

# On the Importance of Well-being

Raffaele Rodogno

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**Abstract** Many among philosophers and non-philosophers would claim that well-being is important in moral theory because it is important to the individual whose well-being it is. The exact meaning of this claim, however, is in need of clarification. Having provided that, I will present a charge against it. This charge can be found in the recent work of both Joseph Raz and Thomas Scanlon. According to the latter the concept of well-being plays an unimportant role in an agent's deliberation. As I will show, to claim this much is to undermine our initial claim; and to do that is to undermine some of the most central theories in normative ethics. I will focus on Scanlon's discussion in particular because it affords us with two criteria for the assessment of the importance for a person of a value-concept such as well-being. I will claim that much of Scanlon's case rests on the idea that well-being is an inclusive good, a good constituted by other things that are good in and for themselves. Then, I will put forward a case against Scanlon's challenge by (1) showing that inclusiveness, when properly understood, does not lead to the conclusion Scanlon is led to and (2) showing that on at least the reading Scanlon prefers, his criteria are inappropriate.

**Keywords** Well-being · Importance · Inclusive good · Moral psychology · Scanlon · Raz

## 1 Introduction

Many among philosophers and non-philosophers would claim that well-being is important in moral theory because it is important to the individual whose well-being it is. The exact meaning of this claim, however, is in need of clarification. Having provided that, I will

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R. Rodogno  
Department of Philosophy, Harvard University, Emerson Hall 209a, Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA  
02138, USA

R. Rodogno (✉)  
Swiss Center for the Affective Sciences, Geneva, Switzerland  
e-mail: [raffaele.rodogno@lettres.unige.ch](mailto:raffaele.rodogno@lettres.unige.ch)

present a charge against it. This charge can be found in the recent work of both Joseph Raz and Thomas Scanlon.<sup>1</sup> According to the latter the concept of well-being plays an unimportant role in an agent's deliberation. As I will show, to claim this much is to undermine our initial claim; and to do that is to undermine an important family of normative ethical theories. I will focus on Scanlon's discussion in particular because it explicitly offers two criteria for the assessment of the importance for a person of a value-concept such as well-being. I will claim that much of Scanlon's case rests on the idea that well-being is an inclusive good, a good constituted by other things that are good in and for themselves. Then, I will put forward a case against Scanlon's challenge by (1) showing that inclusiveness, when properly understood, does not lead to the conclusion Scanlon is led to and (2) showing that on at least the reading Scanlon prefers, his criteria are inappropriate.

## 2 On the Importance of Well-being

Recently, Thomas Scanlon claimed that:

It is commonly supposed that there is a single notion of individual well-being that plays the following three roles. First, it serves as a basis for the decisions of a single rational being, at least for those decisions in which he or she alone is concerned (that is to say, in which moral obligations and concern for others can be left aside). Second, it is what a concerned benefactor, such as a friend, has reason to promote. Third, it is the basis on which an individual's interests are taken into account in moral argument....*[T]he first of these roles is generally held to be primary: well-being is important in the thinking of a benefactor and in moral argument because of its importance for the individual whose well-being it is.*<sup>2</sup>

From this passage we may derive five different claims concerning well-being: (1) well-being is important to the person whose well-being it is as the basis for those rational decisions in which she alone is concerned; (2) well-being is important to benefactors as that which they have reason to promote; (3) well-being is important in moral argument as the basis on which an individual's interests are taken into account. Claims (4) and (5) can be read off the highlighted passage as stating the following: (4) the claim that (2) because of (1); and (5) the claim that (3) because of (1). The ultimate focus of this paper is claim (5), which I will state as follows:

(5) Concern for well-being is important in moral argument because well-being is important to the person whose well-being it is as the basis for those rational decisions in which she alone is concerned.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Raz (1999), Ch.13 and Scanlon (1998), Ch.3.

<sup>2</sup> Scanlon (1998), 108–109. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>3</sup> To be entirely faithful to Scanlon's text, (5) should have looked like this: "Well-being is important in moral argument as the basis on which an individual's interests are taken into account because well-being is important to the person whose well-being it is as the basis for those rational decisions in which she alone is concerned." Many philosophers, though not Scanlon, would not be happy with this statement of (5) because they take a "person's well-being" to be synonymous to a "person's interests". On this reading, the beginning of (5) would be a tautology. Claim (5) can however be reformulated as I proposed in the text with no loss of meaning.

This claim goes already some of the way towards a specification of the less clear claim according to which well-being is important in moral argument because it is important to the person whose well-being it is. Claim (5), however, is far from being itself clear. The notions of importance in moral argument and importance to the individual need elucidation. Let us start with the former.

I take it that moral *argument* and moral *theory* may not be the same thing but that the claims that we should ultimately be concerned with here are claims about the importance of well-being in moral theory. Moral argument can take place at ordinary, everyday level and not everything that happens there needs to be considered or have repercussions at the level of moral theory. Yet there is and should be a connection between moral argument and moral theory. The link is afforded by a further premise that appeals to moral phenomenology. The idea is that if in our everyday moral argument the notion of well-being played a central role then that would make it a plausible candidate for importance in moral theory. In light of this remark, I will reformulate thesis (5) as follows:

(5') The concept of well-being is important in moral theory because it is important to the person whose well-being it is as the basis for those rational decisions in which she alone is concerned.

Note that we are now talking of the importance of a *concept* in moral theory. In fact theoretical importance can only be understood as the importance of a certain concept within a theoretical framework. In particular, such importance can be understood in terms of explanatory power. A concept is more important or central if it has greater explanatory power. Alternatively, one could say that a certain notion is theoretically more important than another if it is more primitive than the other (i.e. the other is derived from it). Importance in this context can also be understood in absolute rather than comparative terms. If, for example, a certain notion were the foundational notion of an entire moral theoretical system, it would be rather appropriate to call such notion theoretically important or central. The problem here, however, is that, for cases other than the foundational ones, it is rather difficult to determine precisely when or at what point a notion becomes important or unimportant in absolute terms.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of the importance of something like well-being to an individual in her rational decisions is more difficult to understand.<sup>5</sup> The problem here is that, as Frankfurt recognised, the notion of importance is very hard to define because some circularity seems inevitable whenever we attempt to define it. The idea is that nothing is important unless it makes a difference. But there are unimportant things that make a difference. They are unimportant because the difference that they make is trivial. Thus we cannot determine whether something is important unless we are already able to distinguish between differences that are trivial and those that are important.<sup>6</sup> Frankfurt nonetheless offers a useful criterion of importance: "... things are important to us...in so far as we need them; and how important they are depends upon how badly we need them" and "to assert that a person needs something means just that

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, any reference to the importance of well-being in moral theory, will have to be read as the theoretical importance of the *notion* or *concept* of well-being in moral theory. Omissions of 'notion' or 'concept' will be merely stylistic.

<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, reference to "the importance of well-being to an individual" should always be understood as a short for the more cumbersome "the importance of well-being to an individual in her rational decisions when she alone is concerned."

<sup>6</sup> Frankfurt (1988), p.82 and (1999a), p.92.

he will inevitably be harmed in one way or another – he will inevitably suffer some injury or loss – unless he has it.”<sup>7</sup> The problem with this criterion is that it ultimately refers to the notions of harm and injury which are intimately linked to the notion of well-being and that will not do if one wants to understand, as we do, the notion of importance in order to understand the expression ‘the importance of well-being’.<sup>8</sup>

Scanlon also uses the expressions “caring about *x*”, “being concerned with *x*”, “*x* matters to us” in the vicinity of “importance”.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, however, we are not told much about these terms. Frankfurt, however, may be more helpful in this context. He writes that:

A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense what he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced.<sup>10</sup>

If that is correct, and I don’t see any reason why it wouldn’t, caring about something would not be useful in explicating the notion of the importance of well-being because caring about my well-being implies that I am vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits but these notions presuppose that of well-being. So far, then, we have not found a non-question begging criterion for importance.

I propose at this point to borrow Scanlon’s own criterion of importance of a value-concept such as well-being:

There are two related ways in which the importance of the concept of well-being in a given mode of thinking might be shown. First, it might be shown in the role that concept plays in explaining and helping us to understand the importance of the particular things that contribute to well-being. Second, it might be shown in the significance of the boundary of that concept – the difference it makes whether something is or is not a contribution to well-being.<sup>11</sup>

The idea is that something is important if in our rational deliberation we appeal to its *concept* in order to explain and understand why we take certain things to be important and if the boundary of this concept plays a significant role in our deliberation. We shall discuss this criterion more at length in Section 4. For the moment, we shall simply note that the criterion is not straightforwardly question begging. In fact, Scanlon uses this very same criterion to conclude that well-being is not important.

With this partial elucidation of the elements of thesis (5’), its meaning should appear clearer. Further clarification, however, may be obtained if we asked who, what kind of moral theorist, would disagree with (5’). Most radically, one can disagree with the methodology underpinning (5’). I believe that anti-heteronomous moral theorists such as Kant, for example, would disagree with any claim of the form “*x* is important in moral theory because *x* is important to individuals”. Morality has to be grounded in the formal conditions of rational agency; that’s

<sup>7</sup> Frankfurt (1999b), note 7, p.163.

<sup>8</sup> To say that ‘harm’ and ‘injury’ are intimately linked to well-being does not mean that I am here presupposing that they are reducible to it. I am not excluding that there may be harms and injuries that do not decrease well-being. Even if we did not assume that, however, the intimate link between ‘harm’ and ‘injury’, on the one hand, and well-being, on the other, is still hardly debatable.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Scanlon, Chapter 3, 1998. But see also pp.158–160 and pp.72–76.

<sup>10</sup> Frankfurt (1988), p.83.

<sup>11</sup> Scanlon (1998), 126.

that. Less radically, however, one may accept that “ $x$  is important in moral theory because  $x$  is important to individuals” while disputing that  $x$  is the concept of well-being.<sup>12</sup>

Claim (5'), then, will be asserted against both of these challenges. In moral theory, well-being, and not another notion, should be central or fundamental and that's because it is important to the individual, and not for another reason. In light of this, the connective “because” as it appears in (5'), can surely be taken to express the presence of a necessary condition. Without importance to the individual we cannot claim that well-being should be an important notion in moral theory. That, however, does not exclude that (5') can also express the presence of a sufficient condition and in fact that is what the presence of the connective “because” most typically signals. Whether or not it does, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, it is enough that (5') expresses the weaker claim that in moral theory well-being should be important only if it is important to the individual whose well-being it is. The ultimate aim of this paper is to defend the truth of (5') against a challenge undermining the idea that well-being is important in this way. If the challenge is correct, a condition necessary to the importance of well-being in moral theory would not obtain.

### 3 The Challenge to (5') and Its Relevance to Moral Theory

Our discussion of this challenge is at the core of moral theory. On one reading, (5') would count as an expression of philosophical utilitarianism. This is the philosophical thesis to the effect that the only fundamental moral facts are facts about individual well-being and that's because well-being is important to the individual in the way we described.<sup>13</sup> Claim (5') would count as such thesis if importance in moral theory was understood in a particularly strong way, i.e., as fundamentality. In fact, even if importance in moral theory was not understood so strongly, claim (5') could count as a crucial step towards a justification for philosophical utilitarianism. That's because (5') is compatible with the thesis according to which claims about individual well-being are one class of valid starting points for moral theory. Claim (5') would then get us all the way to philosophical utilitarianism if it could be shown that there are no other valid starting points.

Obviously, the truth of (5') depends on the truth of the importance of well-being: if well-being is not important to the person whose well-being it is, all the moral theories that consider well-being as important in moral theory will have to find a different ground for this belief and, beside an intuition *à la* G. E. Moore, it is hard to see what ground could be offered.<sup>14</sup> But would anyone deny that well-being is important to the individual whose well-being it is? Scanlon has something to say about this:

[(a)] It sounds absurd to say that individuals have no reason to be concerned with their own well-being, [(b)] because this seems to imply that they have no reason to be concerned with those things that make their lives go better. [(c)] Clearly they do have reason to be concerned with these things. [(d)] But in regard to their own lives they have little need to use the concept of well-being itself, either in giving justifications or in drawing distinctions... The concept of one's overall well-being does not play as

<sup>12</sup> There is a third, rather odd, possibility: to endorse the same methodology as (5') but claim that there is no  $x$  such that  $x$  is important to an individual.

<sup>13</sup> Scanlon (1982), pp.108–110.

<sup>14</sup> See Moore (1903)

important a role as it is generally thought to do in the practical thinking of a rational individual.<sup>15</sup>

Given Scanlon's buck-passing account of goodness, claim (a) amounts to an assertion that well-being is an agent-relative value.<sup>16</sup> I will not disagree with (a).<sup>17</sup> Claim (b) and (c) introduce an interesting point. We have reason to be concerned with our well-being because we have reason to be concerned with the things that contribute to our well-being and not *vice versa*. Take enjoyment, for example: we have reason to be concerned with it in and for itself and not in virtue of its contribution to our well-being. And we have reason to be concerned with well-being because something such as enjoyment happens to contribute to it. We shall have an opportunity to discuss this view of the relation between well-being and its parts in Sections 4–7. As for the argument in favour of (d), we shall wait until next section. Here, however, we have to note the shift from the importance of *well-being* to the importance of the *concept* of well-being. I had already introduced this shift earlier, when discussing the notion of theoretical importance. Here Scanlon introduces it in the context of a discussion of the importance of well-being to the individual whose well-being it is.

Is Scanlon dismissing (5') by rejecting the importance of well-being as we described it? Scanlon does claim that well-being is something we have reason to be concerned with. But, according to him, its value does not so much lie with itself as with the things that happen to contribute to it and which would be valuable independently of well-being. Now, if these things are sufficiently important, I suppose, well-being would indirectly inherit their importance and that, in fact, is what Scanlon seems to be saying through claims (a)–(c). To say that, however, is not to endorse the claim that each person has a reason to desire and pursue the things that contribute to their well-being in virtue of their contribution to well-being. And *that* is what (5') claims: well-being should be considered important in moral theory because *it*, and not something else such as enjoyment or what have you, is important “as the basis on which individuals would take the rational decisions concerning their own life.” Scanlon's claim (d) clearly denies this. If it were true, well-being is clearly not that on the basis of which many rational decisions would be taken.

What is more, Scanlon takes (d) to be the starting point for another important conclusion. The claim that the *concept* of well-being is not first-personally important, if true, could be taken to be evidence that the concept of well-being used in moral theory is *not* the same concept individuals would use from a first-personal point of view. Evidence for this divergence would be afforded precisely by the fact that individuals do not really use a notion of well-being from their first-person point of view. But if the notion of well-being used in moral theory is not the same as the first-personal one, which notion is it? Scanlon believes that whatever notion it is, it will be a *moral* notion, one that derives its

<sup>15</sup> Scanlon (1998), 109–110. Claim (d) is reproduced partly from p.110 and partly from p.132.

<sup>16</sup> The buck-passing account of value takes “goodness and value to be non-natural properties, namely the purely formal, higher-order properties of having lower-order properties that provide reasons of the relevant kind....it is not goodness or value itself that provides reasons but rather other properties that do so.” Scanlon (1998), 97.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, one could disagree with Scanlon in three ways. (1) Well-being never affords any reason to desire or do anything. But I can't see how anyone would defend this thesis. (2) Well-being never affords any reason *on its own*. A version of this thesis has recently been defended by Darwall (2002) who claims that, only if we care about ourselves does our well-being afford us with any reason. Finally (3) there may be a more subtle disagreement as to the *kind* of reason each agent would have to be concerned with his or her own well-being. Scanlon takes well-being to afford agent-relative reasons; more controversially, however, Darwall (2002) takes well-being (and care) to afford agent-neutral reasons even to the agent whose well-being it is.

significance, and to a certain extent its distinctive shape, from its role in the moral structure in which it figures.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, this conclusion is at the heart of normative ethics, as it contradicts one of the main tenets of many a teleological theory including philosophical utilitarianism, namely, that individual well-being is the *non-moral* notion on which moral theory is grounded.

In conclusion, the claim that the concept of well-being has little importance in first-personal thinking, as in (d), has considerable repercussions for moral theory. Firstly, the truth of (d) would undermine (5') and that would debase any form of philosophical utilitarianism. Secondly, it would open the door to an argument according to which the concept of well-being used in moral theory is not the same as the one that would allegedly be important first-personally. Now, if that was true, (5') would indeed be the rather obscure thesis according to which a notion of well-being is important (in moral theory) because another diverging notion of well-being is important (first-personally). What is more, if that was true, we would have the beginning of an argument aimed at debasing one of the main tenets of teleological theories such as philosophical utilitarianism. It is, then, to assessing the importance of the concept of well-being in our first-personal thinking that we now turn.

#### 4 Assessing the Importance of Well-being

Scanlon is not alone in holding that the concept of well-being is rather unimportant in our first-personal thinking. Joseph Raz makes much the same point when he writes that:

[N]ormally one's own well-being is not a reason for one's own action.<sup>19</sup> [N]ormally our own well-being is not an independent factor in our deliberations.... Goals and relationship [people] have or may want to have are what people have reason to care about, not their well-being as such.<sup>20</sup>

I take these claims to be psychological descriptions of what we "normally" do when we deliberate. When we think about what to do, Raz would say, the concept of well-being is not one of our main reason-giving considerations. It does not appear independently in our thinking. What does the real reason-giving work is the goals and relationships people have or may want to have. Hence, we shall conclude *contra* (5'), well-being is not that on the basis of which an individual would take her rational decisions when she alone is concerned. We do not typically take ourselves to have reason to desire it in itself; it is not important first-personally in the sense described by (5').

We have already introduced Scanlon's criterion of importance:

There are two related ways in which the importance of the concept of well-being in a given mode of thinking might be shown. First, it might be shown in the role that concept plays in explaining and helping us to understand the importance of the particular things that contribute to well-being. Second, it might be shown in the significance of the boundary of that concept – the difference it makes whether something is or is not a contribution to well-being.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Scanlon (1998), 110.

<sup>19</sup> Raz (1999), 315.

<sup>20</sup> Raz (1999), 317–318.

<sup>21</sup> Scanlon (1998), 126.



In fact there appears to be two criteria which I will call (C1) and (C2) and state them as follows:

(C1) We have evidence that well-being is that which typically if not uniquely motivates us, that which we take ourselves to have reason to desire, if we appeal to its concept in explaining why we take ourselves to have reason to desire the various things that contribute to well-being, that is, if we take ourselves to have reason to desire these things because they contribute to well-being.

One point of contention concerning my gloss of the first criterion may be the introduction of the notions of frequency and explicitness. Scanlon makes no mention of them but talks merely of the *role* played by the concept of well-being. At this point we should ask ourselves two questions. (1) Can a concept be considered to play an important role even if it didn't appear frequently and explicitly in our deliberation? My answer to this question is positive though I shall postpone its discussion until Section 5. (2) Does Scanlon believe the concept of well-being can be psychologically important only if it frequently and explicitly appears in our deliberation? It seems so:

If you ask me why I have reason to listen to music, I may reply that I do so because I enjoy it. If you asked why that is a reason, the reply "A life that includes enjoyment is a better life" would not be false, but it would be rather strange. Enjoyments, success in one's main aims, and substantive goods such as friendship all contribute to well-being, but the idea of well-being plays little role in explaining why they are good.<sup>22</sup>

Here Scanlon is testing the psychological importance of the concept of well-being by way of application of his first criterion. His conclusion is that well-being plays "little role". That is because we do not normally appeal, i.e., make explicit reference, to it. Indeed it would be "strange" to do so. Were we to do so frequently and explicitly, there would be something odd about us.

Things may look more straightforward for the second criterion:

(C2) We have evidence that well-being is that which typically if not uniquely motivates us, that which we take ourselves to have reason to desire, if the boundary of the concept of well-being is significant in our mode of thinking, i.e., if the fact something is or is not a contribution to his or her well-being makes a difference to an agent's actions.

Well-being would be important if we considered whether or not  $\phi$ -ing would contribute to well-being and the outcome of this consideration makes a significant difference as to whether we should or shouldn't  $\phi$ . For example, agents value benefiting their families or friends for reasons other than the contribution to their own well-being and yet it will be true that they would benefit by benefiting their families and friends:

From a first person point of view, however, we have no reason to resolve this ambiguity by deciding where the limits of our well-being should be drawn. It is of course important to us – important in our moral self-assessment – that our concern for our friends and family is not grounded entirely in benefits they bring to us. But, given that we care greatly about our family or friends, we have no need to determine the degree to which we benefit from benefiting them.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Scanlon (1998), 126–127.

<sup>23</sup> Scanlon (1998), 129.



Even here, however, the problem of frequency and explicitness can be posed. How are we to understand the idea of “consideration in our deliberation”? Can the boundary of the concept be significant if it is not frequently and explicitly appealed to? We will return to these questions later. For the moment let us note that, by way of an application of these two criteria, Scanlon gets to the conclusion that the *concept* of one’s overall well-being does not play as important a role as it is generally thought to do in the practical thinking of a rational individual.<sup>24</sup>

Note also that Scanlon’s argument through (C1) and (C2) seems to rely on the idea that well-being is an inclusive good, “one that is made up of other things that are good in their own right, not made good by their contribution to well-being.”<sup>25</sup> According to (C1), the concept of well-being will not have explanatory power because agents in their first-personal deliberation do not appeal to the concept of well-being *but to its parts* to explain why they take certain ends to be normatively important.<sup>26</sup> According to (C2), the concept of well-being has no precise boundary or limits (and that’s more evidence of its unimportance) because, *given that we appeal to its parts* as goods for their own sake in order to explain and justify our actions, we do not and need not determine the boundaries or limits of the concept of well-being. On its own, however, inclusiveness is not sufficient to get to Scanlon’s conclusion. That there is reason to desire each part of well-being for its own sake does not entail that there is *no* reason to desire them *also* for the sake of well-being. And if there is reason to desire the parts of well-being for their own sake *as well as* for the sake of well-being then Scanlon cannot get to the conclusion that in regard to their own lives people “have little need to use the concept of well-being itself, either in giving justifications or in drawing distinctions,” as in claim (d) above.<sup>27</sup>

In the remaining part of this article I agree with Scanlon that well-being is an inclusive good but, as just shown, I disagree that this feature on its own supports the unimportance of the concept of well-being. Though the parts of well-being are good in their own right, I will argue that in our thinking they are nonetheless rationally subsumed to the concept of well-

<sup>24</sup> Scanlon (1998), 132. Let me make clear that the distinction between standard of rightness, on the one hand, and decision-procedure, on the other, is not at issue here, nor is the distinction between immanent- and transcendent-perspective theories (see Rabinowicz and Österberg 1996). One should not take Scanlon’s claims here as an attempt to show that a theory of well-being has to say, for whatever reasons, that our well-being is whatever motivates an agent under certain circumstances. Such a claim would in effect imply that the immanent-perspective is the correct one, something which would need extensive argumentation. Rather, at this point, the question is “How do we know whether well-being is something that matters to agents?” and the answer is “Look at the role the concept of well-being plays in agents’ first-personal thinking.” This is an epistemological question not the semantic question underlying theories of well-being. That is why this discussion is largely neutral with regard to the distinctions mentioned above. Many thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing to my attention the possibility of confusing these two questions.

<sup>25</sup> Scanlon (1998), 127.

<sup>26</sup> Note that Raz’s argumentation too seems to rest on the inclusive nature of well-being: “In most cases when people refer to their well-being or their interests they refer either to their chances of succeeding with worthwhile goals or relationships which they have, or want to have, or their possession of the means (money, education, etc.) which will enable them to pursue whatever worthwhile goal or relationship they may at some time come to want to pursue. Goals and relationships they have or may want to have are what people have reason to care about, not their well-being as such.” Raz (1999), 317–318.

<sup>27</sup> A terminological remark is in order at this point. Scanlon, and I with him, seems to take the notion of a person’s well-being to be the same as what is *good for* that person. I am aware that *good for* is sometimes used to refer to perfectionist goods. That is *not* how this term is used here. Scanlon also seems to think that well-being is a *constitutive* or *inclusive* good made up by other goods that are “good in their own right”, i.e., things “there is reason to desire and pursue for their own sake”. The various constitutive goods are referred to here as the parts of well-being. The relation between the parts of and the concept of well-being is further discussed in Section 5.

being. On my way to showing this, it will become evident that the role of the concept of well-being in our thinking cannot be grasped by the *frequent* and *explicit* reading of (C1) and (C2). A concept such as well-being plays an *implicit* role in our first-personal thinking, or so I shall argue.

## 5 The Implicit Role of Well-being in Our Thinking

On Scanlon's (and Raz's) account, the agent considers the fact that something is enjoyable to be itself the reason for choosing it; enjoyment is good in its own right. That enjoyment also contributes to one's well-being seems to be a fact largely irrelevant to the agent's deliberation; that fact is something of an epiphenomenon, motivationally largely inert. With Scanlon, I agree that often when deliberating we do not seem to consider the fact that something is or is not constitutive of our well-being. More precisely, I think that often, this fact is not considered *explicitly*. It would, however, be too quick to take that as evidence that well-being is psychologically unimportant. The fact that there isn't much explicit consideration of well-being can be explained by the fact that most of our deliberation relies on a number of background beliefs concerning what objects and activities are good for us, or part of our well-being. Unless the circumstances are such as to prompt us to question these beliefs, we need not and do not attend to these beliefs in our deliberation. In this sense they are implicit. The concept of well-being seems to function in a negative way in our thinking. It acts as a *constraint* when the deliberator is in doubt about the prudential value of her choice or action.

Scanlon's own cinema example can illustrate this: "why do you take yourself to have reason to go to the cinema? Because I enjoy it." The agent does not need additionally to spell out that enjoyment is good for her and so would this particular instance of enjoyment. These things are taken to be implicit in the answer. This comes out most clearly when we consider cases in which one can no longer assume that a certain action or pursuit is good for one. Suppose that a trustworthy friend of mine with insider knowledge tells me that in the last month the cinema I want to go to received several credible bomb threats. I take my friend to be suggesting that going to the cinema might not be *good for* me. Sensibly, I take myself to have reason on the whole not to want to go to the cinema. What would justify my choice not to go? Most of us would find it perfectly satisfactory to say that it is the idea of my well-being, the fact that I now believe that it would not be good for me to go.<sup>28</sup> Doubts about the prudential value of my pursuit bring into my deliberation the concept of well-being. This will rationally constrain my desiring to engage in the considered activity.

<sup>28</sup> This example might need further spelling out. Suppose, for example, that my friend is the bomber and knew that a bomb capable of disintegrating the whole block would go off at the time I intended to be at the cinema, just a few minutes before the session started. In this case there is no reason for me to desire to go to the cinema as nothing good for me would be obtained by going to the cinema. Next, consider the case in which the bomb would in fact go off just as the session reaches its end. In that case there would be some reason to desire to go to the cinema, as I would get to enjoy the movie, though there would be stronger reason to desire not to go, as that would not be overall good for me. This is the case I had in mind in the text above. It might be thought that the "bomb-threat" example is too extreme, though of course that would depend on what part of the world one lives in. The same point can be easily made with everyday type of cases. A child asks his parents: "Why do I have to go to school? I hate it!" The parents answer or think to themselves "Because that is good/best for you." Or again, my friend is trying to convince me to try some hash/a new machine at the amusement park/to take a course in culinary arts. It would be appropriate and natural on my behalf to consider whether and how each of these things would be in my interest or good for me.

One may reply that the reason we would decide not to go to the cinema would be explained by our desire not to die, not by reference to a master concept of well-being. This, I think, may only postpone appeals to well-being without getting rid of them. Surely, most of us take it for granted that life is precious and death is to be avoided. It must be remarked, however, that there is nothing intrinsically normative in the concept of biological life or continued existence; other features lend normativity to this concept. Believers, for example, may be persuaded by the idea that life is sacred for it is a gift from God. Alternatively, or additionally, another plausible and common idea is that being alive is good for you for it allows you to realise all the things you take to be good for you. This position, however, is compatible with the idea that life is not intrinsically normative. For some of us, continued existence may be the greater evil (think about agonising incurable patients or tortured prisoners with no prospects of regaining freedom). In such circumstances the desire not to die cannot be appealed to as a reason. I contend that the one feature which would plausibly make such a desire normative in the cinema example above is well-being.

Another example confirms the implicit role of well-being in our deliberation. Suppose that we have reason to desire enjoyment for its own sake and that an agent is confronted with a choice between two courses of action with no consequences for anyone other than himself. Suppose also that the only desirability feature of each of the two actions is its enjoyableness. We should agree that it would be most rational for the agent to choose the thing that brought about the most enjoyment. What makes this the most rational choice? One answer would be 'enjoyment itself' given that we are postulating that we have reason to desire it for its own sake. But then we could carry out the simple test introduced above. Suppose it could be shown that the most enjoyable option was not in fact good for the agent: would we still think that he has most reason to want it? Clearly not. What confers rationality to our desire for that thing, then, is not simply enjoyment. Rather, it seems that the idea of the agent's well-being always and at least implicitly plays a part in determining what there is most reason to desire.

We could run two slightly different versions of this argument. The first one would go as follows. We agree that it would be most rational for the agent to desire the thing that brought about the most enjoyment. If someone asked why that would be the most rational thing to desire one could answer that that is so simply because it is believed to yield the most enjoyment. Scanlon would have to be satisfied with this answer. But wouldn't we find this answer satisfactory only insofar as we also took it to imply that that thing was the one most in the agent's interest? If someone made us seriously doubt the fact that this thing is the one most in the agent's interest, wouldn't we *ipso facto* doubt that the agent has most reason to desire it? The second version of the argument would require that the description of the example be altered in the following way. We can no longer assume that the consequences of the agent's choice are restricted to himself alone. Other moral subjects might be involved. We also know that the choice resulting in the most enjoyment for the agent is the best in terms of the agent's well-being and, yet, he chooses something else. What are we to conclude? I think we have three options: (a) the agent has acted on considerations other than his well-being; (b) the agent did act on what he believed to be his interest but held false beliefs concerning what was the best choice for him or what were the best means to realise it. Suppose, however, that his choice cannot be explained by either (a) or (b). We will then have to conclude that (c) the agent's rationality is criticisable on the grounds that he did not take the option that he had good reason to believe to be most conducive to his well-being.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Incidentally, note that if this conclusion is correct, then we can claim that the *idea* of one's well-being is a normative idea. Darwall (2002), attacks the idea that the concept of well-being is itself normative.

Recall the cinema example once again. When answering why he went to the cinema, I claimed that the agent need not additionally spell out that enjoyment is good for her as that would be implicit in the answer that she enjoys going to the cinema. An objector may counter that the additional spelling out may be necessary after all, because there are people who do what they think they will enjoy without making any assumption about enjoyment being good. I can offer two answers in guise of a defence. Firstly, we would have to note that most of our agency is indeed done without making any *explicit* assumptions (or any assumptions explicit) at the time of action, especially so when the assumptions are of an abstract kind such as the ones at issue here.<sup>30</sup> So, it may very well be the case that agents do not think about goodness when they think about enjoyment but that would not have shown much. Secondly, and more to the point, it may be claimed that agents may *ex post actu* hold that even though enjoyment was what motivated them the idea that enjoyment is good for them is not something they hold. After all, there is a tradition in philosophy, especially in the ancient times, that questioned the idea that pleasure is indeed a good.

In order to answer this charge I need not argue that pleasure or enjoyment is *a* good but that it is a *pro tanto* prudential good. One way to do so is to keep clearly separated moral goodness, perfectionist goodness, and *all things considered* prudential goodness on the one hand, and *pro tanto* prudential goodness, on the other.<sup>31</sup> Those who claim that only certain enjoyments are good for an agent owe us an explanation as to what makes some enjoyments prudentially good and not others. I contend that moral and perfectionist ideals are typically used to discern between the two types of enjoyments. Enjoyments are prudentially good unless they are immoral or unless they go against human perfection. This argument, however, at most shows that some prudential goods can be immoral and some prudential goods can go against human perfection, conclusions which are consistent with the position defended here. To derive any further conclusion from this argument is to conflate moral goodness and perfectionist goodness, on the one hand, with prudential goodness, on the other. Finally, one could claim that enjoyment is only one among a number of prudential goods such as achievement or the pursuit of knowledge. The pursuit of any particular enjoyment over these other goods may then not be all things considered good for one, i.e. it may not be what is best for one.

The objector may still fail to be persuaded by the claim that the parts of well-being are rationally subsumed to the concept of well-being in our thinking. This statement needs some

<sup>30</sup> Most agency is non-deliberative in this sense and is rather what is sometimes referred to as ‘willed’ or ‘controlled’ or ‘voluntary’ agency (see e.g., Jahanshahi and Frith 1998; Shallice 1988; Perner 2003). One should also note the importance of *automatic* agency such as over-learned actions.

<sup>31</sup> Writers such as McNaughton and Rawling might not part of accept my argumentative strategy here. That is because they fail to notice that there is a conceptual distinction between well-being and perfection and hence between welfarism and perfectionism. They write: “[Welfarism] does not state that what determines whether some action or outcome instantiates some particular value is the bearing of that action or outcome on human welfare... [Rather i]n determining what constitutes an achievement we just are *are*, in part, determining what the good life for humans is.” McNaughton and Rawling (2001), 157-158: 158 n.2. McNaughton and Rawling seem to conflate two things: on the one side, what things can make a life a good life, and on the other, what things enhance a person’s well-being or make his life go well for him. Contrary to what they seem to think, though determining an excellence may determine what it is for a life to be a good human life, it is possible for a good human life not to be good for the agent whose life it should be. To claim the contrary, would require a substantive argument. At any rate, one cannot simply assume a conceptual identity between a life’s choiceworthiness and its level well-being. In the words of Sumner (1996), 24: “there is no logical guarantee that the most developed specimen will also be the best off, or that their underdeveloped rivals would not be faring better.”

further refining. For one, it should not be read as implying that things such as enjoyment or achievement, or any other part of well-being, must rationally be subsumed under the concept of well-being to count or be understood as goods. This is best seen in the case of achievement and of some instances of achievement in particular, say, discovering the fundamental laws of the universe, painting the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel or climbing Mount Everest without oxygen. I am not committed to the claim that such things have value only insofar as they contribute to a person's well-being. Knowledge, art, and other types of achievements may be valuable independently of the notion of well-being. What I contend, however, is that in the absence of other – regarding considerations and/or moral violations, an agent can ever have most reason to desire and pursue these choiceworthy activities if they clash with her well-being. “Why would I want to climb Mount Everest without oxygen?” Once again answers such as “It is an achievement” or “it is enjoyable” may be all right, but only insofar as there is no reason to doubt that the activity is good for me, or the best thing for me to do. This is to say that “rationally subsumed to the concept of well-being” means that in our practical rational deliberation, choiceworthy considerations are constrained by the concept of well-being, which acts as a regulatory ideal.

For the above example to meet our intuitions we had to postulate moral considerations out of the picture. Thus, the view defended here does not imply that it is always irrational to choose something we believe not to be good for us and, in particular, it does not exclude that we may rightly consider ourselves to have most reason to do what is morally obligatory though it clashed with what would be in our interest. Remember that we are operating under the assumption that well-being is important only when decisions concerning merely the agent's own life are concerned. Obviously, in certain cases an agent's interest and his moral duties may be fused. An idea similar to this struck Aristotle and, much later, J.S. Mill. *Virtuous* agents are those who thrive while fulfilling their duties. Yet, we should not forget the possibility of (rather Kantian) *conscientious* types, who will to do their duty without finding it particularly good for them.

So far we have it that, in the absence of moral considerations, there cannot be most reason to desire and do something that is not in the agent's interest. In this sense, enjoyments and achievements, though they can be understood to be goods independently of well-being, have sufficient practical normative force only insofar as they are compatible with the agent's well-being. At this point perfectionists may object. Surely, they would say, the fact that certain properties are constitutive of human nature has a practical normative force of its own and a force which (always or at least sometimes) overrides well-being considerations. To understand whether this is a challenge, we need to understand whether perfectionist reasons are typically understood as moral reasons. Thomas Hurka, for example, believes that all versions of perfectionism “share the foundational idea that what is good, ultimately, is the development of human nature.”<sup>32</sup> The ultimate goodness to which Hurka is referring is functionally similar to the ultimate goodness which consequentialists would refer to, that which determines what actions are right and what actions are wrong. In this sense, Hurka is here implying that perfectionist reasons *are* moral reasons. If they are moral reasons then they can be accommodated within our view in the way I discussed in the paragraph above and hence pose no problem here.

Next, however, let us suppose for the sake of the argument that perfectionism implied that at least some perfectionist reasons are neither ultimately good in this sense nor moral in any

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<sup>32</sup> Hurka (1993), 3

sense. According to the perfectionist, if something has the property of making humans humans, then there is *pro tanto* reason to pursue it. Perfectionists, for example, will typically understand the value of anything that can count as an achievement in perfectionist terms, i.e., as something that perfects human nature. The view I defend here does not have to oppose this much. What it would oppose, however, is that an agent can ever have most reason to pursue any of these goods if it conflicts with her well-being. I contend that if perfectionist reasons can override well-being reasons then it could be rational for an agent to sacrifice her well-being for the sake of perfection and this is counterintuitive.

Consider this example: Michelangelo (with all his talents) has a choice between two types of life. *Life A* is a life of artistic achievements but without much pleasure and ease; *Life B* is a life of ease and simple pleasures but no great artistic achievements. Remember that Michelangelo's choice is indifferent from a moral point of view. Michelangelo, then, worries only about the repercussions of his choice on his life. Now let us postulate that *Life A* is a better human life than *Life B*, that is, *Life A* has greater perfectionist value, but *Life B* is better in terms of well-being. According to the perfectionist view at hand, there is most reason for Michelangelo to choose *Life A*. But what would justify this normative advantage to perfection? What would justify Michelangelo's sacrifice? We would surely find some answers if perfection was a moral ideal. But that is not the view considered here. I contend that the (amoral) perfectionist ideal simply lacks the substantive normative force required to rationally justify self-sacrifice. To say that, however, is not to deny that if there were such an amoral version of perfectionism, (a) it could afford agents with *pro tanto* practical reasons and (b) these reasons could become sufficient for action insofar as they are compatible with the agent's interest.

Considering the perfectionist's objection may seem to have distracted us from the main problem. In fact the perfectionist portrayed here shares a structural feature with our position rather than with Scanlon's. Perfectionism would claim that what gives various goods their point is precisely the idea of perfection, just as we would claim that what gives the various parts of well-being their point is the notion of well-being. Scanlon's point is precisely contrary to this one: well-being is an inclusive good "one that is made up of other things that are good in their own right, not made good by their contribution to well-being." Yet, as I argued in Section 4, that there is reason to desire and pursue the parts of well-being for their own sake does not imply that there is no reason to desire them *also* for the sake of well-being.

In fact in this section I hope to have shown that if we want to count things such as enjoyment and achievement among the parts of well-being we *must* also claim that there is reason to desire these things for the sake of well-being. This, I argued, means that there cannot be most reason to desire any of these things if doing so is incompatible with one's well-being. If we dropped this condition, it would be possible that these alleged parts of well-being systematically failed to contribute to well-being and hence there would be little reason to call these things 'parts' of well-being. But if well-being is made up by various goods and these goods can conflict with each other, there must be something that regulates our rational pursuit of these things. If this something is not well-being, we would have no guarantee that our choice contributes to our well-being and hence there would be no reason to call these things parts of well-being. Friends of Scanlon's view are thus facing a dilemma: either they give up the commitment to the idea that well-being is an inclusive good consisting of parts; or they accept that inclusiveness entails the connection to the concept of well-being that I put forward. Either option is unpalatable. The latter is directly inconsistent with their view. Alternatively, if they dropped the commitment to inclusiveness, they will no longer be able to claim that what gives well-being its importance are its parts, for well-being would no longer have parts.



## 6 The Importance of Well-being Reassessed

The upshot of the above discussion is that the concept of well-being does after all play a significant regulatory and explanatory role in the thinking of a rational individual, albeit one that is often implicit. That well-being has such an implicit role is confirmed by the fact that many of our practical questions, concerns, and choices would make no sense without some reference to the concept of well-being even though the concept itself does not always explicitly appear. Consider newspaper questions asking whether people in our kind of society are too addicted to working and earning money. Would it make sense to ask them unless one thought that being addicted to work was bad for one? Or consider our daily dietary concerns, in which we have to trade off gustatory pleasure for considerations of health. The savoury dish is good for me insofar as it is pleasant to eat but it is bad for me insofar as it is unhealthy. Eating healthy all the time, however, may end up being depressing. Or consider what an agent would do when trying to strike a balance between her career ambitions as a research medic and her family. Beside considering the needs of the other members of her family, she will probably try to project herself in the future in each of the options available to her (say, that in which she favoured her career to her family and that in which she favoured her family to her career). She will try to imagine what her life would look like in each option and how satisfied and fulfilled or bitter and frustrated she would be in each option. This appreciation, I believe, cannot be done without an understanding of how good or bad each of these options is for her. In fact, in each of these rather common cases the concept of well-being is the background against which one is to understand the question, the concern, or the choice one faces.

If these cases are added to our practice of explicitly calling the concept of well-being into our deliberation when uncertainty about the prudential outcomes of our choices enters our deliberation, then we see why the explicit and frequent reading of Scanlon's (C1) is not an appropriate test for the role of well-being in our thinking. If this criterion is read as including the implicit role of the concept of well-being, however, then, on that very same criterion the outcome of the test would be rather different. Take any particular thing that contributes to my well-being. Though I may not appeal to well-being to explain and understand why I have reason to have some pro-attitude towards it, rationally, I will cease taking myself to have most reason to desire if I come to doubt its prudential value or if I have to choose between it and another part of my well-being, as we daily have to do.

Scanlon's position, however, may still have some bite through (C2): the boundary of the concept of one's own well-being is typically insignificant in an agent's mode of thinking. Remember Scanlon's example concerning the case of friendship, family relations and loyalty to institutions.<sup>33</sup> I will claim that even in these cases, the concept of well-being can be said to appear implicitly in our motivation. Take the case of friendship. I agree with Scanlon that we take ourselves to have a reason to desire and pursue friendship for its own sake. Suppose, however, that, during the last few months, a friend of mine asked me to do a number of things that I find very exacting. Or suppose again that another friend never has a minute to ask about me and always finds time to unload his numerous problems onto me. In both cases, I will ask myself whether it would be any good for me to maintain these relationships. My question would be perfectly reasonable and my answer will be based on my well-being or, more precisely, on where I intuitively place the boundary or limits of my well-being in this situation. To say this, however, is not to say, as Scanlon would want us to think, that our concern for our friends or family is "grounded" on "selfish" reasons. I would rather say that considerations of well-being will act as a constraint for the rational pursuit of these other

<sup>33</sup> See Section 3 above or Scanlon (1998), 129.



ends. As for the first criterion, if Scanlon's own formulation of the second criterion is read as including the implicit as well as the explicit role of well-being, then, on that very same criterion, well-being would be important in the thinking of that person.

## 7 Conclusion

By bringing to the fore the more implicit ways in which the concept of well-being plays a role in first-personal deliberation and by showing how inclusiveness not only does not exclude but requires having a reason to desire and pursue the various parts of well-being also for the sake of well-being, we are in a position to reject the charge that the concept of well-being has little role in first-personal thinking. This conclusion has at least a twofold bearing on the broader domain of normative ethics. Firstly, it supports (5') and, given that (5') can be taken as either an expression of philosophical utilitarianism or as a crucial step towards its justification, our conclusion supports philosophical utilitarianism. Secondly, it preserves the main tenet of many a teleological theory from a specific kind of argument whose conclusion is that well-being is a moral notion.

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