virtue *is* required for well-being. For without at least some affective virtue, one will not take pleasure in any goods, and without pleasure being taken in objective goods, one cannot be well off.

So virtue (or at least, some virtue) is necessary for well-being. Is it also *sufficient*? Does the existence of virtue also guarantee at least some well-being? That would be an equally surprising conclusion, perhaps even more surprising. But at first glance, at any rate, it seems that the answer must be no. For even if it is true of you that you *would* take pleasure in a good, if only that good were to exist (and so you have the relevant affective virtue), that certainly doesn’t guarantee the *existence* of the good in question! Tragically enough, love of a good simply doesn’t guarantee the existence of that good. But well-being requires more. It requires that one take pleasure in goods that actually exist. No goods, no well-being. Thus even if one were virtuous, it seems that this could not, all by itself, guarantee that one is in any way well off.

But at this point a second claim about virtue becomes important as well. It seems plausible to suggest that virtue is *itself* objectively good. And because of

this, virtue becomes one more good that it is appropriate to love. This in turn points the way to what we can think of as “higher order” virtues — cases in which the particular good that one virtuously loves is itself a virtue.<sup>6</sup>

Suppose then that one were sufficiently virtuous that one had not only a range of lower level virtues, but also the relevant higher order virtues as well. In particular, suppose that one had not only a given first order virtue, but also the relevant affective second order virtue: one takes *pleasure* in the fact that one has the first order virtue. Since the first order virtue (like all virtues) would be an objective good, one would thus be taking pleasure in an objective good. And this means, of course, that to at least that extent one would be well off after all.

Note, in particular, that this could happen even if the particular goods that were the object of the first order virtue did not exist. Virtue can't normally guarantee the existence of its object, but since a second order virtue has as its object the existence of a first order virtue, it turns out that a *sufficiently* virtuous person will have an objective good in which to take pleasure after all. And this then guarantees the existence of at least some well-being. In effect, then, virtue is its own reward! (Somewhat more cautiously: *sufficient* virtue is its own reward.)

Does sufficient virtue guarantee that one is *very* well off? I doubt it. If the only objective goods that one has are the goods of being virtuous, then even if one appropriately takes pleasure in all of one's virtues, I doubt if this will add up to sufficient well-being to leave one very well off.

But once again it is worth recalling the point that if one relaxes the possession requirement, so that the objective goods in which you take pleasure need not be possessed by you in any particularly interesting sense, then someone with “wide” affective virtues will be better positioned to have their well-being increase. I can take pleasure not only in my own virtue, but also in yours — and doing this will increase my well-being as well. And for that matter, even the nonaffective virtues that you or I possess can be the object of one or another of my higher order affective virtues, thus being the source of even more pleasure. Other things being equal, then, the more virtuous you are, the better off you will be.

The final question I want to ask about our account of well-being is this. We are exploring the view that well-being is a matter of enjoying the good. When someone takes pleasure in an objective good, they are, to that extent, better off. But how much well-being is thereby created? It is a familiar point that well-being comes in greater and lesser amounts. And it seems reasonable to expect that this familiar observation can be accommodated by a conception of well-being as enjoying the good. But how exactly does it do this? If the level of someone's well-being can vary, what exactly does it vary as a function of?

Two possibilities immediately suggest themselves. First, if well-being is a matter of enjoying the good, then it seems likely that how well off someone is depends, at least in part, on how much they are enjoying themselves. That is, it seems likely that well-being varies as a function of the amount of pleasure one takes in the given objective good. Second, it might also be the case that how well off someone is depends, at least in part, on the value of the objective good that is being enjoyed. While this second possibility is less obviously correct, it certainly

seems worth considering as well. That is, we should also consider the possibility that well-being varies as a function of the size of the good enjoyed.

There is, in fact, a third possibility that is also worth mentioning. If we decide to take the possession requirement seriously — so that I must possess a good before its enjoyment can enhance my well-being — then we must recall as well the possibility that possession might itself come in degrees. If so, then perhaps we should also consider the possibility that how well off someone is depends, again at least in part, on how “tightly” one possesses the goods in which one takes pleasure. That is to say, well-being may also vary as a function of the degree of possession.

Presumably, well-being might vary in any or all of these three ways. Let’s consider each in turn. First of all, and most obviously, it seems plausible to hold that well-being increases as one’s pleasure increases. That is to say, even if we keep the value of the particular good that is being enjoyed constant (and the degree of possession as well, if this can indeed vary), as we increase the amount of pleasure that one takes in that good, one’s level of well-being should also increase.

If we were to graph this, with the X axis representing the amount of pleasure taken in the good, and the Y axis the amount of well-being thereby produced, we would have a line moving up and to the right: other things being equal, the greater the pleasure, the greater the well-being. One way of capturing this view is shown in Figure 1.

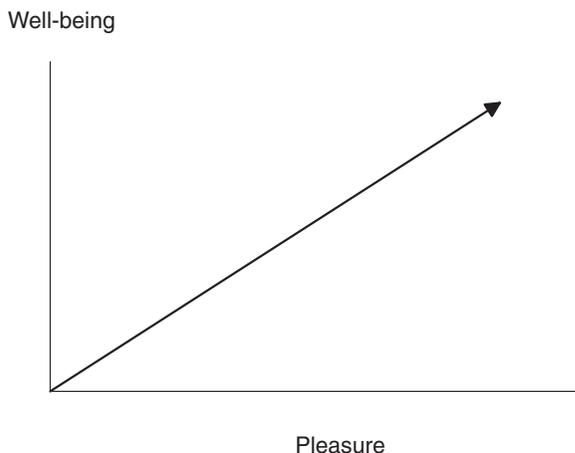


Figure 1.

But we must now ask: does well-being really continue to increase without limit as one’s pleasure increases? (That is, should the line really continue to move ever up as we go further and further to the right?) And if so, does it increase in a linear fashion (is the line straight)? I think these matters are far from clear, but continuing in the dogmatic manner I have adopted throughout this essay, let me simply report the positions I currently find myself inclined to accept. First of all, then, I am inclined to believe that there will actually be diminishing marginal returns of well-being as pleasure increases. Thus, at a minimum, the slope of the

line should decrease as we move further to the right (the line should be a curve, rather than a straight line). But this is, of course, compatible with holding that well-being continues to increase without limit. See Figure 2.

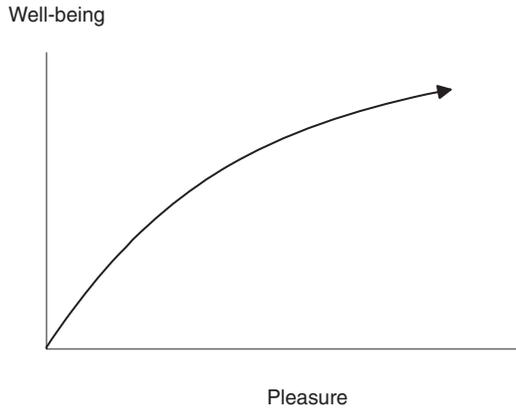


Figure 2.

Nonetheless I am inclined to doubt that it does. I find more plausible the alternative suggestion that there is a limit to the amount of well-being that can be had from a given objective good: as pleasure taken in that good increases, there is an initial phase in which well-being increases, but eventually one has “squeezed out” all the well-being that is to be had from the given good. Beyond this point, one may still be able to enjoy the good in question even more, but doing so won’t actually make any further increase in one’s well-being. That is to say, the line will eventually reach a plateau: a maximum level of well-being that can be had from enjoyment of the given good. See Figure 3.

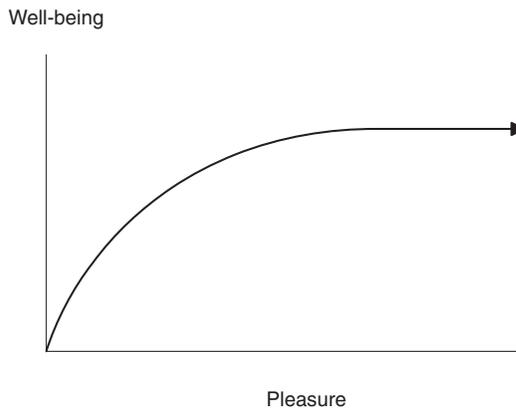


Figure 3.

There is of course an even more extreme possibility: that the line eventually turns back down, so that the overall shape of the curve is somewhat similar to a curved mountain with either a flat or a rounded top. See, for example, Figure 4. This would represent the claim that if one enjoys a given good “too much” this can actually reduce one’s well-being. Conceivably, some might find this view attractive, but I do not.

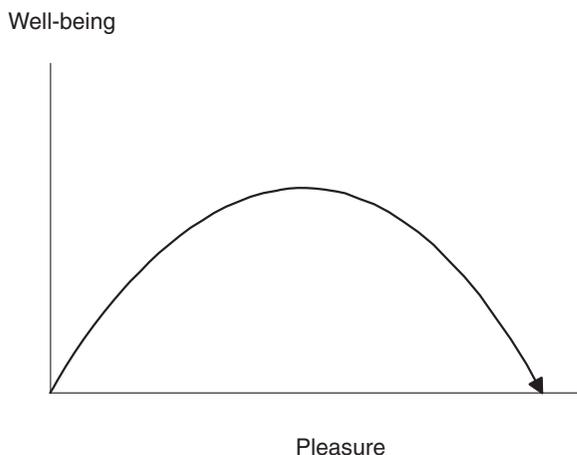


Figure 4.

Some may prefer a slightly less radical cousin of the plateau view, according to which as pleasure increases, one’s level of well-being asymptotically approaches a limit. On this alternative, in effect, one “approaches” the plateau, but never actually reaches it. See Figure 5. This has the implication that further increases in

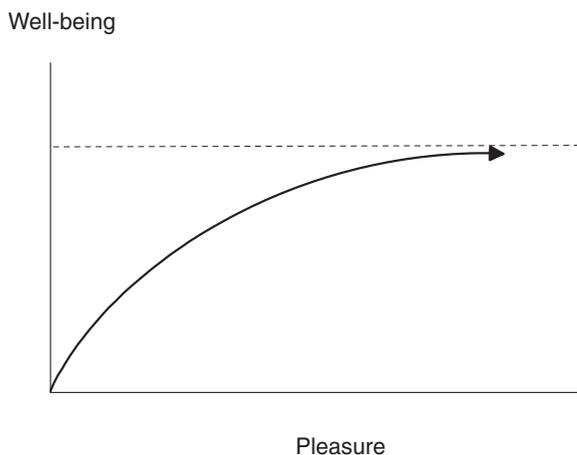


Figure 5.

pleasure will in fact always increase one's level of well-being *somewhat*, albeit by vanishingly small amounts. In contrast, of course, according to the true plateau view, for any given good one eventually reaches a point at which further increases in enjoyment make no further increase in well-being at all. For what it's worth, I find myself inclined to prefer the plateau view rather than the asymptote view, though I can see the attraction of the latter as well.

Let us suppose, then, that as pleasure increases, the line eventually reaches a plateau. But this is not to say that the *height* of the plateau is the same in all cases. On the contrary, I think it plausible to hold that the height of the given plateau is itself a function of the size of the good being enjoyed. That is to say, even if there is a maximum amount of well-being that one can derive from the enjoyment of any given finite good,<sup>7</sup> that limit will itself vary depending on the size of the good in question. It is plausible to suggest that greater goods are capable of generating greater amounts of well-being; their plateaus will be higher. Thus we will need to draw more than one line. See Figure 6.

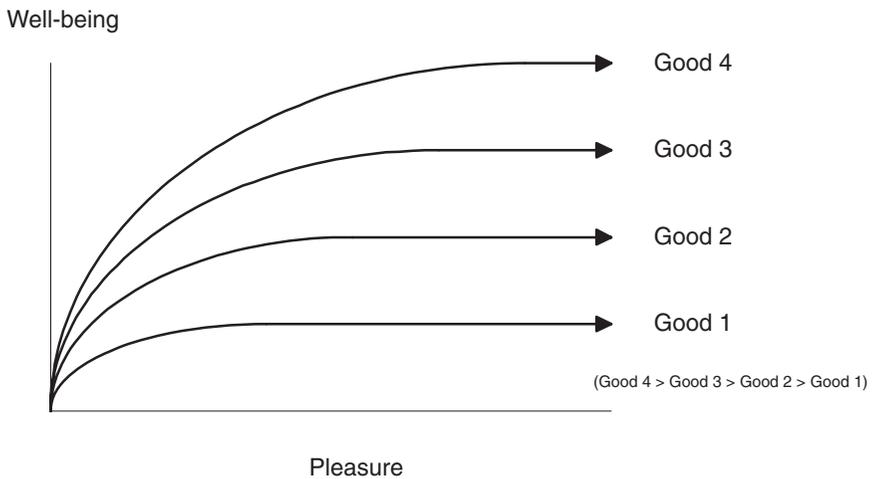


Figure 6.

In Figure 6 representative lines are displayed for four different goods. Each line eventually reaches a plateau, but the greater the good, the higher the plateau. It should be noted, however, that Figure 6 also incorporates a further thought, the independently plausible idea that for greater goods it takes a greater amount of pleasure before one *reaches* the given plateau. That is, the greater the good, the more enjoyment of the good required before one reaches the maximum potential well-being that can be generated by the good in question. Thus, not only is it true that the plateaus for greater goods are higher, it is also true that they begin further to the east along the X axis.

That, at any rate, is what happens to the various lines as we move to the right, increasing pleasure. But what happens to any given line as we move to the left, *decreasing* pleasure? Once we get past the plateau, each line of course slopes down and to the left: from then on, as we reduce the amount by which we enjoy any given good, we reduce the amount of well-being. But we can, in fact, say something rather more precise than this: the line passes through the origin. (See any of Figures 1–6.) To say this, of course, is to claim that for a given good, as pleasure taken in the good approaches zero, well-being decreases, and — more particularly — when *no* pleasure is taken in the good, there is no well-being generated at all. But this last claim should come as no surprise, for it is one of the very points with which we began, when we first introduced the view of well-being as enjoying the good: if there is no enjoyment of the goods one possesses, there is no well-being. Thus the line passes through the origin.

Turn now to the second possibility, that well-being increases as the size of the good enjoyed increases. Is this claim plausible as well? Suppose we keep the amount of enjoyment (and possession) constant, but vary the size of the *good* enjoyed. Does doing this increase one's level of well-being? If so, and if it *always* does this, then for any given fixed amount of pleasure, we will derive greater well-being if it is a greater good that we are enjoying. Thus, in one of our graphs of well-being, the height of the relevant line will always be greater (at a given point along the X axis) for a greater, as opposed to a lesser, good.

It might seem that we are committed to accepting this claim, or at least, committed to it once we adopt the suggestion, already embraced, that the line always plateaus, but does so at a higher level for greater goods. (Again, see Figure 6.) In fact, however, one can accept the idea of plateaus, and accept as well the idea that the greater the good the higher the plateau, without accepting the more general claim that with a fixed level of pleasure, a greater good *always* produces a greater amount of well-being. In particular, it might be that the “initial” segments for the various lines coincide — with a given “branch” breaking off from the shared “trunk” only when the line in question begins to plateau. See Figure 7. If we accept this more restricted view, then the amount of well-being that can be generated from the enjoyment of two different goods will only vary once we move close to or beyond the point at which the lesser good has reached its plateau.

(More restricted still would be a view according to which it *never* makes a difference how great the given good is. The level of well-being is always a function of the amount of enjoyment, and nothing more. Hence there is no need to draw different well-being lines for different goods. Figure 3 would suffice for all goods. As I have already noted, however, I find this view implausible, since I think the height of the plateau varies with the size of the good enjoyed.)

Regardless of what we say about what happens to well-being as the good increases, what should we say about what happens when it decreases? Given my belief in plateaus, and my further belief that the height of the plateau varies with

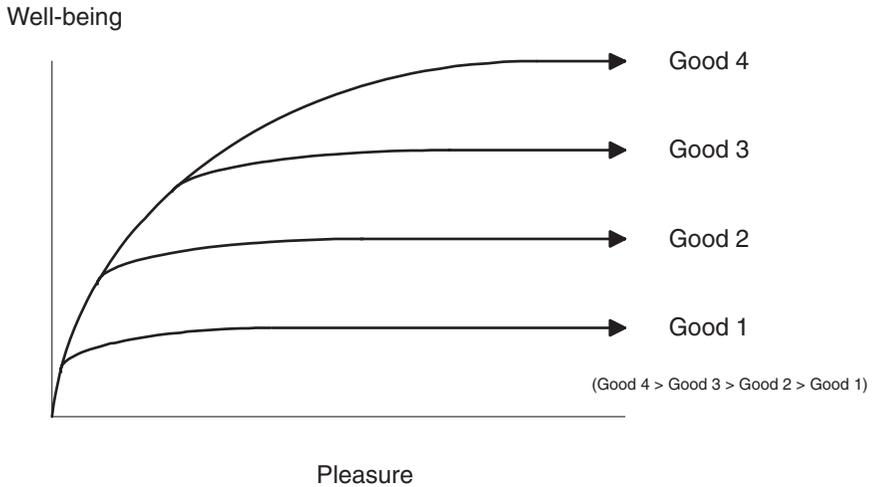


Figure 7.

the size of the good, unsurprisingly I find it plausible to hold that as the size of the good approaches zero, the amount of well-being that is to be had from a given amount of pleasure decreases as well. But this still leaves a question of what to say about the limit case, when the value of the object of my enjoyment actually reaches zero, and is not good at all. If I take pleasure in something that is neutral, can this make any contribution at all to my well-being? Indeed, what should we say about a case that I considered much earlier, only to put aside: if there is pleasure in my life, but nothing objectively good, does this make any positive contribution to my well-being? Does pleasure itself — in and of itself — leave me better off?

To give the question particular bite, we might imagine a situation in which I am experiencing simple bodily pleasures of some sort — the kind of case where it seems natural to say that I am not actually taking pleasure *in* anything at all! Surely this is still a kind of well-being, even if of a rather limited sort. Accordingly, shouldn't we say that even when there is no good being enjoyed (and so the "size" of "the good" being enjoyed is zero) there is still some well-being to be had? If so, then even the line for something neutral will fall above the X axis.

Perhaps. But I am not convinced. I do find it hard to deny that pure pleasurable sensation can be good for me, even if only in a limited way. But it is not clear to me that in such a case there isn't really anything objectively good in which I am taking pleasure. On the contrary, it seems to me possible that in such a case what is happening is that I am taking pleasure in my body. And if we recall the suggestion that it may suffice if the good in which one takes pleasure is instrumentally good (rather than requiring that it be intrinsically

good), and recall as well the suggestion that it may suffice if one's pleasure is a *direct* response to the good making features of the good (rather than requiring that one be thinking of it as good), then it seems to me that we might be able to claim even of such a case that one is indeed taking pleasure in an objective good after all. If that's right, then of course it still might be true that if there really were a case where the object in which one were taking pleasure had *no* objective goodness, then well-being would not, in fact, be enhanced at all.

What should we say about the last possibility, that how well off someone is varies as a function of the degree to which they possess the objective good that they enjoy? As I have already indicated, I am not myself especially sympathetic to the possession requirement in the first place. So I am inclined to think that even if we could make out the relevant notion of possession, it would do no serious work in our theory of well-being. But for those with greater sympathy to this possibility, it seems to me that they would do well to take seriously the possibility that possession can come in degrees. And having recognized this point, they might then be open to the further thought that how much well-being is generated in a given case (where pleasure and size of good are fixed) would vary depending on how "tightly" the good was mine. Other things being equal, a good that was mine to a greater degree might well generate a greater amount of well-being.

And what of the case where I took pleasure in a good that was not especially mine to any degree at all? While it would be open to friends of the possession requirement to insist that in such a case no well-being was generated, a more congenial suggestion, I think, would be to admit that enjoying an objective good will always be a source of at least *some* well-being, even if that well-being could be enhanced, perhaps significantly enhanced, were the good mine.

There are, of course, many other questions about well-being as enjoying the good (beyond those that we have already been discussing) that an adequate account of that view would still need to consider. Let me close by quickly noting three important topics that remain in need of further investigation.

First, we haven't yet explored the relevance of time. Presumably, well-being varies not only with the intensity of the pleasure that one takes in a given good, but also with the duration of that pleasure. But what, exactly, does the function look like (for example, is it linear)? Beyond this, does it also matter, not only how long one enjoys a given good, but how long the good itself continues to exist? Indeed, must the good that one is enjoying exist at the very same time as the enjoyment that one takes in it?<sup>8</sup>

Second, we haven't yet asked how the particular, individual contributions to well-being — made by individual episodes of taking pleasure in various goods — are to be combined so as to determine someone's overall level of well-being, whether at a given time or over an extended period. The simplest approach here is presumably an "additive" one, where one's overall well-being at a time, or over a period of time, is simply the sum of the relevant individual contributions

(at that time, or during that period); but there are several less straightforward possibilities that need to be considered as well.

Finally, in this paper we've really been addressing only the *positive* aspects of well-being. That is, we have been exclusively concerned with investigating those elements that directly contribute to being intrinsically *better* off (with the constituents of *well-being*, as we might put it). But we haven't yet asked about the constituents of *ill-being*, that is to say, the negative elements that directly contribute to being intrinsically *worse* off. Clearly, an adequate development of the view we have been exploring would need to address the negative aspects of well-being as well, and not only its positive aspects. But I think it isn't at all obvious how best to extend the core idea — that well-being consists in the enjoyment of the good — to cover the negative cases. So I am going to leave this last question, like the others I have just mentioned, for another occasion.

## Notes

1. See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–45.
2. To say that this idea is easily overlooked is not, of course, to say that everyone has overlooked it. It (or a view like it) is mentioned, for example, by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 501–502, and by Fred Feldman in *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 119–122; it is defended by Stephen Darwall in chapter 4 of *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton, 2002), and it may be similar to what Susan Wolf has in mind in “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life” (*Social Philosophy & Policy* Vol. 14, No. 1 (1997): 207–225.) My own consideration of the view is most directly inspired by the discussion in Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 93–101, from whom my name for the view being examined has been taken as well (though he calls it “well-being as enjoyment of the excellent”).
3. I've given some reasons for taking this proposal seriously in “Me and My Life,” (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 94 (1994): 309–324), though I would no longer endorse the precise arguments and conclusions that I offered there. (I am still drawn to the idea that well-being requires an element “internal” to the person; but I am not now drawn to the further thought that all *changes* in well-being require changes in the person.)
4. Compare the analogous question with regard to knowledge. Suppose, for simplicity, that someone knows if and only if he has justified true belief. What, precisely, constitutes his knowing? I find it most natural to answer: S's knowing is his *believing* — provided that his belief is justified and true.
5. It's fullest exposition is in Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford, 2001). An early presentation of Hurka's views can be found in “Virtue as Loving the Good” (*Social Philosophy & Policy* Vol. 9, No. 2 (1992): 149–168)—a title I deliberately echo, along with the phrase from Adams (see note 2), in choosing the title of the current paper.
6. Again, see Hurka, for discussion of these points.

7. What about an infinite good (such as God)? Here, perhaps, there would be no limit to the well-being that could be had (at least, in principle) if one took appropriate pleasure in such an infinite good.
8. Suppose not. That is, suppose that well-being is increased even when the good enjoyed and the enjoyment of that good do not occur simultaneously. And then consider a case where someone takes pleasure in a good that no longer exists (though she possessed it earlier). If you are like me in finding it more plausible to say of such a case that the contribution to well-being occurs at the time when the enjoyment takes place, rather than at the time when the good existed, then that supports the thought — mentioned earlier — that well-being simply *is* the pleasure (when taken in an objective good) and not (in whole, or in part) the objective good itself. (I owe this argument to Rob Rupert.) Note, incidentally, that even if the *person* is only made better off when the enjoyment occurs, it still might be the case that the central moment when the person's *life* goes better is when the *good* occurs.