

# How Theories of Well-Being Can Help Us Help

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## ABSTRACT

Some theories of well-being in philosophy and in psychology define people's well-being in psychological terms. According to these theories, living well is getting what you want, feeling satisfied, experiencing pleasure, or the like. Other theories take well-being to be something that is not defined by our psychology; for example, they define well-being in terms of objective values or the perfection of our human nature. These two approaches present us with a trade-off: The more we define well-being in terms of people's psychology, the less ideal it seems and the less it looks like something of real value that could be an important aim of human life. On the other hand, the more we define well-being in terms of objective features of the world that do not have to do with people's psychological states, the less it looks like something that each of us has a reason to promote. In this paper I argue that we can take a middle path between these two approaches if we hold that well-being is an ideal but an ideal that is rooted in our psychology. The middle path that I propose is one that puts what people value at the center of the theory of well-being. In the second half of the paper I consider how the value-based theory I describe should be applied to real life situations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Well-being is, by definition, what is good for you. If you achieve well-being in your life, you may not have lived a morally perfect life and your life may not have

made any great contribution to art, world peace or progress, but you will have lived a life that is good for you. Even though a good life in this sense is not the same as a perfect life (whatever that might be), well-being is still an ideal. It is something we strive for and we certainly do not all achieve it. Our well-being may be diminished by health problems, bad financial luck, the death of a loved one, poor planning, or many other factors. Even if we are lucky and things go well for us, the ideal of a good life serves as a goal for our aspirations about how things might go even better.<sup>1</sup>

There are a variety of different theories of well-being in philosophy and in psychology that take well-being to be an ideal to different degrees. Some theories define well-being in terms of people's psychology to a much greater degree than others. Theories that define well-being in terms of our psychology directly keep the ideal down to earth. Other theories define well-being in terms of objective values or the perfection of our human nature and these theories let the ideal move farther away from people's actual psychological perspective. These two approaches present us with a trade-off: The more we define well-being in terms of people's subjective psychological states, the less ideal it seems and the less it looks like something of value that could be an important aim of human life. On the other hand, the more we define a person's well-being in terms of objective features of the world that do not have to do with his or her psychological states, the less it looks like something with which a person should obviously be concerned or something he or she has a reason to promote.

What I want to argue in this paper is that we can take a middle path between these two approaches if we say that well-being is an ideal—something it makes sense to say is valuable—but an ideal that is anchored in our psychology. Other theories have taken this path. Full information theory, for instance, defines well-being in terms of idealized psychological states, namely the desires that we would have if we were fully informed. I believe such theories are on the right track, but I also think that existing theories of this kind can be improved upon. In this paper I propose a version of these idealized subjective theories that I hope shares their virtues and avoids their shortcomings.

Idealized subjective theories in general have the problem that we do not have ideal psychologies to work with, which means that there are special difficulties for

1. At least by my definition of well-being. There is some controversy about how this and related concepts should be used, but these controversies need not concern us here. The good for a person is what I mean to be talking about and the particular word used to refer to it is not of great importance.

applying such theories of well-being. If we don't have access to what our psychological states would be like *ideally*, how do we help promote well-being defined in terms of such states? I answer this question by articulating a different way that a theory of well-being can be helpful. Instead of providing us with a detailed picture of all the elements of an ideally good life, I argue, a theory of well-being can give us practical guidance about how to change a person's life so that it improves. In other words, a theory of well-being can fulfill its practical function by instructing us about the process of improving people's lives rather than by giving us a sharp picture of the ultimate goal.

So, this paper has two aims: first, to describe a theory of well-being that strikes the right balance between real and ideal, and second, to show how this theory can be applied to the practical matter of helping improve people's well-being. In the first section of the paper I will explain in a little more detail the background that I've gone over quickly in this introduction. In section two, I will outline the theory I favor: the value fulfillment theory of well-being. In section three I discuss how the theory can be applied.

### REAL OR IDEAL?

Some theories define well-being in terms of our actual psychological states. Many psychologists, for example, think that well-being consists in life satisfaction and positive affect balance (roughly, more pleasant feelings than painful ones) (Diener 1984; Diener 2006). Some philosophers agree that well-being should be defined in terms of mental states like pleasure and pain. According to hedonism about well-being, the good life for a person is a life that has the most pleasure and the least pain (Crisp 2006; Feldman 2004). Others (many philosophers and economists) think that desires or preferences are the right psychological state to focus on. According to the desire satisfaction theory of well-being, the good life for a person consists in getting the most of what she ultimately wants over the course of her lifetime (Heathwood 2006; Heathwood 2005).

All of these theories have something going for them and it is not the purpose of this paper to show that these theories are wrong. What I want to point out is that these theories make well-being depend very heavily on our individual psychologies. What we happen to take pleasure in, to be satisfied by, or to want fundamentally determines what is good for us. It's not that these theories don't give us any ideal

to which to aspire at all, but rather that the ideals these theories posit are defined in terms of each person's actual psychology. For instance, the ideally good life according to desire satisfaction theory is not the life that many people actually achieve (few of us are able to get all the things that we want), but it is an ideal that is fixed by what we really do want.

Though these theories do give us something of an ideal, many will find these ideals wanting. Well-being is supposed to be one of the main goals of human life, that at which we aim in deliberation and planning when we think about how to live our lives. Could the mere satisfaction of our desires play such a role? Think about someone whose desires seem ill suited to living a good life, for example, someone who desires nothing but money and power, or a person with anorexia nervosa who desire to be thin above all else. We might think that a theory of well-being ought to allow us to question whether satisfying these desires really is good for a person in any way, but actual desire satisfaction theory does not allow this.<sup>2</sup> Or think about the well-being of children. People tend to think that part of what it is to raise children well is to instill the right desires in them so that they want to be productive, decent people. If well-being is just desire satisfaction, it is unclear where these standards for the "right desires" will come from.

Other theories of well-being allow the ideally good life for a person to move farther away from her psychology. According to eudaimonism, for instance, the good life for a person is the one in which she fulfills her human nature, where what counts as a person's nature has much to do with what is normal for members of the human species not with what this particular person happens to like (Foot 2001). Objective list theories of well-being say that a good life for a person is one in which she achieves certain objective goods such as friendship, knowledge and pleasure (Arneson 1999; Finnis 1980). Such theories make well-being an ideal that could be far removed from what a person actually thinks about what is good for her. If she is different from other human beings, or doesn't care about certain objective values, for example, the way that the theory defines well-being for her might not be something she has any real interest in pursuing.

We can now see more clearly the trade-off that I mentioned in the introduction. Theories that make well-being a function of our actual psychology do not

2. Actual desire theory does allow some room for criticizing defective desires, for instance, on the grounds that satisfying one will cause one to have less overall desire satisfaction in the long term. See Heathwood (2005).

explain why well-being is a valuable goal of human life. Theories that idealize well-being away from our actual psychology do not explain why well-being should be *our* goal.

## THE VALUE FULFILLMENT THEORY OF WELL-BEING

There are surely many ways of resolving this problem. To argue that one way is better than any other possible way is far beyond the scope of a single paper. Instead, I will take an approach that has seemed promising to many and put a new spin on it that makes it an even more compelling solution. In doing so, my starting assumption is that a theory of well-being must explain why well-being is a valuable ideal and also why it is a valuable ideal for each of us.

The promising approach I have in mind defines well-being in terms of a person's *ideal* psychology: for example, theories according to which well-being consists in getting what you would desire if you were fully informed and rational, or what your fully informed self would want you to want, or what you take to be a satisfying life insofar as your assessment is fully authentic (Railton 1986; Griffin 1986; Brandt 1979; Sumner 1996). Such theories promise to explain how well-being is specially related to individual subjects, because they appeal to an individual's desires or satisfactions. They promise to explain how well-being is something valuable, because they do not take our desires and satisfactions at face value, but rather as these desires and satisfactions might be improved in accordance with norms of improvement (such as rationality or authenticity).

It seems to me that the promise of these idealized subjective theories (as I called them in the introduction) has not been fully appreciated. One reason for this is the serious objections to full information as a norm of improvement. Philosophers have argued that the ideal is at best alienating and at worst incoherent (Rosati 1995; Velleman 1988; Tiberius 1997). Another reason has to do with the psychological states that have been at the center of these theories; critics have argued strenuously against the relevance of desire and life satisfaction to well-being (Richard Kraut 1994; Haybron 2011). The theory I propose is an idealized subjective theory that takes values (rather than desires or satisfactions) as the key psychological state, and a model of a value full life (rather than an informed or authentic agent) as its ideal. In the remainder of this

section I will explain the theory in more detail, in the hope that a good description of it will reveal its advantages.<sup>3</sup>

Let's think first about which psychological states a theory of well-being should concern itself with? Preferences? Pleasures? Life satisfaction? I believe that the aspect of our psychology it makes most sense to attend to in our theories of well-being is our *values*. This is because values are what people themselves take to be relevant to how their lives are going; our values are the goals we plan around and use to assess how well we're doing in life. For this reason, a theory of well-being that focuses on what people value is well suited to explain why well-being is something that people have a particular reason to care about. Moreover, values are held to standards in ways that desires or pleasures are not; it makes sense to talk about what it is appropriate to value and we tend to think that we should have reasons for valuing what we value. This gives values a leg up when it comes to well-being, because it allows them to make sense of how we can go wrong in pursuing our well-being. Accounting for how we could go wrong or make mistakes about what is good for us is needed to make sense of well-being as a normative notion.<sup>4</sup>

To value something is, in part, to be motivated with respect to it; desires and values are similar in this respect. But values have a special status in our planning and evaluation, they have greater stability than mere preferences and they are emotionally entrenched in ways that desires might not be. For example, a person who values being a parent will be disposed to make plans that include spending time with her child, to feel joyful when she spends time with her child, disappointed when she misses her child's ballet recital, and so on. She will also be inclined to take into account how well she is doing as a parent when she thinks about how well her life is going and how she could improve. In short, then, values are what we value, and to value is to have a coordinated pattern of emotions and motivations toward something that you take to be relevant to how your life goes. Not all values are fully realized—sometimes our motivations to act, our emotions and our judgments are out of sync with each other—but values in their most complete sense include all these elements. Values, as I intend them, then, are relative to subjects; different people may value different things. That

3. I defend a close relative of this view in more detail in Tiberius 2008.

4. This is an important topic in its own right and more needs to be said about how the value fulfillment theory makes sense of the possibility of error. I will say a little more about this shortly, but my main focus in this paper is on how the theory can be used for guidance.

said, there are many shared values, especially when it comes to relatively basic values: almost everyone values health, happiness, friendship, family and meaningful work.<sup>5</sup>

Now that we know what values are we can see how they fit into what I call the value fulfillment theory of well-being or VFT. According to VFT, a person's life goes well to the extent that she pursues and fulfills or realizes things that she values where those values are emotionally suitable, mutually realizable and seen by the person to make her life go well.<sup>6</sup> The best life for a person is the one in which she gets the most value fulfillment she can, given her personality and environment, and what is good for you now is to do what contributes to some specification of the best, "value full" life. In short, we live well when we realize what matters to us over time. This includes achieving certain states of affairs (such as career goals) and also maintaining the positive affective orientation that comprises valuing something. If your (suitable and realizable) values include your own enjoyment, relationships with family and friends, accomplishing something in your career, and contributing to certain morally worthwhile projects, then your life goes well for you insofar as you have good relationships and career success, make a moral contribution and enjoy what you're doing, as these continue to be the things you care about.

What it is for a value to be fulfilled or realized and what it means to say that one life has more value fulfillment than another are obviously very important for VFT. Values, like desires, bring with them standards for success, and living up to these standards is part of value fulfillment. These standards are not always as obvious; some values are such that we succeed in their terms by having the right attitudes or being a certain kind of person. Nevertheless, there are standards for values in the sense that there are ways of responding appropriately or inappropriately given the nature of what is valued (see Anderson 1995). Moreover, most values encompass standards that are objective in the sense that whether or not we fulfill them is not a matter of whether we believe we are fulfilling them. There is something to meeting the standards that our values impose that goes beyond our subjective experience. In this respect, value fulfillment is similar to preference satisfaction: you may fail to get what you want without knowing it (say, if you are seriously deluded), and you may fail to fulfill your values, though you believe otherwise. Finally, if we are going to achieve what matters to us, it is not only success in terms of what is valued that matters, but

5. For a more thorough discussion of this view of values and the research on what people value see Tiberius 2008.

6. For a similar approach to the relationship between values and well-being see Raibley 2010.

also the valuing attitudes themselves. We require some stability in our valuing attitudes if we are going to succeed by the standards we think are important. (Of course, there is such a thing as too much stability: how much stability is required, and when change is recommended, are difficult practical questions, as we will see in the next section). Value fulfillment, then, is succeeding by the standards of your values while continuing to think that these standards are important to how well your life goes.

Assessing *total* value fulfillment requires attending to the relationships between values. People's values are typically complex. We value some things largely as a means to others (for example, you might value running marathons as a means to the values of health and fitness). We value some things as constitutive of other more abstract things (for example, you might value playing the piano *as a way of* valuing music). Some values are more important to us than others and some values have a more central role in the whole system. These considerations must be taken into account when we evaluate total value fulfillment and we ask whether one life has more overall value fulfillment than another. Importantly, it is not necessarily the case that getting more fulfillment of a single value at the expense of fulfilling others to a smaller degree contributes to the best overall life. This is because of the ways in which values are related to each other. Consider a simple example to illustrate this point. Imagine Bob, a person whose main values are meaningful work and family life. As with most people, Bob finds that these two values often conflict with each other because of the amount of time they each demand. You might think that VFT implies that Bob would be better off quitting his job and attending to his family, or leaving his family and focusing on his career, but VFT implies no such thing. First of all, if work and family are really both important to Bob, he might very well get more total fulfillment by achieving each of these values to a lesser degree than he would by achieving either on its own. But more importantly, for a normal human being like Bob it is very unlikely that he could make great strides in one if the other were entirely abandoned. This is partly because of diminishing returns (working all the time often does not lead to progress). And it is partly because of the role of other values that Bob (like most normal human beings) has: Bob's health would likely be affected by his working all the time and not developing close personal relationships, his enjoyment would likely be decreased by spending all his time in one way, and so on.

We can now see how the value fulfillment theory promises to accommodate both sides of the trade-off for theories of well-being. It defines well-being in terms of a person's individual psychology, namely, her values. But it also posits an ideal



and allows for the possibility that a person's psychological states are in need of improvement or transformation (thus allowing for the possibility of error). For example, the person with anorexia nervosa has values that are just not conducive to a value full life, since the value of thinness competes with other values (physical and mental health) and even with life itself (a necessary pre-condition for value fulfillment). The compelling ideal of a value full life—a life in which we do well by what matters to us—does constrain which values it makes sense for a person to have. Nevertheless, the ideal does not impose external values on a person in a way that risks its appearing unrecognizable to someone as what is good for him or her.

### APPLYING THE VALUE FULFILLMENT THEORY: FROM IDEAL TO REAL

One problem with idealized subjective theories is that we do not have access to our ideal psychological states and this makes it difficult to apply such theories to real life problems. The value fulfillment theory is certainly not immune to this difficulty; indeed, in some ways the focus on values and the ideal of a value full life makes the problem worse. The ideal of a value full life provides guidance for thinking about what a good life is through the standard of the fulfillment of a set of values over time, but even with these guidelines about what counts as fulfillment, there are many different ways of living a life in which you value and have good friendships, meaningful work, enjoyable experiences, and so on. The complexity of systems of values and the fact that values themselves are open to interpretation mean that there will be no single, well-defined best life for a person overall or even at a particular time. This is in part because the “units” of value fulfillment are large and in part because there are different ways that values can be successfully organized even for a single person. If the units of fulfillment were small, we could rank possible lives in terms of minute gains and losses. If there were only one way for a particular set of values to be realized together, then there would be a clear sense in which there is a best life for a person. But this is not how values are. Instead, the value fulfillment approach tells us that the good life for a person overall is one of the lives in a set of roughly equivalently value full lives that constitutes a model of a good life for a person.<sup>7</sup>

7. Raibley (2012) uses the notion of a “paradigm” where I prefer to talk about a model. I think it is just as useful and perhaps a bit more precise to think about a set of best lives for a person that is a model of well-being.

There are, in other words, many different shapes that the ideal of a value full life can take and, to make matters worse, what is in that set of value full lives will change over time as the person makes choices that close off some options and open others.<sup>8</sup> It's easy to see this when it comes to career choices. There is a point in one's life when the value of meaningful work could be specified in many different ways, constituted by many different kinds of work. But as a person ages, acquires training and specialization, the options for living a life with the most value fulfillment change. Whereas there is a time at which being a teacher, doctor or baker could all have roughly equal value fulfillment, once you have spent 20 years practicing law the calculation is not the same. This is certainly not to say that making large changes can never improve your life, however, the amount of value fulfillment you can expect by quitting your job as a lawyer mid-career and going to medical school is different from the amount of value fulfillment you can expect as a young person deciding between medicine and the law. Similarly, as anyone who has children will tell you, once you have children your values change profoundly; you suddenly value your child, your relationship with him or her, and your identity as a parent. Therefore, once you have children, it is almost certainly true that all of the lives that have the most value fulfillment for you are lives in which your children are healthy and happy and you enjoy being a parent to them. But for many people, before they have children there are value full lives open to them that do not include having children.

Applying the theory, then, is not going to be a simple matter. But we can make progress by thinking of the practical contexts in which such applications take place. What practical purposes do theories of well-being have? For what purpose would we need to translate the ideal life given by a theory of well-being into reality? Basically, we need to bring the ideal down to reality when we want to help somebody (or help ourselves), to make their (or our) lives better. It is as potential benefactors that we try to discern the exact shape of a good life, and this endeavor takes place in a particular context that determines whom we aim to help and in what way. (In what follows I focus mainly on friends as potential benefactors and beneficiaries, but the points I'll make can be extended to other relationships. Benefactor and beneficiary could even be the same person if the context is of someone who is trying to evaluate and improve her own life).

According to the value fulfillment theory, there are some broad guidelines

8. Of course, this is true for desire satisfaction theories too, but it is not often noticed as a challenge for the application of theory.

for what a benefactor should attend to in almost any context: if you are trying to assess how well a person is doing you will need to ascertain (a) what that person's core values are<sup>9</sup>, (2) how well she is succeeding in terms of these values, and (3) how likely it is that the status quo will lead to a life of high total value fulfillment over time. To figure out how the person's life could be improved you also need to think about how things could be different such that greater total value fulfillment will be achieved. This requires thinking not only about what kinds of core values and specifications of cores values would be more compatible and more likely to lead to fulfillment, but also about what kinds of changes the person is actually capable of making and how she sees her own good. For example, consider Jane, a person who values creativity and accomplishment, but who has manifested these values in her life with a career for which she has no talent. Let's say Jane has dedicated herself to writing novels, but she is destined to experience only frustration as a writer. To help Jane we need to think about how else these values can be realized in a life and whether she could become a person who fulfills these values in a different way, say through practicing an art for which she has more talent, or by seeing the creative aspect of something for which she does have talent.

These things are not easy to figure out, but they do seem like the right things to think about when we aim to understand how someone is doing and to help improve her situation: how is she doing with respect to what she cares about, does she care about the right things given her personality and circumstances, and could her situation or her values be changed so as to make her life one in which she is better able to achieve what matters to her. When we see that such assessments of how people are doing take place in a practical context, new challenges arise. These challenges give rise to more guidelines for the process of translating the ideal into reality.

The first kind of challenge is epistemological: there are a variety of things that the benefactor might not know that will affect his or her ability to assess how much the beneficiary's life resembles the ideal and how it could be improved. In particular, the benefactor needs to know (and might be wrong about): what a good life is for the person in broad terms, how the ideal could be specified, what changes are required for bringing about the better life, and what changes the person is capable of making.

9. "Core values" are values that are more important, more central and/or more likely to be at least in part valued intrinsically. I think these features of values are a matter of degree; so, a particular value can be more or less core. Core values are often very general and need to be instantiated or specified in some particular way to be pursued

No one (including the person herself) could possibly have perfect knowledge about all of these things, but some will have better information than others.

There is no easy solution to the epistemological problem. The basic guidelines for potential benefactors are to try to acquire more knowledge, to proceed on the basis of conservative assumptions about what almost everyone values, and to proceed with caution given the possibility that we do not know how to help. On the first point, we can think about acquiring knowledge about the particular person or group of people we are trying to help. It is also helpful to learn about human psychology in general: for instance, how human beings tend to reveal what they really value (what clues to look for) and how people are able (or unable) to change course in life. Learning about human nature generally can help us make reasonable assumptions about what core values individual people are likely to have. (Note, however, that it is still the individual person's relationship to the value—not the human species' relationship to it, as eudaimonism would have it—that explains why it is good for her). Many of the values people have are socially sanctioned, highly stable and abstract enough that how they are fulfilled is open to interpretation: for example, health, pleasure, close family ties, friendship, comfort and security. These values are quite likely to be a part of any of the best lives a person could live (though particular means to them might differ) and therefore they form an excellent basis for well-being assessments. We can also assume that values that are related to other values in fundamental ways—as necessary conditions for their pursuit (such as health), or as a justification for other values (such as psychological happiness)—will be stable and emotionally appropriate over the long term. A useful heuristic, then, in assessing well-being and making judgments about how to benefit people, is to pay attention to the basic values that are likely to be part of the best life for anyone. We shouldn't underestimate how far this takes us.

The fact that we might lack crucial information about a person's situation or the ideal life for her is one significant problem, but there is a second kind of challenge that is independent of our epistemic position. Even if you are correct about what is good for a person and what is wrong with the way she is currently living her life, intervening in someone's life on behalf of values that you think would be more appropriate for them introduces costs in value fulfillment terms: ruptures to the bonds of friendship, pain and dissatisfaction. Most of us have had friends who pursue romantic relationships that are bad for them, but it is rarely a good idea to take drastic measures to prevent our friends from making dating mistakes. A friend who

criticizes our choices too much is not one we are likely to confide in or turn to for help when things turn out badly. Overriding or ignoring the actual values of someone with whom one has a professional (rather than friendly) relationship in order to help that person causes its own problems such as the feeling of being disrespected, the erosion of trust in helping professionals, and the violation of role defined obligations. Finally, success by the standards of an inappropriate value is not always entirely bad for a person. This is because of the relationship between values: succeeding in any terms (even if the value achieved is not perfectly appropriate for you in the long term) usually brings pleasure, a sense of satisfaction or accomplishment, and other valued rewards. For all these reasons, the fact that a person's values could be better for her does not license us to ignore her actual values in the usual case.

It does seem, though, that there are some contexts in which it makes sense to discount a person's inappropriate values in practice, such as when these values are so dysfunctional that they do not have any connections to other values and rewards, or when the risks of negative consequences are minimal. For example, a friend who is putting herself and her children at risk by staying in an abusive relationship almost certainly needs to adjust her values (on the assumption that she does value the relationship, which of course she may not). In this case, continuing to value the relationship with the abusive partner is at odds with other things she values more, or should value more if she is going to live a life of high value fulfillment. It might indeed be a duty of friendship to try to intervene in some way or another with this friend's situation. To take a less dire example, a student who asks for guidance from a teacher might be well served by advice that recommends changing her goals.

The second type of challenge, then, is the challenge of ascertaining whether it is desirable (in terms of the goal of promoting well-being) to discount, ignore or override a person's actual current values. Let's call this the interpersonal challenge. The interpersonal challenge also does not admit of an easy solution. But we can minimize the risk of making things worse by taking care to assess the circumstances before trying to help. Some circumstances make it more appropriate to discount, ignore or override a person's values than others. One factor that is relevant to any decision under uncertainty is the degree of risk of harm or benefit. If the beneficiary's values are a clear and present danger to her, it makes more sense to ignore these values than if her values are just somewhat less than ideal. For example, in order to benefit a person who has become addicted to drugs or has fallen into a cult (long enough to say that she genuinely values participation in the cult) it might be necessary to ignore

or override her current values because they put her health and even her life in danger. Second, it matters whether the beneficiary could actually change so as to have better, more ideal, values. If Jane is just never going to give up on her dream of being a writer, it might do no good for you to try to help her by engaging in a long term project of talking her into doing something else.

A third important factor is the kind of relationship that exists between the benefactor and the beneficiary. What kinds of relationships make this sort of helping appropriate? I suggest that there are several important variables. Trust (that the person trying to help you has your best interests at heart) is important because it makes some room for honesty about what might be wrong with a person's life and it makes it more likely that the beneficiary will accept (and hence benefit from) the benefactor's help. A certain level of intimacy or understanding is also required among friends without which advice about how to live one's life better might be taken to be nosy or condescending. Trust and intimacy make a difference to whether someone will be benefitted by help that assumes the need for a transformation of actual values. Making changes to our values is difficult, so we need to have some reasonable prospect that a proposed change would be good for us before we'll put in the effort. Advice from a person who knows us well (intimacy) and whom we trust to care about how well our lives are going is, *prima facie*, better than information from someone who knows us less well or whom we suspect of having ulterior motives. Another important variable is the extent to which the friends' lives are intertwined. One thing that makes it more acceptable for a life partner to criticize the spouse's actual values is that the two of them have to live together and they share each other's burdens to a greater extent than most friends. A final important factor is the skill that the friend has in communicating difficult or sensitive information. Some ways of telling a person that her goals are inappropriate and likely to make her life go poorly over the long term are more tolerable than others, and a more effective benefactor has the skills to communicate this information in the best way.

No one of these variables is sufficient to determine whether it's appropriate to discount a beneficiary's values and there's no algorithm for how much of each variable is needed. You might have an intimate relationship with someone in the sense that you have a long history together and know each other to the core, but without trust such a friend's suggestions about how we could better our lives are not helpful. Think of divorced partners who might know each other better than anyone else in the world, but who are in no position to give advice because there is no longer a

presumption that each has the other's best interest at heart. Trust without intimacy is also not sufficient, because a trusted person who doesn't know you very well can't make good assessments about how you would be better off. For example, many of us have parents who value our welfare more than anything else, but are not well positioned to help us live better lives because they still see us as the children we once were. Trust and intimacy without skill are also problematic: someone who wants to help and knows enough about you to have a useful perspective, but who doesn't have the sensitivity to communicate that perspective in a way you can accept isn't in the best position to help you overcome your dysfunctional values. Notice that the presence of certain formal relationships, such as the relationship between patient and therapist, can change the required balance of qualities: a therapist who is trusted and skilled can do with less intimate knowledge of the patient in part because he or she will have greater general knowledge of human psychology and professional knowledge about the patient's life. Finally, mutual dependence weighs against shortcomings with respect to the other factors, because the costs of sticking with the status quo might be very high, but mutual dependence by itself is no guarantee if the other factors are absent.

We have discussed a number of conditions for the appropriateness of discounting, ignoring or overriding a beneficiary's current values for the sake of helping to promote her well-being. To summarize, it can make sense for a benefactor to discount, ignore or override a beneficiary's actual values in assessing or trying to improve her well-being under four conditions:

1. The beneficiary's values are truly harmful
2. The beneficiary could change
3. There is an appropriate relationship between the helper and the beneficiary, defined in terms of: intimacy, trust, skills of communication, and the extent to which lives are intertwined
4. The helper is in a good epistemic position with respect to the above.

These conditions are, in essence, guidelines for applying an ideal theory to a real life in practice. More guidance, as we have seen, is found in the value fulfillment the-

ory's account of what counts as a value full life. It is worth pointing out that there are many different ways of trying to help that might discount, override or ignore a beneficiary's current values. One can give advice, provide alternative options, withdraw support, directly intervene, coerce or force. These different actions vary in terms of how intrusive they are and the more intrusive, the higher the stakes. As one contemplates more intrusive actions for the sake of a person's welfare, the above conditions become more stringent.

Certainly, the story the value fulfillment theory tells about how to benefit people is not a simple one. If this theory is correct, it turns out that the practical application of the theory of well-being requires those who want to help other people to figure out how those people's lives could be closer to an ideal, where there are many different shapes the ideal could take in practice. Is this a problem with the theory? I don't think so, for two reasons. First, according to the value fulfillment theory (and, indeed, any plausible theory of well-being) there are many very easy ways to help very many people. Almost everyone values health and enjoyment for themselves and their friends and family. Deprivations that make it impossible to attain these values are an obvious road block to achieving well-being. In particular, people who are suffering from illness, who are in pain, or who lack basic material resources (of whom there are vast numbers in the world) can be helped tremendously by alleviating these impediments to living value full lives. There are even easy ways to help people who are more fortunate in terms of their basic needs, because there are many cases in which helping people to pursue their valued projects is exactly the best way to help improve their lives.

Second, for the other cases—cases in which a person is not deprived of the basic necessities that make it possible to live in accordance with her values and has values that are harmful to her in some way—it should not be surprising that it is not easy to help. To see why not, think of a paradigm type of case of dysfunctional values, a case in which core values conflict. For example, consider Joe, the gay evangelical Christian. Joe deeply values his religious identity and his church, and yet his sexual identity is completely rejected by this church. If Joe also values having satisfying romantic relationships, he is in trouble with this set of values. If you are Joe's friend, how should you help him? Given my own beliefs about religions like this, if I were Joe's friend I would be likely to try to talk him into joining a different church. But is it completely obvious that this is the best way to help Joe? What if he is unable to get rid of the belief that living as a gay man would result in his eternal damnation? What if



he does not actually care that much about romantic relationships? What if by telling him to join a new church I reveal that I have no understanding of his religious identity at all and he loses confidence in one of the few people in his life with whom he can share this problem? My point here is not that one shouldn't make some effort to get Joe to change his mind about his particular church (or about eternal damnation). Rather, my point is that it's hard to know what to do for Joe.<sup>10</sup> Cases like these are difficult and so it is no criticism of the value fulfillment theory that it acknowledges this fact of life. Indeed it is a point in the theory's favor that it helps explain why such cases are so difficult.

## CONCLUSION

The value fulfillment theory says that to live well is to succeed in terms of our own values. The best life we can live (in terms of our own well-being) is the one in which we get the most value fulfillment overall, and what is good for us to do now is whatever contributes to living a life that is closer to this ideal, which will sometimes require changing our values in some way. The value fulfillment theory does make well-being an ideal, though the ideal is relative to the evaluative outlook of the person. Therefore, well-being is both ideal and psychological. Unlike other theories that define well-being in terms of our idealized psychological states, VFT does not propose particular norms for the improvement of individual psychological states such as full information, rationality, or authenticity. Rather, it asks that we evaluate our current values by comparing them to an ideal of life in which we succeed in terms of the standards imposed by what we care about over the long term. Since there are many paths to an ideal life for a person that change as life goes on, applying this theory to real life is a challenging process. A theory of well-being can help us in this process by identifying the standards of success that we should employ, and the dangers we should aim to avoid, when we are assessing how well people are doing and imagining how they might do better.

It is impossible to provide a complete defense of a theory of well-being in a single paper and I have not tried to do that. I hope to have highlighted some of the advantages of thinking of well-being in terms of values and ideals of value fulfillment,

10. I was prompted to think about the difficulties involved in this kind of case by an article in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "Living the Good Lie" (Swartz 2011).

however, and to have addressed one of the main concerns that arise for the application of a theory like this.

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