

CHAPTER 4

OBJECTIONS TO GOOD AS HAPPINESS

1. WHAT MIGHT GOODNESS BE IF NOT HAPPINESS?

Assuming the characterization of happiness suggested here, is such happiness identical with what is good for individuals? While I do not think that there is anyone who would deny that happiness is *a* good, many have proposed that there are goods which are sometimes at least as valuable, and which may even be better for a person than happiness, so that if loss of one of these were to increase happiness, it would be better to lose happiness than to lose that good. In discussing these objections I will argue — not that these other goods could not be considered ultimate — but rather that our common beliefs about them can be accounted for in terms of their effects upon happiness as I have defined it. To this end I will suggest the following. (a) While many of these goods are extremely important to a good life — even necessary to the best sort of life —, there are some situations in which they may not be good for one, whereas happiness, suitably characterized, is always good for one. (b) While many of these goods are pursued for their own sakes, they are also pursued for their contribution to one's happiness, whereas the converse is rarely the case. (c) While it is almost always reasonable to pursue any of these goods independently of their contribution to individual happiness, that they contribute to one's happiness overall is always a sufficient reason to pursue them (with the sole restriction that they not create greater unhappiness for another, or be in some other sense immoral). I will *not* try to show that we are always motivated by happiness, or that our only good reason for pursuing something is that it will make us happy.

Nor will I claim that we could not so define some other goods as to make them the only things good in themselves for an individual. If we did, however, such a definition would, I believe, come close to the way I have defined happiness: namely, living a life that is satisfying overall, without regret and discontent. What I do claim is that the analysis presented here of individual good allows us to account for the beliefs about it which have survived centuries of discussion. I do not wish to contend that there could be no other adequate analysis, or even a better one. My primary purpose throughout this book is to show that an adequate analysis is possible by actually providing one. If a different theory can improve upon mine, all the better. The truth of moral cognitivism does not require that there be only one true moral theory, any more than scientific cognitivism requires that there be only one true account of physics or

genetics. If the account of language and truth conditions given in the first chapter is correct, different theoretical constructs, using different truth conditions for their most central propositions, may be equally adequate. All that is required is that the theory as a whole account for the data — in the case of science, observed phenomena; in the case of ethics, well established moral beliefs. Of course, in a science its practitioners attempt to decide between competing theories by experimentation. With a primarily classificatory theory — as moral theories are — it is not necessary to do this. Which theory (of those which adequately account for well established beliefs) is preferable is determined by practical considerations.

I shall reiterate here and throughout this chapter that the topic I am discussing is what is good *for an individual*, not what is good overall or what it would be good (in general) for some person to have or to be. What would make a person admirable and good is not necessarily good for him. Nor is it always unreasonable for a person to sacrifice what is good for him, if by doing so he can bring about a greater good for others. In subsequent chapters I will indicate where individual goodness fits into moral right and wrong.

(1) One good which is a candidate for being ultimate is liberty or autonomy. Liberty has been widely recognized to be one of the greatest goods. It is good not only because it is universally desired, but because it enables people to pursue their own interests more effectively. Most of us know better than other people what will make us happy, and even when we don't, we often profit more through learning from our own mistakes than by being prevented from making them in the first place.

No one believes, of course, that we would all be better off if we were allowed to do exactly as we pleased, but in many situations loss of liberty in one area may increase it in others. Yet while liberty is a great good, and there are many people who have even been willing to die rather than lose it, most people are not willing to regard liberty as the ultimate good. Most people will accept major restrictions on their freedom in order to survive, and to obtain those goods which are essential to any degree of well being.¹ For some individuals death may be a lesser evil than loss of freedom — but not just any freedom. No one in his right mind would knowingly sacrifice his life in order to have the freedom to drive on whichever side of the road he wished. On the other hand, many have died fighting against tyrannical governments, and we believe their sacrifices worthwhile and worthy of honor.

Since not all freedoms are equally valuable, there needs to be some other criterion for determining which are the most important.² The most valuable, I suggest, are those which enable the individual to obtain those things which are most essential to human happiness. Indeed freedom may be considered one crucial constituent of happiness just because a significant level of happiness is impossible without it.

One might argue that liberty can easily be considered ultimate since the value of a particular kind of liberty depends upon how many other kinds of liberty it affects. Thus political freedom gives people many opportunities (i.e., freedom to do things), while freedom to pick one's teeth in public does not. Hence political freedom is more valuable. The problem with this approach is that it tends to classify every good thing

as some kind of freedom. Food gives one freedom from hunger; a house, freedom from exposure. Education and good health give one freedom to do many things one couldn't do without them. An army or police force can give one freedom from fear. Conservation gives us freedom to continue to live on this planet. These assertions seem to stretch the meaning of 'freedom' to make it coextensive with goodness, for they characterize freedom as basically being relieved or protected from all manner of things that would make us discontented, and enabled to do those things which make us satisfied with our lives. Thus 'liberty' would be used in just the same way in which I have used 'happiness.' This assertion, of course, opens me to the accusation that I have stretched the notion of happiness just as much as one who stretched the notion of liberty to cover all goods. I think, however, that my characterization of happiness is more naturally coextensive with what people think of as good than is liberty. To see this, however, it will be necessary to discuss a variety of objections — as I shall do in this chapter.

There is a particular sort of freedom which is considered not only a basic good, but constitutive of a basic principle of morality, such that it is better for a person to respect his autonomy even if doing so might diminish his happiness. This is *autonomy*.³ Autonomy is, fundamentally, the ability to make one's own choices based on a consideration of all the available information which might be relevant. A person's autonomy may be violated both by ignoring her known desires or by deceiving her so that she will make choices based upon falsehoods. If a doctor puts a patient on a ventilator in spite of a clear advance directive to the contrary, he has violated that person's autonomy. And if he lies to you about your diagnosis to keep you from worry and despair, or gives you a placebo to make you think you're getting a medication you want but isn't good for you, he has just as surely violated it. Our autonomy may also be violated when others manipulate our desires:⁴ e.g., by lying or withholding crucial information, or by presenting a one-sided view of a situation. One can manipulate a person by inducing shame or embarrassment for some of her desires — which in turn may cause her to suppress them unjustifiably.

There is certainly wrong involved in all these paternalistic actions. To force something upon a helpless person against his will can rarely be justified, since, unless there is very strong evidence to the contrary, we must presume that what one wants is in one's best interests. But sometimes a person is not in a state where he can assess his interests; in such cases we believe ourselves justified in preventing him from doing what he wants. Most of those who are suicidally depressed, for example, are later glad that they were committed for treatment, even though they were forced into a path they did not desire at that time.

Paternalism is usually not good for people for many reasons. If you aren't given a realistic picture of your situation, you may be unable to take control of your life and do what is needed to realize your goals. If you are told that you are going to die soon, you will no doubt be fearful and sad.⁵ Nevertheless, if you can get your affairs in order and make sure you spend your last days doing what matters most to you, this will probably give you some satisfaction. If you are kept in the dark, however, your real situation will probably become apparent to you eventually, but most likely when you have no

time or energy left to take care of unfinished business. This would surely be a source of significant unhappiness. If you are asking for a potentially harmful medication, it would be much better for you if your physician explains to you the potential problems with continuing to take it, and works out with you a way to overcome your dependence.

On the other hand, there may be situations in which such deceptive medical paternalism might be better for the person. Some patients might be so devastated by a prognosis that knowing it could bring them nothing but increased suffering: e.g., a severely depressed quadriplegic who is told there is no chance that he will ever move again. A drug addict might be in a violently irrational state, so that explaining his situation to him would be impossible, yet continuing to give him his drug would only prolong the problem. In these cases, it may be better for the doctor to say to the quadriplegic something like, "It's too soon to say how much function you'll regain," even though he is virtually certain that the answer is "None," and to give the addict a placebo for a time. As a rule, such measures are temporary, and designed to time things so that discussing the truth with the patient will occur at a time when he is in a condition to deal with the truth constructively: i.e., in such a way as to protect or advance his interests.

Often it is very difficult to know in a given case whether it is harmful (as distinct from being morally wrong) to withhold truth, or to take a choice out of someone's hands. The same may be said about manipulating desires. With children, parents and teachers quite openly want to encourage desires that will lead them to be happy and socially responsible adults, and to discourage those which will have the opposite effect. We don't usually consider these efforts in any way bad for the child. Of course, it is best to influence his desires by letting the child have experiences from which he can learn that, say, hard work and deferred gratification can lead to both material and emotional satisfaction. This influences a child's desire in a better way than, for example, by slapping him whenever he objects to a parental demand. The difference is, of course, that the first kind of influence shows respect for the child and a desire for his ultimate good, while the second does not. Yet in both cases, the child's desires are being influenced and altered. (The term 'manipulation' has evaluative meaning; manipulation of a person is always wrong, whereas influencing or shaping is not.)

Thus it appears that there are occasions when autonomy may not be good for one (unless, as is likely, 'autonomy' also has evaluative meaning, so that it excludes liberties that might not be good for one), although normally autonomy is a great good because it is an integral part of a person's overall well-being and leads to a happier life. While we generally think that it is better for a person to be allowed to do what he thinks best for himself, even if he is wrong and makes mistakes that cause him some harm, we also believe it better for someone to intervene when his mistakes are likely to harm him significantly. The obvious cases are people who are clearly not capable of appreciating their own good, such as small children or the mentally incompetent. Others are less clear — e.g., adolescence, depression, or addiction. These people usually *do* have some grasp of their interests, but their outlooks may be distorted so that they are unable to appreciate what is good for them. Most think it right and good for our teenagers to give them a large degree of autonomy, but at the same time set

limits to prevent them from seriously harming themselves. Even normally rational adults may act contrary to their own interests, and if one person sees that another is about to do something disastrous, she may do him a favor by forcibly intervening. (The question of whether paternalistic acts are justifiable is, of course, another matter altogether; that X would be better off if Y keeps X from doing what X wants does not necessarily justify Y's doing so.) Thus whether a degree of autonomy is good for a person depends upon how much harm he can do himself by acting as he desires. Autonomy is an important component of well being, but it is defeasible.

No discussion of autonomy would be adequate without attention to Kant's conception of autonomy as the basis of human worth. For him autonomy is the capacity to legislate in the Kingdom of Ends — i.e. for all rational beings, considering what acts and ends one could will for all to adopt. According to such a conception, anything that diminished or interfered with this capacity or its functioning would be bad for the individual, and conversely, what would promote it would be good for him. As Barbara Herman persuasively argues,⁶ however, it is by no means obvious that Kant would hold that what is good for a person is solely what promotes rational autonomy. Nevertheless, Kant holds that this capacity is the ground for the priceless worth of human beings; its operation and what promotes it, while not the only things which are good, are the only unconditional goods. Hence contentment and enjoyment would not be good in themselves, but only as promoting rational autonomy. Yet while the ability to act rationally might be the source of human dignity, the bare ability need not be best for particular individuals. Having rational autonomy (which Kant thinks all humans have) is hardly sufficient to prevent a person's having a miserable life. While rational autonomy might be what *makes people valuable* and the grounds for treating them with respect, it is distinct from the essence of what is *good for* a person.

In discussing Kantian autonomy it must be remembered that he was concerned with what is good overall, and what is morally good. He clearly distinguishes between what acts are right and what are in the agent's interest, and it is what is in a person's interest that I am discussing here. We might also interpret Kant as saying that the only things that contribute to a person's worthiness, or goodness as a person, contribute to her ability to act as a member of a kingdom of rational ends. But once again what makes someone a good person is not necessarily the same as what is good for her.

(2) Charles Taylor and David Brink argue⁷ that certain goods cannot be reduced to satisfaction of desire, and their arguments are applicable to the view that the goodness of a life is measurable by its happiness. As examples, Taylor discusses ideals which guide the lives of human beings. Those who live by such ideals as personal integrity, doing God's will, and freedom, for example, are widely admired, and often thought to lead better lives than people who don't have them. This is true, even if the people with those ideals have lives that are less happy and satisfying than they might have been without those ideals. Brink points out that there are many values — such as pursuit of and realization of the agent's reasonable projects, as well as certain personal and social relationships, which are components of a good life and which would be good even if they did not bring happiness.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0687-6>

Moral Beliefs and Moral Theory

Forrester, M.G.

2002, XIII, 293 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0687-6