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## GOOD LIVES: PROLEGOMENA\*

BY LAWRENCE C. BECKER

A philosophical essay under this title faces severe rhetorical challenges. New accounts of the good life regularly and rapidly turn out to be variations of old ones, subject to a predictable range of decisive objections. Attempts to meet those objections with improved accounts regularly and rapidly lead to a familiar impasse—that while a life of contemplation, or epicurean contentment, or stoic indifference, or religious ecstasy, or creative rebellion, or self-actualization, or many another thing might count as *a* good life, none of them can plausibly be identified with *the* good life, or the *best* life. Given the long history of that impasse, it seems futile to offer yet another candidate for the genus “good life” as if that candidate might be new, or philosophically defensible. And given the weariness, irony, and self-deprecation expected of a philosopher in such an impasse, it is difficult for any substantive proposal on this topic to avoid seeming pretentious.

Unfortunately, it is only the effort to contribute to a detailed, defensible, substantive account of the good life that sustains my interest in writing on the topic. So I will offer a modest proposal. Stated as a set of ordinal<sup>1</sup> precepts for individuals, it is simply that we should first immunize ourselves against bad fortune by acquiring the power to detach ourselves from harm. (The object is not to *become* detached, but to acquire the ability to detach; not to have the ability to ignore events or deceive ourselves about them, but rather, by means of understanding them, to be able to control the damage they do.) Second, we should construct and follow a schematic, practicable, revisable plan for our whole lives<sup>2</sup>—a plan

\* My main intellectual debts for the ideas in this paper, beyond the obvious ones to the history of philosophy and the people cited in the footnotes, are to three groups: the Social Philosophy and Policy Center's conference on the good life, which both prompted and refined this paper; my seminar on the subject, offered in the fall of 1990 at the College of William and Mary, where some of these ideas were distilled from a long list of possible topics; and the Social and Political Philosophy Discussion Group, which gave me advice on a draft of the paper. Individuals who deserve mention include George Harris for discussion of the nature of integrity; Todd Davidson on the criterial good of unity; Eric Foster on the criterial good of action; Sebastian Dunne on (against) the notion of having a good life by accident; Mark Fowler on examples of good but miserable lives; and George Harris, Alan Fuchs, Sharon Rives, Wayne Sumner, and Todd Davidson for criticism of the list of precepts.

<sup>1</sup> The precepts are meant to be ordinal (not lexical) in the sense that any momentary conflict between two of them must be resolved in favor of the one prior to the other on the list.

<sup>2</sup> I call attention below to the importance of a whole-life frame of reference in assessing the goods realized in a life. This precept simply acknowledges that importance and proposes a modest amount of schematic planning. Those who find the notion of a life-plan either empty or wrongheaded may yet be able to assent to the proposal here.

which, if followed successfully, will accomplish the following things (in lexical order<sup>3</sup>): it will create and sustain the exercise of the deontic virtues (traits that issue in actions required for a productive social life: reciprocity, justice, fidelity, and so on); it will create and sustain in us a high level of goal-directed activity; it will leave open at least one possibility, consistent with the above, for having a fulfilling and beautiful life; it will create and sustain the prudence required to minimize the need for detachment (especially the sort of detachment that flattens affect, reduces expectations, and induces passivity). Third, within the framework of such a plan, we should (in the following nonlexical order) cultivate loving relationships and make them just and beautiful; find a vocation and follow it; act as if the Aristotelian principle<sup>4</sup> were true; stay calm; be passionate; be convivial; and, ultimately, stop trying to have a good life and get on with it. Then if our lives are not good by accident, or not good as a by-product of the activity bounded by those precepts, we will be able to make them good, in at least one robust sense of that term, under almost any circumstances.

The preliminary material assembled in the following sections is meant to make those precepts plausible. But the precepts are not themselves meant to be, or to imply, a particular account of *the* good life—or even of a good one. If one labels the rest of the paper theoretical, then the precepts are meta-theoretical. They define a way of managing the pluralistic results of the theoretical inquiry. The *modus vivendi* they define is plausible, I believe, in the light of those results, when one considers the uncertainty of life, its vulnerability to reversals, its resilience (in either a good or bad direction), the multiplicity of ways in which a bad life can become a good one, and the self-defeating gap between a contrived life and a good one. For rhetorical reasons, I will say no more about my substantive aims, lest they appear ignorant, self-indulgent, and embarrassingly autobiographical. I will also hide, as best I can, the disappointingly limited consequences of this inquiry for the rest of ethics and social and political philosophy. Such deception calls for a disgracefully misleading introduction.

### I. WHOLE LIVES

Commercial speech encourages the belief that “the good life” is something like a good vacation, or a good house, or a good meal—at best a long stretch of happiness. One can have (and lose) the good life repeat-

<sup>3</sup>“This is an order which requires us to satisfy the first principle in the ordering before we can move on to the second, the second before we consider the third, and so on. A principle does not come into play until those previous to it are either fully met or do not apply.” John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>“Other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.” *Ibid.*, p. 426.

edly; whether one has it at a given moment will be determined by the quality of one's life at that moment.

There is a more interesting line to take for present purposes: Living is the process of creating a single, unitary, spatiotemporal object—a life. A life has a value *as* an object, as a whole. It is not always the case that its value as an object will be a function of the value of its spatiotemporal parts considered separately. But it is always the case that an evaluation of the parts will be incomplete until they are understood in the context of the whole life. What seems so clearly valuable (or required, or excellent) when we focus on a thin temporal slice of a life (or a single, long strand of a life) may turn out to be optional, or awful, or vicious when we take a larger view. And it is the life as a whole that we consider when we think about its value in relation to other things, or as part of the cosmos.

This focus on the entire life is explicit in Aristotle and, in more or less elaborated versions, is to be found in a long succession of texts in the history of ethics. It is my impression of that history, however, that despite the efforts of some major philosophers the whole-life frame of reference has gradually receded into the background under systematic pressure from Christian theology (with its emphasis on the universal availability of redemption), consequentialism (with its forward-looking, fluctuating summations of expected value), and deontological theories (with their "antecedentialist" emphasis).

Whatever the cause, the focus on the parts, or on the sum of the parts of a life, obscures some important features of the inquiry here.<sup>5</sup> One of them is the extent to which one's own estimate of the value of one's life is necessarily inconclusive. (For example, others will have to judge my life as a whole, because its character as a whole is not likely to be predictable while I am around to judge it, and because many important holistic considerations—such as its beauty, excellence, justice, and net effect—are things that I am either not well-situated to judge or at least not in a privileged position to judge.) Something else obscured by the focus on parts of a life is the range of ways in which a single event or characteristic, without wide causal connections to other elements of one's life, can nonetheless ruin it (for example, the possibility that a monstrously unjust act can indelibly stain a whole life<sup>6</sup>). Also, focusing on the parts of a life tends to obscure the roles played by aesthetic criteria and the notion of excellence in the evaluation of a life.

## II. UNITARY CONCEPTIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE

It is useful to divide conceptions of the good life into pluralist and unitary ones. A pluralist conception holds (a) that the goods realizable in a

<sup>5</sup> Compare Robert Nozick's remarks on this subject in his *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 411ff.

<sup>6</sup> One of the themes of Costa-Gavras's 1989 film, *The Music Box*.

human life are genuinely diverse, that is, not reducible to a single species, (b) that genuinely diverse combinations of goods are sufficient to make a life a good one, and thus that good lives may differ in kind as well as degree, and (c) that any theoretical explanation to be found for the diverse array of good lives will be purely formal, or schematic, or perhaps merely heuristic. A unitary (or monistic) conception, by contrast, holds either (d) that goods are not diverse, and thus good lives differ only in degree, or (e) that whether goods are diverse or not, there is only one set of them sufficient for making a life a good one, or (f) that though there may be more than one sufficient set, all of them have in common the same ordered subset of necessary goods, a subset rich enough, or ordered rigidly enough, to ensure that all good lives will be remarkably similar.

The history of philosophical accounts of the good life can plausibly be written as the history of failed unitary conceptions, with footnotes to pluralist ones. Would it be profitable to extend this history by putting forward yet another unitary account? The following considerations suggest that such a course would be futile.<sup>7</sup>

### III. CRITERIAL GOODS

Assume that attempts to construct an account of the final good are either vacuous or unsound. That is, assume that we cannot specify, in a nonvacuous way, a final or ultimate intrinsic good (for example, happiness) such that every other thing we value as good is valued ultimately only as a means to the final good. Then consider the range of things that might plausibly be regarded as (a) distinct goods, not reducible to others on the list, (b) intrinsic, necessary, or widely instrumental goods,<sup>8</sup> and (c) definitive, at least in part, of a good life. We may call goods falling into this range "criterial" ones with respect to a good life. Here is a reasonably full list of them.

1. *The material conditions necessary for sustaining life and consciousness.* On the assumption that a vegetative existence is not a life in any sense rele-

<sup>7</sup> A deflective remark may be in order here. The *prima facie* diversity of goods is a commonplace. A recital of the obvious candidates would be pointless if the result were to leave open the possibility that they could all be generated and nicely ordered by some one overarching good (say, rationality or self-realization). It will be my contention, though, that an "inclusive" account of the good life—one which defines such a life as the realization (through some overarching aim) of a maximal array of goods—is only plausible when we jump too quickly over the lists to follow. I hold a similar view of the contention (which one assumes is almost audible by now in the minds of those interested in Aristotelian accounts of these matters) that lists of the goods that might be realized in a life are pointless—that the real issue is which, among the various good lives that are possible, is the best. I will argue that this issue, too, does not look fruitful against a reasonably full set of lists.

<sup>8</sup> The idea here is to limit the list by excluding the indefinitely large number of things that have only limited, contingent, and instrumental worth. Intrinsic goods are those desired for their own sake, and not (only) as a means to something else; necessary goods are those without which no (other) goods are realizable in a life; widely instrumental goods are those which, while not necessary, are useful as means to all (or almost all) other goods.

vant to this discussion, the material conditions for life and consciousness are bedrock necessary goods. Since they are so obvious, and so far from being sufficient for any sort of life that has been put forward as a good one, they are typically relegated to the background and not treated as definitive "criteria" of a good life. But given the prevalence of war, famine, disease, and natural disaster, this reminder does not seem pointless.

2. *The quality of consciousness.* Here the definitive criterion is a certain state or states of consciousness (sensation, pleasure, desire, serenity, passion, compassion, active contemplation, and so on). The good life is defined, at least in part, as one in which such a state of consciousness is actually achieved—either by design or by default—to a degree sufficient to warrant describing a whole life as a good one.

3. *Understanding.* Here the definitive criterion is a form of knowledge or comprehension of the nature, value, and meaning of things, events, and experience. The good life is then defined as one in which, among other things, soundness and completeness in such matters are to some extent achieved. Note that the criterion is an epistemic one, and that the good defined here is not reducible to a state of consciousness in which one merely believes things or has a simulacrum of understanding.

4. *Self-command.* Here the definitive criterion is the possession of a sound self-concept and the ability to resolve states of consciousness into acts of will: decision, choice, and action. As a practical ability, then, this is not reducible to criterial goods 2 or 3 above. It defines the good life, at least in part, as one of will and action. It is a (nearly) universal instrumental good and is arguably both an intrinsic and a necessary one.

5. *The harmonization of reason, desire, and will.* Here the definitive criterion is not the quality of consciousness achieved (though that may be a byproduct), or the soundness and completeness of one's understanding, or action alone, but rather the unification of the multiple and often conflicting elements of action. Roughly speaking, there are three elements to be unified or harmonized: (a) the dispositions, motives, desires, needs, appetites, drives, impulses, raw energy, and intentions antecedent to action (say, for short, *desire*); (b) the knowledge, practical wisdom, and deliberation characteristic of deliberative rationality (or, for short, *reason*); and (c) the sort of self-command (or *will*) that resolves itself in choice. Unity may be understood in terms of an appropriate hierarchy of elements, in which, for example, desire and will are subordinated to reason (Plato, Freud); or in terms of the purification of one or more elements, for example, the purification of reason by the elimination of false beliefs (Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius), or the purification of desire (Epictetus), or the elimination of mixed motives (Kant). Or unity can be understood in terms of the ecstatic convergence of all these elements in a single, triumphant, and definitive aim (Nietzsche). Lives are good, by this criterion, insofar as they achieve such unity. As a special sort of combination of the quality of consciousness (2), understanding (3), and self-command (4), this fifth criterion is not simply reducible to the conjunction of them.

6. *The exemplification of goodness-of-a-kind.* Here the definitive criterion is the excellence or perfection of a certain type of thing, for example, an individual human being, a human community, the natural order, a divine order, a tradition, or a narrative. A good life is defined as one that realizes (or contributes to) goodness-of-a-kind. Aristotelian accounts of excellence are examples. Such accounts may be unitary—for example, by stressing the perfection of a single element, such as reason, which is thought to be the essential defining characteristic of the species—or they may be (more) inclusive, stressing the perfection of one or more sets of diverse elements characteristic of members of the species.

7. *Meaningful opportunity.* Here the definitive criterion lies in the liberty (either negative or positive) and autonomy to choose and carry out projects that are valuable, valuable enough to warrant the claim that the mere potential to pursue projects gives value to one's whole life. Claims that autonomous human lives have a dignity that is immeasurable, incommensurable, infinite, beyond price—and that the loss of autonomy forecloses all possibility for a good life—embody this criterion. Note that this criterion is not reducible to a "sense" or "experience" of freedom or autonomy; it is not, that is, reducible to a version of the quality of consciousness (criterial good 2). Nor is it reducible to mere self-command (good 4). The happy slave or prisoner-unaware, who may be blissful and able to act, has lost the chance for a genuinely free and autonomous life. Moreover, what is at stake here is potential alone. The potential to choose and carry out valuable projects is sufficient to give life dignity and make it good, even if that potential is never actualized. This criterion is not a consequentialist one.

8. *Meaningful activity.* Here the definitive criterion lies in the effort to achieve valuable ends, that is, in the active pursuit of projects valuable enough to warrant the claim that their mere pursuit (regardless of success or potential for success) has made one's whole life valuable. We may think of Socrates, here, for whom doing philosophy was apparently both necessary and sufficient for the good life, and perhaps also of Camus's rebel, in perpetual, creative revolt against the absurdity of the human quest for meaning in an indifferent universe.

9. *Meaningful necessity.* Here the definitive criterion is found in being required for, or compellingly called to a role in, something apart from one's own life—something good enough to make carrying out that role (whatever the result) sufficient for a good life. Note again that this criterion is distinct from the attendant experience of happiness or exhilaration which sometimes comes from recognizing such necessity. It is also distinct (or at least it is meant to be distinct) from the value of the activity or the outcome.<sup>9</sup> Religious vocations, or immersion in politics, a profession, an organization, or a family can be goods of this sort. These goods are thought

<sup>9</sup> See Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

to be sufficient to give one's whole life meaning no matter how small the role one plays or how remote or ambiguous the consequences.<sup>10</sup>

10. *Self-love*. Here the definitive criterion lies in the self-esteem required to avoid self-destructive acts, the self-respect required to defend one's liberty and integrity, and the concern for one's own interests that gives shape to rational deliberation. Without self-love, no other goods in one's life can be sustained long enough, or realized completely enough, to make one's whole life good. Self-love is a distinct sort of widely instrumental good.

11. *Benevolence*. Here the definitive criterion lies in the direct concern or affection one person may have for the being and well-being of another. This concern or affection is measured not by the giver's state of consciousness or acts of will alone, and not by what the giver produces in the recipient, but by the congruence between the other's well-being and the giver's desire for it. This is held by some to be an intrinsic good, since people express it in self-sacrificial ways (implicitly valuing it for its own sake?). But of course, its instrumental connection to the vast array of goods that can only arise from stable, cooperative social relationships (from families to international organizations) gives us a warrant for regarding it as a widely instrumental good.

12. *Mutual love*. Here the definitive criterion is the reciprocal desire, affection, benevolence, empathy, and conviviality that might be thought to be the source of the most deeply rewarding states of consciousness we can have; the matrix in which we can achieve the most perfect harmony of reason, desire, and will; the characteristic through which we can best exemplify what is good of our kind, or the most meaningful kinds of opportunity and necessity; the source of the only sustainable form of self-love, and hence all of the goods for which it is necessary; or a necessary condition for the sort of self-sustaining cooperation that makes productive social life (and hence all good lives) possible. Thus, in addition to being an intrinsic good, it has a strong claim to being necessary.

13. *Sexuality*. Here the definitive criterion is the expression, in consciousness and conduct, of the sexual aspect of our human nature, in erotic love (mutual or not), sexual behavior, and reproduction. Erotic experience and sexual desire are intrinsic goods as states of consciousness, of course, and important forms of mutual love are erotically charged or otherwise sexual. Moreover, our sexuality may be necessarily linked to our self-concept, will, and self-love. But it seems plausible to hold that there is a species of intrinsic good, here, that is not reducible to one or the other of those other goods (states of consciousness, self-command, self-love, mutual love) or to a simple conjunction of them. Like the unity of reason, desire, and will, the intrinsic good of sexuality lies in its unique

<sup>10</sup> See Walt Harrington, "The Mystery of Goodness," *The Washington Post Magazine*, January 6, 1991. The article is about Bryan Stevenson, director of the Alabama Capital Representation Project.

fusion of compelling, sensuous activity (not necessarily acts of will) aimed at the satisfaction of egoistic, other-directed, specifically (though not necessarily overtly) sexual desires. We have reason to believe that sexuality suffuses, and contributes powerfully to the good of, a great area of our lives. Its connection to reproduction, and hence to the necessary material conditions of life, is a warrant for calling it a widely instrumental good.

14. *Achievement*. Here the definitive criterion lies in the results, rather than the antecedent elements, of action, in the product rather than the opportunity or necessity of the project, in the external outcome rather than the inner experience. The good life is thus one of productive activity, intentional or otherwise—good because, and to the extent that, its products are good. (Even a miserable wretch may have a good life in this sense.) It seems a safe empirical generalization to say that for most humans productive activity is an intrinsic good. Given the scarcity of resources, the perils of the natural environment, and the limitations of human nature, achievement must be on this list as an instrumental value as well.

15. *Rectitude*. Here the element that is definitive of a good life is morally right conduct. The good life is the morally correct one, the just one, the one that fulfills moral requirements. Moral requirements can be distinguished from the normative implications of the other criterial goods in a variety of familiar ways. For example, moral requirements are typically held to include (a) a universalization principle that bars purely egoistic pursuits and requires similar action in similar circumstances, and (b) either a value-optimization principle (under which the right is defined as the option that realizes the higher net balance of good) or a principle that makes the right independent of the good in some important way (such as by making it independent of consequences). Philosophers are divided about whether this is an intrinsic good or a widely instrumental one.

16. *Integrity*. Here the thing definitive of a good life is an intact, coherent identity as a particular kind of life—for example, noble or ignoble, courageous or cowardly, honorable or dishonorable. The contention is that in order to have a good life, one must first have a life. That life must be something identifiable, in terms of essential defining characteristics, as a life of a certain sort. Integrity, in this nonmoral sense, is a necessary condition for every sort of good life and may perhaps be sufficient for one.

17. *A life as an aesthetic object*. Here the thing definitive of a good life is the extent to which, considered as an object, the life has intrinsic aesthetic value. Is the life beautiful, sublime, or a work of art? This good, while often coupled with those of understanding (3), self-command (4), and integrity (16), is in principle distinct from them, since there is no necessary conceptual connection between a unified, coherent, intact, or exemplary<sup>11</sup> life and an aesthetically valuable one. Chaos can be beautiful; so can ruins.

<sup>11</sup> The trivial exception is the life that exemplifies an aesthetically valuable object.

Most of these criterial goods (perhaps all but the last) are intuitively plausible as partial criteria of the good life. Any attempt to select only one, to the exclusion or lexical subordination of all the others, will be very difficult to defend. In fact, standard unitary accounts of the good life rarely attempt to do that. Instead, they attempt to show that one or another of these criteria, when properly satisfied, will generate a life that necessarily satisfies (most of) the other criteria as well. Since attempts to show this inevitably involve some redescription and reorganization of the other criteria, it is useful to briefly survey the major ones.

#### IV. UNITARY ACCOUNTS OF THE GOOD LIFE

Suppose we catalog the most influential accounts of the good life under these headings: congruence, inner unity, human excellence, personal excellence or achievement, personal well-being or fulfillment, right conduct, autonomous activity, vocation, aesthetic value, and rationality.

*Congruence* theories measure a good life by the degree to which it conforms to, or fits into, or is attuned to a given external order. Injunctions to follow nature, or to do God's will, or to accept one's place in a given social order fall under this heading, and under criterial goods 6 (exemplification of goodness-of-a-kind) and 9 (meaningful necessity) described above. Stoicism is a leading example. But it is crucial to notice that the various Stoic and religious disciplines (detachment, resignation, humility) designed to achieve such congruence are also offered as routes to rectitude, personal happiness, human excellence, inner harmony, meaningful freedom and activity, and (occasionally) beauty and/or achievement. It is obvious that many modern readers reject all congruence accounts on the grounds that none of them can actually achieve all of this, or even very much of it. The connection between doctrines of congruence and the sort of indoctrination that produces prejudice, reinforces injustice, and perpetuates oppression is clear; clear too is the danger that conformity to an external order will suppress individual excellence. Thus, it is highly implausible to accept any ordering of priorities compatible with a unitary account of the good life based on congruence. In order to meet the obvious objections to a congruence theory, we need to have an independent criterion of rectitude to rule out conformity to an unjust social order, and we need to preserve autonomy in some sense—for example, by insisting that conformity be either voluntary and reversible, or hypothetically rational, or both. However, adding these conditions to congruence yields a pluralist account, not a unitary one.

Accounts based on *inner unity* measure a good life by its inner harmony, unity, integrity, or wholeness—particularly with respect to reason, passion, and will. Here good 5 (the harmonization of reason, desire, and will) has been given pride of place. Advocates of this view—for example, Plato, Butler, Nietzsche, and Freud—insist that it is also the route to satisfying other criteria. Thus, Plato makes inner unity's compatibility with

individual happiness, ideal communities, and human excellence central to his discussion; Butler is concerned to reconcile self-love and benevolence; Nietzsche puts inner unity forward as a measure of human excellence and aesthetic value; Freud connects it to personal happiness and the conditions for civilization. Again, however, it is fair to say that the monism is insupportable. A moral monster can have inner unity, and justice surely should not be subordinated to that sort of unity. A consciousness flickering just above the level of extinction can be unified, but surely we think a fuller version of human excellence is better than a near-vegetative one, even if some degree of unity has to be sacrificed to get it. The goods of mutual love, achievement, meaningful opportunity, meaningful necessity, and meaningful activity all support this conclusion. They cannot all plausibly be subordinated, all of the time, to inner unity. No account of the good life seems defensible if it is unitary in that sense. Or rather, if we insist that unity is sufficient for a good life, we must be prepared to conclude that some "good" lives are not good all-things-considered.

A unitary theory based on *human excellence* measures a good life by the degree to which it exemplifies, or realizes, generic human characteristics. This is a version of criterial good 6 (exemplification of goodness-of-a-kind). Aristotelian accounts of human flourishing fall under this heading. But some other accounts of self-realization belong here as well, whether grounded in metaphysics (for example, Idealism, dialectical materialism, existentialism), evolutionary biology, or developmental physiology and psychology; accounts that emphasize achievements measured against generic human capacities rather than personal potential also fall under this rubric. The fundamental problem with unitary accounts along these lines is that they are insupportable without independent guarantees that human excellence is compatible with inner unity, integrity, congruence, rectitude, and mutual love. After all, if our consciousness is by nature as chaotic as Freud thought, or as plastic as Skinner thought, then the perfection of it will be perfect chaos or perfect plasticity, not unity; if we are by nature more selfish than righteous, then the perfection of that nature will lead to injustice. Of course, it may be that the perfection of human nature *is* compatible with the other goods on the list. But the recognition that it *must* be so, if human excellence is to be the leading measure of a good life, is tantamount to the recognition that other goods cannot be subordinated to human excellence.

*Personal excellence or achievement* measures a good life by the extent to which it realizes one's personal potential, given one's particular circumstances and talents. The standard here is individual (rather than generic) human excellence, but the objections to using it as a unitary account are the same as those for the generic account.<sup>12</sup> The temptation to use it (as

<sup>12</sup>This will, perhaps, be evident enough from a brief outline of David Norton's case for a eudaimonistic account of ethics and the good life, in his *Personal Destinies* (Princeton: Prince-

opposed to a generic standard) may come in part from an egalitarian desire to have an account of the good life that makes it available, in principle, to everyone.

*Personal well-being or fulfillment* provides an account of the good life in terms of the degree to which (a) the cup of one's experience is filled with pleasure (or at least is free from pain), (b) one's needs and desires are satisfied (or at least not frustrated), and (c) the conditions under which one experiences the world are conducive to pleasure, satisfaction, and the absence of pain and frustration. Hedonism and Epicureanism belong here, as do various psychological theories of "adjustment" that look similar to Stoic, Buddhist, or Christian disciplines for the transformation, diminution, or elimination of desire, but stripped of their metaphysical doctrines. It is notorious that such doctrines, to be plausible at all as accounts of the good life, must not be compatible with a purely passive existence in which nothing is achieved, or with a contrived existence in which (as in a Nozickian experience machine)<sup>13</sup> fulfillment is achieved through illusion, or with a stunted existence in which one's generic human capacities are deliberately allowed to wither, or with a ruthless disregard for justice.

A much more robust version of this candidate for the good life is possible. It centers on the nature of positive personal experience and the material conditions necessary for such experience; it acknowledges diversity in the types of good experience; it recognizes that circumstances may make personal fulfillment or well-being (defined in terms of such experience) impossible, and that certain sorts of efforts to guarantee such experience are self-defeating. It then makes the case that (viewed from

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ton University Press, 1976). Norton understands the "daimon" in eudaimonism to refer to one's innate, individual "ideal possibility." This possibility is understood as having normative force. Thus, the basic imperatives are to know oneself (one's daimon) and to choose to approximate it, that is, to turn it, as completely as possible, from an ideal possibility into an actuality. The life one thus chooses to live will be dominated by the virtue of integrity, the pursuit of one's unique destiny. This defines the notion of moral necessity. But justice and benevolence are implicit in this moral necessity, since one will refuse to consume (or exclude others from) things that are not necessary for self-actualization, will take delight in others' achievements, and will be rewarded by their reciprocal justice and benevolence. Norton's account is pluralistic in two senses. First, each person's daimon is unique, and thus there are as many definitions of the good life as there are persons. Second, each person goes through a developmental process that has distinct stages (childhood, adolescence, maturity, and old age), correlated with incommensurably distinct phases of that unique daimon. But in my terms Norton's is a unitary account, since it unambiguously insists that working out one's personal destiny (that is, finding and taking the self-actualizing path from one's actuality to one's daimon or ideal possibility) is *the good* (or best) life for everyone.

<sup>13</sup> The allusion here is to a thought-experiment introduced by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45. The question is this: If our only ultimate concern about the quality of our lives is about the way our experience "feels from the inside," then if there were a machine that could (reliably) stimulate one's brain to produce any felt-experience imaginable, what objection could there be to defining the sort of experience one wants to have and then living one's whole life in the machine?

"inside" one's life, so to speak) personal well-being, broadly conceived, must be the ultimate measure of a good life.<sup>14</sup>

What these powerful descriptions of well-being lack, it seems to me, is something that comes easily when we adopt a whole-life frame of reference. From that standpoint it is not hard to see how figures like Sardanopolis, Lucrezia Borgia, Catherine the Great, or de Sade (without the difficulties they encountered) might have had lives characterized by a high level of personal well-being, and yet had lives which, as a whole, were so unjust, ugly, or pointless as to preclude our describing them as good. And from that standpoint it is not hard to see how Joan of Arc, Kierkegaard, Virginia Woolf, or Albert Schweitzer might have had lives so desolate as not to qualify as ones of personal well-being, and yet had lives which, as a whole, were so noble, profoundly creative, courageous, or self-sacrificial that we are compelled to describe them as good. If these judgments are right, as I believe, then personal well-being or fulfillment is not a plausible candidate for a unitary account of the good life.

*Right conduct* measures a good life by the extent of its conformity to moral requirements, where those requirements are defined under some special conception of morality.<sup>15</sup> Such a special conception might be defined, for example, in terms of universalizable, rationally justifiable rules of conduct directed by concern for the welfare of others. Alternatively, it might be defined in terms of a single, supreme principle held to be determinative for all conduct. Either way, right conduct is very often thought to be a constraint on conceptions of the good life, in the sense that pleasure, or congruence, or achievement will be required to stay

<sup>14</sup> See James Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Griffin lists five "prudential values" for well-being (pp. 67-68): accomplishment, the components of human existence or agency, understanding, enjoyment, and deep personal relations. He states that "being moral enters [this] list only in a limited way: only by being part of what it is to be at peace with one's neighbour and with oneself" (p. 70). In considering the necessity of moral rectitude for the good life, Griffin considers the claim that a certain sort of moral failure might make a good life impossible:

It is an extravagant claim, and . . . rests on a confusion. We need to split "the good life" into two. There is a sense in which moral failure, being a failure to act for the best reasons, is a falling off from an ideal – and not just in the trivial, circular sense that it is not the most moral or most rational life. It is not the finest life: the life one would hope to lead. But there is another conception of a good life, a life one would hope to lead. It is the sense that appears in judgments such as that it is better to be moral *and* alive than to be moral and thereby lose one's life, or that it is sometimes better to fail morally and stay alive than not to fail and thereby lose one's life. And it is this second conception that should be the base for judgments of well-being in moral theory. (p. 69)

It is my contention that while this is plausible in an account of well-being made from "inside" one's life, its very plausibility makes well-being defective as a candidate description of the good life.

<sup>15</sup> As opposed to one in which whatever one ought to do or be all-things-considered is morally required.

(mostly)<sup>16</sup> within the boundaries defined by moral duty and obligation. Some basic level of justice or right conduct may thus be thought to be a necessary condition of a good life. But how basic? How necessary? Does unjust conduct foreclose the possibility of a good life? Is it possible for people to foreclose the possibility of good lives for themselves by being fundamentally, dispositionally unjust, even though they restrain themselves from unjust conduct? The answers to these questions are by no means obvious. What does it mean, for example, to say that a murderer might have lost forever the possibility for a good life? It amounts to making claims such as the following:

People who have acted unjustly, and by so doing have unforgivably and irreparably destroyed the good life of another, have also necessarily destroyed or foreclosed the possibility of a good life for themselves.

One assumes that if wrongdoers repair the damage they do, and/or are properly forgiven, their injustice has been rectified, and no obstacle (from a criterion of right conduct) remains in the way of their having good lives. But suppose neither condition can be met because the wrong involved is unforgivable and the damage cannot possibly be repaired. The wrongdoers can never, in that respect, rectify the wrong they have done. Then one of the following must be true: (a) any unforgivable and irreparable wrong will stain one's entire life, such that no antecedent or subsequent conduct, and no other good ever realized in one's life, can make that life a good one; or (b) the stains such wrongs introduce are merely local ones, whose effects on one's prospects for a good life are minimized over time, or canceled by past and future goods;<sup>17</sup> or (c) only wrongs of a certain magnitude foreclose all possibility of a good life.<sup>18</sup> I suggest that (a) is wholly implausible. It entails that one's life as a whole can never be redeemed from the minor short- and long-term damage done by (for example) an unforgivable and irreparable act of petty cruelty. If that were true, we could never hope to find an example of a good life, unless we defined "unforgivable and irreparable" in such a way as to collapse this category into either (b) or (c). But that would be no help, because both (b) and (c) entail that rectitude is not a necessary condition for a good life; both entail that, under certain conditions, a good life is possible without recti-

<sup>16</sup> I say "mostly" because it is usually conceded that injustice is an inescapable part of the human condition, that all of us are to some degree culpable, and yet that even fairly extensive, persistent culpability is not a bar to having a good life.

<sup>17</sup> An issue raised pointedly in Woody Allen's 1990 film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.

<sup>18</sup> For example, one might say that the stain on the wrongdoer's life is proportional to the harm to the victim's life, so that to destroy the victim's good life is to destroy one's own, to destroy ten years of it is to destroy ten years of one's own, etc.

tude. This generates an unpalatable story, but I do not readily see how that can be avoided.

Leaving aside the question of whether right conduct is a necessity of the good life, it remains to be seen whether such conduct is ever *sufficient* to make a life a good one. The usual objection here is that the quality of consciousness, self-love, mutual love, liberty, and various nonmoral forms of excellence will often get unjustifiably damaged in a life dominated by rectitude. Whatever we think about the sufficiency of rectitude in lives bereft of these other important goods, surely their absence is cause for great regret. Albert Schweitzer reportedly said that by no stretch of the imagination could he be called a happy man. Did he nonetheless have a good life? Perhaps. Could we imagine a better life for him, without altering his rectitude, by imagining that his reason, desire, and will had been more unified? Or that he had had more meaningful opportunity, or mutual love, or pleasure in his life? Certainly. Thus, it seems that even if rectitude is necessary and sufficient for a good life it is only *minimally* sufficient, never desirable by itself, and only tolerable alone when all other forms of the good life are impossible. It may be, as I shall urge below, that while nothing is *more* important to the good life than rectitude, there are other things which are *as* important. If that is so, we will have to give up the effort to make our account a unitary one.

*Autonomous activity* measures a good life by the extent of one's ability to direct one's own affairs, to construct and live out one's own conception of a good life. The idea here, drawn from good 4 (self-command), is that the essence of a good life lies in the dignity, or nobility, that comes from being the author of one's own story, the creator of one's own good life. Autonomous activity requires opportunity or liberty, both negative and positive, and agency: the ability to conceive of goals, to deliberate about their worth and about means to them, and to choose to pursue them. Obviously, there are antecedent necessary conditions for the exercise of autonomy; such conditions include life itself, the requisite cognitive, conative, and physical abilities, the availability of resources, and the cooperation of others. But without autonomy life is mere existence; conduct is mere reflex or conditioned response; knowledge, ability, and resources are mere inputs; and cooperative social life is akin to what is found among the social insects. The nature and extent of such autonomy in human lives is disputed, but the notion that it is central to a good life is now very generally held.

It is tempting to think that autonomy, so conceived, bears roughly the same relation to a good life as does right conduct: that it is a necessary condition for it, and perhaps just barely sufficient in extreme circumstances. It seems impossible to argue for anything stronger, since autonomous agents may be desperately unfulfilled and unhappy, have lives full of inner turmoil, be decidedly mediocre, be bereft of loving relationships, act with great cruelty and injustice, and achieve virtually nothing

good. The claim that autonomy is sufficient to make all of that into a good life is just barely credible. It is credible only for circumstances so reduced (a state of nature, solitary confinement) that nothing more is possible. At most autonomy is like right conduct, that is, necessary and occasionally, under extreme circumstances, sufficient. But if that is true of both, neither can be a *unitary* account of the good life; if we are committed to such an account, we must choose one or the other. And if we suppose that autonomy is a *precondition* for morally right conduct, then it appears that we must choose autonomy.

There is, however, some reason to doubt that liberty (and hence autonomy) is a necessary condition of a good life.<sup>19</sup> Consider the following line of argument about the value of liberty, which begins with a distinction between negative and positive sorts. Negative liberty is the absence of impediments to action.<sup>20</sup> Positive liberty is the presence of the means necessary for effective choice and action. Conceived in this way, negative liberty is not a "thing," but rather the absence of something. It is like the hole in a doughnut; take away the doughnut and it is hard to see the hole at all, let alone regard it as valuable; take away the impediments to action, and negative liberty, as an "object," vanishes with them. It may be wise, then, to organize a discussion of the value of negative liberty by beginning with *things*, rather than the spaces they leave, by looking at the impediments rather than at the elbowroom those impediments define.

When we do that, it is clear that among impediments, as among doughnuts, some are good and some are bad, from the agent's point of view. The friction caused by an obstacle is sometimes a necessary condition for doing what we want to do, and, when it is, we see the obstacle as valuable. In fact, valuable impediments provide us with another sort of liberty: positive or material liberty. If the impediment is a good one, the corresponding negative liberty—or absence of the impediment—is derivatively bad. We should be able to learn all we need to know about the derivative values of derivative things (such as holes and elbowroom) by immediate inference from the things that define them.

Positive liberty, by contrast, is not the absence of something but rather the presence of it: the presence, indeed the possession, of the means necessary for action. It is the "stuff" we require in order to act in the space provided by negative liberty. The presence of social and political institu-

<sup>19</sup> The remainder of this section on autonomous activity is adapted from an unpublished conference comment presented in response to a paper by William Ruddick and James Rachels, "Lives and Liberty." Their revised version was published in *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy*, ed. John Christman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 221–33.

<sup>20</sup> Negative liberty should not be equated with the absence of coercion or active interference. Liberty can be limited by passive, even accidental impediments, as well as by active, intentional, or coercive ones. Negative political liberty should be defined quite generally as the absence of impediments imposed or legitimated by political institutions. Other sorts of negative liberty—social, interpersonal, physical—may be defined correspondingly.

tions gives us the means—the liberty—to lead lives that we could not otherwise have. So do friends, courage, and physical strength. Individualist political theory tends to resist labeling such things as “liberty.” But the description of economic resources, education, and many other things as “liberating” is surely a warrant for calling them liberties, and it is unassailable that negative liberty alone is of very little importance unless one can or might be able to use it. For using it, some resources (psychological and physical) are necessary, and we may plausibly speak of them as constituting our positive or material liberty.

The question, then, is whether liberty of either sort is a necessary condition for a good life. Since we know that various criterial goods that might make a life a good one are possible without genuine liberty (one can be happy and feel free in a room one does not know to be a locked cell), and since advocates of autonomy connect it to the very nature of human action itself, perhaps the question is whether, without liberty of some sort, we can have anything describable as a *life* at all, good or bad, as opposed to physical existence.<sup>21</sup> Why not? Suppose my name is Calvin, and suppose that my creator has predestined every detail of my life, every nuance of my thought and action, including the fact that through theological study I have now discovered that my life is predetermined. Does this mean that I have not had a (good) life to this point, or that I cannot continue to have one? I have no genuine liberty at all to do anything other than what God has planned for me. I am, in effect, a total slave to God. But I certainly *think* I have a life. I remember, and feel, and feel joy, anticipation, fear, responsibility, pride, guilt, shame, and obligation. I fear judgment. I do not know how things will turn out for me, but I suspect I am one of the elect and am glad for that. In any case, I know that whatever happens, it will be exactly as God has planned. In the meantime, I will live the life that I have been given. Given God’s will, nothing else could have happened. I was never at liberty to do other than I did in fact do. I had a life without liberty. But I rejoice in it, and affirm it anew every day.

End of story. Now what is wrong with it? It surely does not suggest that we cannot have (good) lives without liberty. Negative liberty, in general terms, is the space left to us by the political, social, personal, and metaphysical impediments that surround us; positive liberty is the stuff that enables us to act in that space. What Calvin imagines is that the space and stuff available to him are enough for exactly one life: the one God has given him to live, without liberty. If so, then liberty is not a necessary condition for having a good life.

*Vocation* measures a good life by the extent to which one is drawn into a necessary role in something good enough so that playing one’s part in

<sup>21</sup> See Ruddick and Rachels, “Lives and Liberty,” for a developed analysis of this distinction.

it promises to yield a better life than one could reasonably hope to construct for oneself. The plausibility of this vision of a good life rests on showing that participation in the role to which one is drawn or called is either morally right, licit, or sufficiently good to justify participation and to warrant the loss of autonomy involved in surrendering to it. How can this be shown?

We may begin with the observation that autonomy often undermines inner harmony—the unity of reason, desire, and will described under criterial good 5. Autonomy inevitably separates the autonomous subject from all its objects—other people, projects, achievements, and even most states of consciousness (all but one of which—self-consciousness—are experienced as things separable from the self). And autonomy systematically undermines the perceived value of opportunity, activity, and achievement by insisting that their worth as elements of a good life is ultimately subjective in the sense that it is legislated by the self. Some defenders of autonomy (for example, Kant) have in effect responded to such charges by arguing that the legislative activity of the autonomous self is generic, that is, it follows a path identical to that followed by every other autonomous agent. Autonomous action can thus be seen as a form of participation in something greater than oneself, and thus may itself be a kind of vocation. Other defenders of autonomy may choose to attack the very idea of vocation as defined here, for example, by insisting on the necessity of autonomy as the source of human dignity, moral rectitude, human excellence, and self-love. Insofar as vocations undermine autonomy, then, they undermine something necessary for a good life. Defenders of vocation may reply either by denying the possibility of genuine autonomy (for example, by arguing for a strong notion of the social self), or by denying that autonomy is damaged by living out a vocation.<sup>22</sup> This last reply seems sufficient to save a place for vocation in a pluralist account of the good life. Vocations are, after all, compatible with autonomy in the sense that they can in principle be autonomously chosen, and many pursuits involve the cultivation of traits that systematically foreclose whole regions of autonomous choice by changing one's dispositions, or traits of character. (Becoming a thoroughly honorable person, for example, means that many options faced by someone with a more fluid character simply will not present themselves as live options in deliberation.) Unless we are prepared to say that all such foreclosures are incompatible with the level of autonomy required for a good life, we will have to acknowledge the legitimacy of vocations into which people are willingly drawn and within which they are changed in such a way that the vocation becomes integral to their lives. It is evident from the history of modern philosophy that the attempt to remove the possibility or centrality of this sort of vocation to

<sup>22</sup> Or, of course, by reiterating the charges against, or against the necessity of, autonomy.

the good life leads directly to a struggle with the problems of nihilism, despair, and anomie that can only be solved (as Camus solved them)<sup>23</sup> by showing that creative activity is an acceptable substitute for a vocation.

*Aesthetic value* measures a good life, considered as an object, by the extent to which it has some superordinate aesthetic value. I say "superordinate" here to emphasize the fact (which could as well be said of any other attempt at a unitary account) that the sort of aesthetic value at issue is only the sort that could plausibly dominate moral rectitude, inner harmony, and all the other criterial goods, that is, the sort that might by itself be sufficient for a good life. It is fairly clear that making one's life a work of art or achieving some sort of narrative unity in one's life will not suffice unless one aims at a rather exalted form of art. A soap opera has narrative unity; there are forms of art barely discernible as works, or as art; there are works of art meant to be self-negating, repellent, or disgusting. A life exhibiting such qualities may be a good one, in part because it has such aesthetic value, but I have not been able to find a way of describing such qualities as either necessary or sufficient for a good life. As for more exalted forms of art, three objections come to mind. First, they are artifacts in the most thoroughgoing sense imaginable. A whole life that exhibited such a degree of artifice would surely seem objectionably contrived. Second, the artificiality aside, it is not clear at all that we can justify (all-things-considered) a *recommendation* that life be lived so as to make it high art. (Shall we say, "Go make a life like Iago's" or Desdemona's? or Medea's?) It seems very odd for a theory of the good life to recommend against making one's life good, and, of course, if it sorts aesthetically good lives by some other criterion (say the quality of consciousness, or rectitude) and recommends only those that meet both criteria, it is no longer a unitary account. Finally, even if we were to take the bit in our teeth and recommend making life an exalted work of art, to whom could we reasonably give such advice? Who is capable of carrying it out? And what will we say of the failures?<sup>24</sup> In short, life as a work of art seems a nonstarter.

What about beauty, and sublimity?<sup>25</sup> Is a beautiful life necessarily a good one? The temptation to say so is dependent, it seems to me, on the claim that a beautiful life necessarily realizes many of the goods described in the other criteria: inner unity and integrity, excellence of a kind, mean-

<sup>23</sup> See esp. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (1951; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1956).

<sup>24</sup> An artist once remarked, overhearing a spectator's outrage at a silly piece in the Hirshhorn Museum, that at this museum of modern art, people are often angered by the failures they see, but that at the Air and Space Museum they find the failed flying machines hilarious.

<sup>25</sup> Nobility, which might also be thought of in aesthetic terms, is probably best treated under the exemplification of goodness-of-a-kind. Integrity, which can also be brought under the heading of aesthetic value in various ways, is probably better regarded as an altogether separate candidate. In my view, it fails as a unitary account for reasons parallel to the ones I note for beauty and sublimity.

ingful activity, meaningful necessity, or (sometimes) an exalted state of consciousness and/or moral rectitude. Suppose, as a rough approximation, we give something like the following analysis. To say that a life is *beautiful* is to say (a) that perception or contemplation of it is both pleasant and attractive, that is, that to experience a life as beautiful is to have certain affective responses to one's *cognition* of it; and (b) that the nature of the life as a whole — as an object — is the cause of our pleasure in it and attraction to it; and, more particularly, (c) that the cause of our pleasure and attraction lies in the fact that the life embodies a combination of aesthetic properties such as unity, completeness, fullness, magnitude, narrative form, originality, uniqueness, balance, simplicity, purity, variability, contrasts (internal and against a ground), fittingness, proportion, profundity, memorability, immediacy, transcendence, excellence of execution, difficulty of execution, and fragility. Then suppose a sublime life is defined as one that has a terrible or dangerous or awesome beauty.

The question, then, is whether any sort of beauty or sublimity definable in these ways (or plausible alternatives) can credibly be either necessary or sufficient for a good life. If it is true that rectitude and perhaps autonomy are necessary conditions, then beauty or sublimity obviously cannot be sufficient. If (as seems highly probable) any combination of other criteria, absent aesthetic ones, is sufficient for a good life, then beauty or sublimity is not necessary either. (Think of trying to defend the thesis that an ugly little life, characterized by right conduct, personal achievement, personal fulfillment, meaningful opportunity, meaningful action, and meaningful necessity, is not a good one. Rule out the transparently *ad hoc* attempt to argue that no such life could be ugly or little.) In short, it seems plausible to go only this far: that beauty or sublimity can be fundamental and sufficient for a good life when (enough) other goods are realized through it. That modest result, however, falls far short of the claim that one could plausibly advance a unitary account of the good life in terms of such aesthetic values. The same is true of integrity.

A unitary account based on *rationality* measures a good life by the extent to which one's plans and choices are the product of rational deliberation. The idea here is not to unify reason and other elements of action in order to achieve inner harmony, nor is it to require only that a life in principle be rationally justifiable (though perhaps lived out impulsively, or passionately, or through habit). Rather, the idea is to make rational deliberation a necessary and sufficient condition for a good life, and to organize a unitary account in terms of it.

Rawls has given such an account.<sup>26</sup> For him, a "person" is an individual life lived according to a plan. If the plan is rational, and if one has drawn up such a plan under favorable circumstances and believes oneself to be "in the way of realizing it" with good prospects of success, then

<sup>26</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, ch. 7.

one is happy.<sup>27</sup> A plan is rational if and only if it meets the conditions for rational choice and would be chosen under conditions of full deliberative rationality. The principles of rational choice are those of finding effective means, choosing the more over the less inclusive good, and choosing the goods with greater over lesser likelihood of realization.<sup>28</sup> The conditions of full deliberative rationality are full information, careful consideration under favorable circumstances, awareness of the genesis of wants and desires, and the application of rational choice principles with particular attention to (a) a whole-life frame of reference, (b) no discounting for the future, (c) the advantages of rising expectations throughout life, (d) the consequences of the "Aristotelian" principle that "other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities . . . and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity," and (e) a concern for continuity, unity, and a dominant theme in one's life.<sup>29</sup> Summarizing, Rawls says:

The guiding principle [is] that a rational individual is always to act so that he need never blame himself no matter how his plans finally work out. Viewing himself as one continuing being over time, he can say that at each moment of his life he has done what the balance of reason required, or at least permitted. Therefore any risks he assumes must be worthwhile, so that should the worst happen that he had any reason to foresee, he can still affirm that what he did was above criticism.<sup>30</sup>

Note that rationality is proposed solely for its instrumental value in producing a whole life that is both just<sup>31</sup> and as full of goods (other than rationality) as it can be. Unless rationality yields these things it is not defensible as a unitary account. Whether rationality of the sort described yields moral rectitude is a much disputed point. Suppose it does, and that it yields *only* rectitude, not pleasure, or inner unity, or achievement, or something else. Then if rectitude is sufficient for a good life, rationality will be. But the sufficiency of rectitude is questionable. Suppose, then, that in addition to rectitude, rationality yields important goods described in the list of criteria: unity, for example, and peace of mind, a variety of pleasures and achievements, excellence. Then it seems that the plausibility of this unitary vision of the good life rests on the extent to which we can be confident that the persistent, thorough deliberation rationality re-

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 411-16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 416-33. Quoted material is from p. 426.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>31</sup> Rawls believes, of course, that rationality will give *the right* priority over *the good*, and presumably yield a life-plan that is *just* as well as *good*. This implies that for any account of the good life based on this notion of rationality, right conduct will be a necessary component.

quires will not be self-defeating, that is, will not defeat the pursuit of rationally desirable goods that are necessary for a good life. This is comparable to the question of whether living on act-utilitarian principles will necessarily force one to cultivate traits of character (habits of thought and conduct, dispositions) that gradually diminish the extent to which one is able to apply the utilitarian principle, even at the most abstract level.

I suggest that rationality is self-defeating in this sense. After all, it recommends something like Rawls's full deliberative rationality *as a way of life*.<sup>32</sup> I submit that, under all but the most reduced circumstances, it is rational to cultivate dispositions regarding mutual love, risk, personal achievement, integrity, and perhaps aesthetic values and unity, which will grow, become self-reinforcing, and gradually erode the extent of the areas of life in which one is prepared to deliberate seriously (that is, as between live alternatives) and the extent to which one is willing to count a life free of rational regret sufficient for a good life. I imagine, in other words, that in a very wide range of life-circumstances it will be rational for us to cultivate deeply internalized commitments (to family, friends, institutions) which thereafter will typically block the pursuit of full deliberative rationality in important areas of our lives. Once we have acquired such commitments, we will no longer be able to pursue full deliberative rationality as a comprehensive way of life. Rather, we will find ourselves unwilling or unable to deliberate about some matters that, considered objectively, would be genuinely open questions. We will, for example, find ourselves saying, with Bernard Williams, that when we have thought about why we should save our families from death rather than save strangers in similar peril we have had one thought too many.<sup>33</sup>

#### V. THE BEST LIFE

It might be objected that there is virtually nothing to be learned, at this late date, from a recital of the various ways in which a life may be said to be a good one. Philosophers have always acknowledged plural possibilities for good lives. What has concerned them is finding the best one from among those possibilities—the one sort of life that, given the requisite abilities and favorable circumstances, we ought to strive for, all-things-considered. That is the only unitary account of these matters worth having, and indeed the only one that philosophers who have considered

<sup>32</sup> If all it means to adopt rationality as an account of the good life is that a good life must be hypothetically justifiable in terms of full deliberative rationality, then the inquiry into the nature of such a life is equivalent to philosophical inquiry (as I understand it) into the nature of the good life.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 215. Reprinted in Williams, *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

them deeply have tried to get. Nothing in what has been said so far precludes or even casts doubt on the possibility of getting a unitary account of the best life. My reply to this is a flat denial. At this late date, what a recital of the range of possibilities for a good life does above all else is to remind us of how preposterous it is to suppose that there is only one best sort of life. Each of the candidates for a good life has its own better and best versions, defined in large part by how completely other important goods are realized in it. When the candidates are defined so as to look their best, the contention that a life of personal fulfillment is either inferior or superior to a life of human excellence, or achievement, or rationality at a comparable level is barely worth considering. Consider how such forms of life can be compared:

1. They can be ranked according to achievability and likelihood of success on their own terms, but it is obvious that that is a function of the circumstances in which they are pursued. The best, then, means merely the best under the circumstances. It does not seem plausible to suppose that only one form of life would turn out to have the "most likely to succeed" rating for all individuals under conditions defined broadly enough to cover most human lives.

2. Forms of life can be ranked according to sustainability and self-sufficiency, but that too is a function of circumstance. Every *best* version of a form of good life is vulnerable to disastrous misfortunes. (The sort of invulnerability recommended by Epictetus is arguably sufficient for a minimally good life, but hardly a plausible candidate for the best life possible for a stoic.)

3. Forms of life can be ranked according to necessity, that is, according to their compatibility with all the things necessary for a good life, and their ability to guarantee those necessities. If it turned out that only one form of good life were genuinely compatible with all the necessary goods, then the best version of that form would necessarily be the best life. But I take it that the discussion of criterial goods and candidate definitions of the good life implies that all of the influential candidates are fully compatible with the necessities, at least in the sense that each defines a kind of life that is both good and achievable, in a fairly wide range of circumstances. As for the ability of each candidate to guarantee the necessary goods, that is a question of achievability and likelihood of success, which is, as already noted, a function of circumstance.

4. Forms of life can be ranked in terms of preference, that is, in terms of which candidate is preferred by all or most suitably situated agents. The very persistence of the candidates described above, each apparently ranked by many thoughtful people as the best form of life, is evidence that this procedure will not yield a unitary result. Of course, the conditions of choice could be rigged to force one candidate to the top. If ancient Athenian philosophers—the ones past forty, perhaps, with money and slaves—were the only voters, that would narrow the range considerably.

But that is not a worthwhile exercise. Turning the choice over to a Millian panel of experts<sup>34</sup> is not likely to narrow the field. (Certainly Mill's liberalism is premised on the conviction that it will not.) Nor will it help to turn the choice over to hypothetical rational agents, unless they are defined so schematically as to render the result uninteresting. (*If I were not a particular person, in a particular time and place . . . then . . . ?*)

5. Forms of life can be ranked according to inclusiveness, that is, in terms of the quantity and quality of goods of diverse sorts that they can coexist with, make possible, create, or sustain. The diversity of criterial goods and the way in which most of them show up (in one guise or another) in all candidate descriptions of the good life suggests that the best life will be replete with diverse goods. It will be one in which all the necessities, and as many as possible of the other criteria, are as fully realized as possible. If it turns out that one of the candidates defines the sort of life that is the most inclusive in this way, it will be the best (in one important sense of "best"). Presumably, this idea could be tested by asking of each candidate in turn: (a) whether it is compatible with each of the criterial goods, considered separately, even though it may not be compatible with all at once; and (b) whether, given favorable conditions and a dominant role in defining a life, it will typically generate all the necessary goods and a more robust set of goods overall than any other candidate.

Given the length of the lists involved and the technical difficulties of the hypothetical comparisons to be made, there is no hope of carrying out this analytical task in a mere essay. And I am not aware of any more sustained attempt to do it, or something like it. It appears to me that inclusive accounts of the good life typically proceed by picking just one candidate definition and showing that, under favorable conditions, a life lived in accord with it will be inclusive enough to fend off the obvious objections from advocates of other candidates. But we now have developed philosophical accounts of this sort for rationality, human excellence, right conduct, congruence, unity, and personal fulfillment. Taken together, these accounts constitute an argument for pluralism, and that is a result I am happy to let stand.

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<sup>34</sup>If indeed one could be convened. It is clear enough that people can have genuine "inside" experience of a succession of diverse ways of life. But it is not clear whether they can hold them all in mind in such a way that their preferences would be "expert."