

# HUMAN DIVERSITY AND THE NATURE OF WELL-BEING: REFLECTIONS ON SUMNER'S METHODOLOGY

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**Abstract:** In *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, L. W. Sumner argues that theories of well-being must not pick out some kinds of human lives as richer in prudential value than others. I argue that we should reject this methodological stricture, but should embrace his insight that many kinds of lives are good for people to live. I also reject his claim that a theory of well-being would fail if it took the form of a list of things that are good for us. Nonetheless, I argue, if we construct such a list in a way that caters to the diversity of good human lives, we will be led to the conclusion that they are united by their relationship to the flourishing of our natural capacities. I distinguish between bottom-up and top-down strategies for defending this Aristotelian conception of well-being, and argue in favor of a bottom-up approach.

## 1 Neutrality

In *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, Wayne Sumner proposes, as one criterion of the adequacy of a philosophical theory of welfare, that it be neutral between different ways of life. “An account of the nature of welfare,” he says,

must not have built into it any bias in favour of some particular goods or some preferred way of life. . . . Because of the formidable diversity of human cultures, patterns of socialization, tastes, and conditions of life, rich and rewarding lives come in a variety of forms. No descriptively adequate theory of welfare can simply favour some of these possibilities over others, whether it be a preference for planning over spontaneity, for complexity over simplicity, for civilization over tribal life, for excitement over tranquillity, for risk over safety, for perpetual striving

over contentment, for sexuality over celibacy, for companionship over solitude, for religious conviction over atheism, for rationality over emotion, for the intellectual life over the physical, or whatever. . . . It is tempting to shape an account of the nature of human welfare around some preferred assumption about the way in which a human life should be lived. The temptation must be resisted. (1996, 18)

An insight is embedded in this passage, I would like to suggest, but it takes some work to extract it from other components that are less plausible. Sumner might be taken to mean that when we reflect philosophically about what well-being or welfare is, we should use a Cartesian methodology, setting aside what we believe, even what we think we know, and theorize from that stripped-down starting point. But if that is what he has in mind, his proposal would face a formidable objection that can be made against *ever* taking skepticism as the right starting point of a philosophical project. If you start from scratch, you will have nothing to guide your inquiry. If everything that seems plausible is set aside as a bias, you get nowhere.

In fact, a skeptical methodology would be incompatible with one of Sumner's claims, namely that "rich and rewarding lives come in a variety of forms." He must have arrived at that point by observing or imagining a number of different ways of living, and judging that all of them are equally good lives, all being equally "rich and rewarding." In doing so, he was not being neutral. He was not withholding judgment about their worth. He cannot mean that *every* possible way in which people have lived, or might live, is rich and rewarding—that we do not even have to look at a life to determine whether it is good for the person living it. So, right from the start of his inquiry, in his assumption that good lives take many forms, he himself implies that certain kinds of lives are better than others.

Yet, as I said, an insight is contained in this passage. To elicit it, consider any one of several opposing pairs by means of which Sumner makes his point more concrete. Planning versus spontaneity, for example: some people decide almost everything in advance, and leave little room for spontaneity; others are closer to the opposite end of the spectrum. Neither approach is inherently better than the other. Some have a greater need for spontaneity than others, and are better than most at making quick and improvised choices. For them, a rich and rewarding life may have a large degree of improvisation; other lives, however, go best when little room is left for spontaneity. Similarly, people have different styles when it comes to how much risk, stress, or solitude they need or can tolerate. The amount that is best for one person might be too much or too little for another. The precise affective style and orientation that is best for one person may never be *exactly* what it is for another. The general point, then—although it is only implicit in Sumner's statement—is that no two human beings are exactly

alike in personality, and since what is good for someone is dependent to some extent on that individual's make-up, rich and rewarding lives come in many forms. That is an important point, one that any theory of well-being ought to recognize.

Since "rich and rewarding lives come in a variety of forms," it is natural to wonder whether we can observe something, or some number of things, that they have in common that accounts for their being "rich and rewarding." The fact that they differ in some respects is compatible with the possibility that in other respects they are alike. In fact, Sumner (1996, Ch. 6) himself proposes and defends his own theory of what, despite their diversity, unifies all lives that are "rich and rewarding" for those living them, and makes them high in welfare: all such lives, he claims, are made good by the fact that the person living it is happy with it—sincerely and autonomously affirms that he is happy with the general quality of his life.

What lies behind Sumner's theory of well-being is his conviction, as he puts it that "individuals are the ultimate authorities concerning their own welfare" (1996, 171).<sup>1</sup> If you are happy with your life, and this positive overall assessment of how it is going is authentically your own judgment, and does not depend on any error about what the contents of your life are, then no one can gainsay your self-assessment, because what makes your life one that is good for you is the very fact that you have endorsed it as a happy life.

But this theory of well-being does not sit comfortably with the insight embedded in the passage I have been discussing. I have taken that passage to mean that "rich and rewarding lives" take many different forms because the kind of life that is good for someone depends at least in part on his peculiar psychological complexion. That by itself shows that an individual is not the "ultimate authority" concerning his welfare, as Sumner claims. For someone may have a poor understanding of his personality; he may therefore choose a life that is far inferior to the one that would be the best fit for him. Suppose a high school senior, for example, has chosen college *A* over its competitors because he thought it would be the best match for his interests, talents, and temperament. He may be a poor judge of these matters; perhaps, because of the kind of person he is, he would have been better off and happier had he selected college *B*. Yet over the course of his

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<sup>1</sup>This claim about an individual's "authority" relies on material presented in pages 156-160. Note especially these statements: "When we reassess our lives in retrospect, and from a superior epistemic vantage point, *there is no right answer to the question of what our reaction should be*—that is surely up to us" (author's emphasis, 158-159). One must not presume "to dictate to individuals how much their deviations from an ideal epistemic standpoint should matter to them. . . . That is for them to decide" (159). "What we are seeking is an adequate subjective theory of welfare, one in which the subject's point of view on her life is authoritative. . . . By connecting welfare with happiness we have interpreted that point of view as an endorsement or affirmation of the conditions of her life. When that endorsement is based on a clear view of those conditions, we have no grounds for questioning or challenging its authority: in this respect, the individual is sovereign over her well-being."

college career, he may never regret his choice of where to go to school. He might sincerely and autonomously declare himself to be happy. It may be that he *is* happy. But that does not show that his choice was the best one he could have made from the standpoint of his own good. For by hypothesis he is happy with his choice only because he is ignorant of the ways in which his other alternatives would have suited him better. He would have had a richer and more rewarding college life had he chosen differently.<sup>2</sup> This example can easily be generalized; *any* significant choice about what is best for oneself depends in part on a self-understanding that the chooser may lack. Sumner's theory of well-being, I conclude, is at odds with one of the insights from which he begins to theorize.

In earlier work, I favored a way of thinking about well-being that is closer to Aristotle's than is Sumner's or any other that makes individuals "ultimate authorities" concerning their own welfare.<sup>3</sup> But in a way, what I took from Aristotle is also present in much of ancient ethics—in Socrates, Plato, the Epicureans, and the Stoics, no less than Aristotle. For all of them, certain goods of the soul are greater in value than are external goods. Consider, for example, social status, reputation, and fame—what the Greeks call *timê* (standardly translated "honor"). These things come to us from the outside; they are not aspects of who one is, but detachable objects controlled by others, and therefore easily lost or gained. For that reason, ancient ethics holds that *timê* has far less value than do the most important and advantageous goods—the goods of the soul, which are grounded in who you are. If you proposed to them that it is not honor itself that is a great good, but the consciousness of honor, they would say, with good reason, that this too has little value. The inferiority of honor as a good cannot be remedied by being brought to mind by the honorand.

Sumner, by contrast, is committed to saying that if someone greatly values fame, reputation, and social standing, and judges his life to be happy because he has achieved these goals, then his life is rich and rewarding, the more so to the extent that he is happy about it. Such an individual's well-being, Sumner could point out, is precarious, because reputation and other such goods are ephemeral. But that is the only kind of criticism he can make of this kind of life. He cannot and has no wish to say that it

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<sup>2</sup>Can Sumner adequately handle this objection by saying that the student in question would have more strongly endorsed or affirmed his life, had he chosen differently? That response would require him to concede that an individual may be mistaken about which of the alternative lives between which he is choosing would be endorsed by him most strongly. Furthermore, when we affirm or endorse our lives, we typically do so for a reason. The college applicant in my example wants to be at the school that is the best fit for his temperament, interests, and abilities. His endorsement is based on something, and may therefore be mistaken. It is not the strongest possible attitude of endorsement that he seeks; rather, it is the school that merits that favorable assessment because it is the one that is best for him. For an excellent discussion and critique of the general type of theory to which Sumner's belongs (a "life satisfaction" theory), see Haybron (2008, 79–104).

<sup>3</sup>See Kraut (2007).

embodies a shallow conception of well-being. Doing so would violate his dictum that “individuals are the ultimate authorities concerning their own welfare.”

This explains why he posits right from the start that “an account of the nature of welfare must not have built into it any bias in favour of some particular goods or some preferred way of life.” We have seen that there is no reason to adopt this methodology, and that Sumner himself cannot abide by it. Nonetheless, this constraint on inquiry expresses his opposition to working out a theory of well-being by reflecting on concrete examples of people who are wasting portions of their lives by mistakenly taking such-and-such a goal (honor, for instance) to be non-instrumentally advantageous to themselves. Such an approach to well-being would already have closed off the result that Sumner wants to reach: that “individuals are the ultimate authorities concerning their own welfare.” He must say, then, that philosophers who find the pursuit of honor to be superficial—all of the philosophers of Greek and Roman antiquity—are simply biased against this way of life. But the assumption that fame and suchlike things are superficial goals, of little or no non-instrumental advantage, strikes me as a far more plausible starting point for an inquiry into well-being than is Sumner’s assertion that theories of well-being must begin from a stance of neutrality. We know that some things have little or no value; and we need not set aside everything we know, when we philosophize.

Notice, incidentally, that if human preferences become increasingly homogenized, if more and more people base their happiness with their lives on similar things, the less true it becomes that there is, as Sumner thinks, a great variety of lives that are high in prudential value. Suppose everyone becomes obsessed with fame, for example. Imagine, in other words, a world divided between the famous and happy few; and the unfamous, unhappy, unsuccessful seekers after fame. Here everyone has the same conception of happiness, and so Sumner’s observation no longer holds true—that “rich and rewarding” lives come in many different forms. That is a thoroughly depressing prospect, but Sumner cannot agree. For him, as it turns out, the various forms welfare takes reflects nothing deep-seated, nothing rooted in human personality and its great variety, but depends only on whether people happen to exercise in similar ways their authoritative judgment about their happiness.

One further observation about Sumner’s requirement of neutrality: I have credited him with an important insight, one that he elicits with his examples of the way human beings differ as regards such contrasting pairs as planning and spontaneity, excitement and tranquility, risk and safety, striving and contentment. But he also says in this passage that in constructing a theory of well-being we ought to be neutral between sexuality versus celibacy, and between religious conviction versus atheism. Here, I am not inclined to credit him with an insight.

If I approach the topic of well-being already convinced that there is one Highest One who is an exemplar of goodness, Sumner either ought to offer reasons for doubting my theistic posit, or he ought to explain why I should make no use of my theism, even if it is true. But he does neither. He makes no attempt to show that my theistic posit is *false*, but instead says that it should be dismissed because it is not *neutral*—it already makes a commitment to there being an exemplar of goodness. But there is nothing wrong with starting to construct an ethical theory from a theistic hypothesis if it that hypothesis true. Although Sumner presents his approach to well-being as neutral between “religious conviction versus atheism,” it is really a thoroughly secular theory from start to finish. He, like the rest of us, constructs an ethical theory by building on what he thinks he already knows (even though he denies that he is doing so). He ought to have said that he does not know that God exists: that would have been a better reason than the one he gives for explaining why he does not bring “religious conviction” to bear on his theory.

As for the opposition between sexuality and celibacy, here too a stance of neutrality seems amiss, because even those who take a vow of celibacy do so on the grounds that they are making a sacrifice in one area of human life in order to devote themselves more fully to what they regard as of greater value. Their celibacy would be of no significance were it not regarded as a sacrifice—a renunciation of a human good for the sake of a transcendent value. Sexual pleasures experienced in favorable circumstances strike us all—including those who renounce them—as something good for us to feel. There is no reason, none at any rate that Sumner offers, for suspending judgment about their value in our search for an account of well-being.

If I am right that Sumner is misguided in his stance of neutrality as regards sexuality versus celibacy and atheism versus religion, that is all the more reason to reject neutrality as a methodological requirement.

## 2 Sumner on Formality

I turn now to another methodological constraint that Sumner imposes on the construction of a theory of well-being, in addition to his requirement of neutrality. According to this further stricture, such a theory must have a formal or second-order character. It must not be a mere list of things that are good for human beings (or more generally for “welfare subjects”), but must tell us what well-being is. It would be a mistake for a theory of well-being, in Sumner’s words,

to confuse the conditions which constitute someone’s being benefited by something . . . with any of the particular things capable of being beneficial. . . . A theory therefore must not confuse the nature of well-being with its (direct or intrinsic) sources; it must offer us, not (merely) a list

of sources, but an account of what qualifies something (anything) to appear on that list. (1996, 16)

Sumner's favored conception of well-being holds that the nature of well-being is authentic happiness, and that something is an advantage by being a source of authentic happiness. If, for example, someone is authentically happy with his life because he is famous, rich, and powerful, then the list of good things in his life contains these three, but what it for his life to be high in welfare is just one thing: it is for it to be an authentically happy life.

I propose that we reject the requirement of formality. My argument against it begins with some reminders about the basic features of the value theories of G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross. Well-being (or what is good for someone) is not a topic they theorize about, but nonetheless lists play an important role in their moral philosophies, and this will help us see that Sumner is demanding too much when he requires that we rule out of court on methodological grounds any theory of well-being that takes the form of a list.

Moore holds that goodness cannot be defined, that many sorts of thing are good, and that aesthetic and interpersonal pleasures are by far the two greatest kinds. Ross offers no definition of rightness or goodness, but proposes what he takes to be a complete list of *prima facie* duties and basic goods.

Whatever we think of these moral theories, we ought to acknowledge that it would be of great philosophical interest to secure such results as these. The thesis that goodness has no nature other than being good and cannot be explained in more basic terms deserves a hearing. It cannot be dismissed simply on methodological grounds. Similarly, Ross's thesis that there are just four basic goods—virtue, knowledge, pleasure, and the allocation of pleasure to the virtuous—also deserves close scrutiny. We may decide to reject these claims, but we should not in advance refuse to examine them on the grounds that they do not tell us what the nature of goodness is, but merely put together lists of goods. Note that the same point would apply even if Moore and Ross were talking about what is good *for* someone rather than about *absolute* goodness. So, something has gone wrong in Sumner's requirement of formality.

Suppose a theorist of well-being proposed, first, that what is good for someone cannot be understood in more basic terms; and second, that there are just three basic kinds of things that are good for human beings—pleasure, knowledge, and virtue—all others (friendship, aesthetic experience, and so on) being combinations of these three. I don't see any basis for ruling out that theory merely on methodological grounds—simply because it is a list and does not tell us what the nature of well-being is. For all we know in advance of inquiry, it might be true that welfare is a “primitive” concept. Admittedly, we can use such terms as “welfare,” “well-being,” “prudential value” and “good for someone” more or less interchangeably,

and in this sense we can explain what we mean by “welfare.” But these words do not give us a deeper understanding of welfare by decomposing it into more basic parts. That analytic task might be impossible to achieve. If so, Sumner’s demand that a theory of welfare define its nature has to be rejected.

What a philosophical theory of welfare might usefully do, even in that case, is construct a list of the types of things are good for human beings (and other creatures). Such a list, were it close enough to the truth, would, like Moore’s or Ross’s list of absolutely good things, do real explanatory work. It would tell us not only what to aspire to and pursue, when we seek to advance someone’s interest; it would tell us, in addition, *why* we ought to pursue them. It would, for example, claim not only that one ought to study geometry, but would also explain why: because it is a branch of knowledge, and because it is good to acquire knowledge. A list of the types of things that are good for anyone to have organizes our particular options into general groups, thereby calling our attention to similarities and differences between them, and explaining why we have reason to be attracted to particular tokens of these types—namely because this particular thing belongs to a type that is good for someone to have.

In fact, the construction of a list of things that are good for us might prove to be a helpful first step towards an understanding of the nature of human well-being. For we might discover, as we add further items to our list, that a certain pattern is emerging—that there are certain ways in which the items on our list resemble each other more or less closely. Perhaps there will be one feature that they have in common, and their having that common feature may add to the degree of confidence we already had that they deserve to be on our list. If this happens, all the better for our theory, but we should not infer that in the absence of such a result we have accomplished nothing.

### 3 Flourishing

This leads naturally to my next question: what should be put on a list of things that are good for us?

Many, many items; but I will start, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, with something very close to home: philosophy. When I ask myself whether in teaching philosophy to my students I am trying to benefit them, my reaction is that I would find it dispiriting to work at this job unless I had that aspiration. Philosophy, it seems to me, is non-instrumentally good for them. I also think that it would be good for many students who currently show no interest in my subject to be exposed to philosophical ideas and to learn how to grapple with philosophical issues. When I say that philosophy is or would be non-instrumentally good for these students, I am not denying that it is also a useful tool that can be used for non-philosophical purposes. Perhaps philosophy is good preparation for law

school. Perhaps it trains people to “think outside the box,” and as a result they become more creative entrepreneurs and business professionals. But even if philosophy were not useful in these ways, it would still have great value, because, if one approaches it in the right way, one becomes a deeper, more thoughtful person, and this by itself is an achievement worth working towards. Philosophy is mind-expanding. It enriches one’s mental life. These are metaphorical ways of speaking, but even so, such terms as “the growth of the mind,” “the flowering of the intellect,” and “mental enrichment” convey something important, and we should not try to do without them. I think philosophy is a worthwhile subject, then, because even apart from its practical applications in non-philosophical arenas it is a form of mental growth, and because it is non-instrumentally good for people to have philosophically sophisticated minds.

Someone might accuse me of making the very mistake that Sumner warns us against—bias. I seem to be favoring what I prefer and am familiar with, and thus violating his requirement of neutrality. Should I worry that in supposing philosophy to be good for my students, I am merely imposing on others my own likes and dislikes? It would be odd to base my professional life on the assumption that it is good for my students to become more philosophical and yet to set that assumption aside as a mere bias when I undertake a philosophical examination of well-being. And the suggestion that I just happen to like philosophy and have no basis for thinking that it does anyone good (including myself) strikes me as a form of professional cynicism. So, I continue to believe that the requirement of neutrality is ill-considered.

In any case, I don’t need to assume that it would be in *everyone’s* interest to study philosophy. There are such things as philosophical temperament and philosophical talent; perhaps some people are totally lacking in these qualities or have so little of them that it would be a waste of their time to study philosophy. But this strikes me as akin to the point that it would be a waste of time for someone who is permanently blind to study art history. An inability to engage in abstract thought, or an unalterable lack of interest in speculative questions, is one kind of cognitive limitation or deficiency.

Of course, there are many other sorts of cognitive deficits besides these, and nearly all of us are intellectually deficient or weaker in certain areas, stronger in others. Some people are bad with numbers. Others lack the linguistic creativity needed for writing poetry. I am not claiming that the absence of a philosophical temperament or philosophical skills is a worse cognitive debility than many other kinds. Recall my earlier acceptance of Sumner’s assertion that “rich and rewarding” lives come in many forms. My thesis that philosophy is good for many students should be taken to mean that this is one component of one kind of rich and rewarding life.

In effect, then, with these observations, I have seen a way to expand my list of what is good for people: I should put on it not just philosophy, but anything that in a similar way expands the mind, enriches it, deepens

it, and makes it grow. A great many subjects can be described in these ways—history, literature, the arts, the sciences, mathematics, and so on. The fact that I am putting a great many such pursuits on my list of things that are good for us gives me added confidence that the charge that I am biased in favor of my own way of life will not stick. I personally do not take to every subject on my expanded list of human goods. Chemistry, for example, has always bored me, and unfortunately I did not do well in my high school chemistry class. But I do not deny that it too is a mind-expanding, enriching subject. That science, along with all the others, is on my list of things that are good for us.

But that list, even in this expanded form, is quite one-sided, because it focuses on the intellectual growth of human beings—and surely this is not the only dimension in which people develop. Before we go any further, however, we should pause to notice that the term “intellectual flourishing” would be an appropriate one to designate the growth of the mind that occurs when people go about studying philosophy and the other liberal arts and sciences in the right way. We might say that what is one-sided about our list, so far, is that it includes only intellectual forms of flourishing, and leaves aside many other ways, less intellectual or non-intellectual, in which human beings can develop, grow, or flourish. The remedy for that, accordingly, will be to look at those other areas of human life, calling to mind what we already know about what it is for human beings to develop well in those spheres. We should round out our list of things that are good for us by adding to it the development of the affects and passions, the growth of the senses and imagination, and the enhancement of our skills as embodied creatures in such arenas as dance and athletics. This gives us a broader picture of the many kinds of human flourishing.

The lives of a plant or animal can also be assessed by asking whether and to what degree it is flourishing. Nature gives them certain potentialities for development, and they flourish when they fully realize those potentialities. So, our project of making a list of some human goods, and then adding to the list in ways that remedy its partial nature, has led to something remarkable—something we might not have expected in advance of philosophical inquiry: there *is*, as it turns out, a kind of uniformity, albeit one that is loose and general, in all that is good for an individual creature, whether human or non-human. We have arrived at a theory of well-being of the sort that Sumner laid down as the only sort that is intellectually respectable—what he calls a “formal” theory, one that says what welfare or being good for someone is, and distinguishes what welfare is from the things that bring it about. Well-being does have a nature that can be explained in terms that are not merely synonyms or linguistic equivalents of “advantageous,” “good for,” “welfare,” “prudential value,” and the like. Goodness for a living thing consists in its flourishing.

That does not mean that the words “well-being” and “flourishing” are synonyms, or that the concepts expressed by these words are the same. My

claim, rather, is that these words name the same property. In saying this, I am proposing an explanation of why it is that whenever something is faring well by doing or receiving what is good for it, it is, to that extent, flourishing; and vice versa. That correlation is just what is to be expected, since flourishing and well-being are the same property.

Someone might object that the word “flourishing” gives us no more insight into the nature of well-being than any of the other terms that I mentioned earlier: “good for someone,” “advantageous,” “welfare,” and the like. The invariant correlation between well-being and flourishing, according to this objection, is a trivial matter, since it just reflects the fact that these words are treated as acceptable substitutes for each other by most speakers.

To see where this objection goes wrong, consider the fact that although we can say that a watch or any other mechanical instrument is functioning well, it would be odd to say that it is flourishing. That is because a watch, unlike any living thing, cannot grow or maintain its robust size. It does not have a biological nature.

I do not mean by this that only living organisms can flourish. Someone’s automobile business or career as an attorney can be flourishing—they can be growing or maintaining their robustness. These are ways in which the term “flourishing” can be extended beyond its application to living things. The reason why a business can flourish but a watch cannot is because a business, like a plant or animal, can grow, develop, and expand to achieve its proper size and character. For the same reasons, a business, but not a watch, can be called healthy, even though the primary application of “health,” like that of “flourishing,” is to living things.

So, the thesis that the nature of well-being consists in flourishing is not an uninteresting verbal point, but a substantive theory about what can be found in common among the items we have put on our list of things that are good for human beings.<sup>4</sup> We have a nature, like plants and animals, and unlike watches. We come into the world naturally endowed with a vast number of interlocking capabilities, motivations, skills, and so on. These features can develop or fail to develop. They can be put into operation or lie unused. I conjecture that if we look at the items we have put on our list

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<sup>4</sup>There is such a thing as what is good for a watch, but we do not speak of the well-being of a watch. By contrast, not only is there such a thing as what is good for a dog or a horse—we also speak of their well-being. But I am doubtful that these linguistic facts are themselves a guide to something of normative significance, rather than accidents of language. If it were natural to say “this repair is for the sake of the well-being of the watch,” that should not make watches matter to us in a different way. Similarly, the fact that we can meaningfully say that a business or a career is growing or flourishing does not by itself have normative import. That someone’s business is capable of growing or flourishing is not itself a reason why someone should help it to flourish. It is the *kind* of growth that human beings can exhibit that provides a reason to promote their growth—not the mere fact that they can grow. Some animals can grow psychologically in ways that strongly resemble ours, and that *does* have normative significance.

of things that are good for human beings, they all arise as developments out of these natural starting points. The second nature that we acquire through a process of habituation and learning will be good for us only if it is grafted onto something that already is present in our first nature, as philosophy and other humane disciplines arise out of our natural curiosity about the world, or the enjoyment of word games arises from our delight in language and play.

The epistemological payoff of this thesis is that we are entitled to feel a boost in confidence in our list of things that are good for us if it can be unified in this way. There can be no reasonable doubt that plants and other animals flourish when their nature unfolds in certain ways. Similarly, I am suggesting, although we come to the subject of well-being already knowing certain things about it—enough to start constructing a list of such items—the degree of justification we have for putting this or that item on the list can be enhanced when we notice that a certain reassuring pattern among those items can be found. Since we are justified in being confident that plants and animals flourish when their nature unfolds, we are similarly justified in extending that point to human nature. And this approach to the topic of well-being has meta-ethical implications as well: good and bad are present in the world independently of human volitions and attitudes, since plants and animals are diseased or healthy, predators or prey, winners or losers, apart from our having names for these things.

A theory about what is good for human beings would be incomplete if it had nothing to say about the opposite pole—what is bad for human beings. In *What is Good and Why* I use the unfamiliar term “unflourishing” to designate that opposite state, and among the items I categorize in this way are such sensations as pain and nausea and such affects as depression and despair (2007, 148–168). A critic might say that nothing is learned and no light shed by my suggestion that we can think of pain and other such conditions as states of “unflourishing.” What, after all, is the value of saying that when someone is suffering, he is unflourishing? My reply is simply an application of some of the points I have already made, using other examples, to the case of pain. I start theorizing about what is bad for someone by constructing a list of things I already know to be bad. Pain and many other things (nausea, depression, and so on) go on the list. Then I propose that a pattern emerges: what is natural to us keeps reappearing, not only on the list of good things, but on the list of bad things as well. So, the theory does not claim to teach us a certain fact about pain that we did know before we constructed it: namely, that pain is bad. But the theory does purport to teach us something we did not already know, and in that sense something surprising, about *what it is* for something to be bad for us: since well-being is the flourishing of what nature gives us, so too its opposite, un-flourishing, is rooted in our nature. Pain serves as one small but clear confirmation of that general proposition: pain is not a habit we form or something we learn to feel; rather, first nature gives us a

susceptibility to pain, and so what the theory “predicts” turns out, in this case, to be so.<sup>5</sup>

Another complaint might be that I have failed to give any rationale for deciding which powers of a human being are the ones whose development and exercise constitutes his or her well-being. I have merely offered a short list of highly general capacities: cognition, affect, sensation, perception, imagination, physical powers, sexuality. Where, it might be asked, does this list come from? What do these things have in common that entitles them to be on my list? The same sort of question might be asked about other species: it is not enough, a critic might say, to say, quite vaguely, that lions or bees or tulips flourish when their natural powers are developed and exercised. For each species, my theory must say how I generate the list of the natural powers relevant to its flourishing.

What lies behind this objection is the mistake I discussed earlier, that of thinking that whenever a philosophical theory proposes a list of items that fall into a category, no progress has been made unless a general story is told about the criterion that is being used to generate the list. To repeat: it would be an advance in our understanding of why someone should study geometry if it is true, as Ross proposes, that we should aspire to good things, that all knowledge is good, and that geometry is a form of knowledge. Similarly, we make some progress in our understanding of human well-being if we have a list of the natural human powers whose flowering constitutes our flourishing. It is not the case that progress only comes if we can say what all the human powers that are to be developed have in common, and similarly for all lions, whales, and tulips.

If someone asks why it is good—to take one example—for a baby’s cognitive powers to be developed, my response is to point to the countless later activities that will be non-instrumentally good for that child, and that would be unavailable to it without the maturation of its cognitive capacities. Philosophy was the example I used earlier, but it is only one among a vast number.

#### 4 Generalizing from Individual Cases

One sometimes hears it said that what it is for a theory of well-being to be Aristotelian is for it to move in a top-down fashion: beginning with a norm of faring well that is applicable at the species level, it draws conclusions

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<sup>5</sup>There is no opposite to the notion of a power’s development. A power can remain undeveloped, but it cannot go in a direction *contrary* to development. Our eyesight, for example, can either be developed or can fail to have this potential; but the eyes do not sink into the opposite of seeing, because there is no such thing. The term “unflourishing” is not to be understood as denying this point. In particular, the disvalue of pain does not lie in its being the opposite of a natural power. Calling it a state of “unflourishing” is merely meant to suggest that it is part of our biological nature to be susceptible to it, and that it is not merely the absence of well-being but the presence of what is bad for us.

about any arbitrarily selected individual simply on the basis of its membership in that species. The most basic guiding idea of Aristotelianism, so conceived, is that what is good for a particular living thing is determined by the biological kind to which it belongs. The well-being of chimpanzees, for example, is not to be assessed by looking at their linguistic competence, because biological constraints normally prevent them from acquiring all but the most rudimentary features of a language.

Against this form of Aristotelianism, it can be argued that the biological features of an individual are not unalterable, and that it would be dogmatic to assume that any alteration would have to be for the worse. Suppose a few chimpanzees could be genetically changed so that they could form a linguistic community. It is arguable that this operation would be good for them, because it would enhance their mental lives. The conclusion this argument invites us to draw is that what is good for a creature is determined not by its membership in some larger group, but solely by its own capacities, which may be quite different from those of other members of that group.<sup>6</sup>

That is one way of working out an Aristotelian approach to well-being, but there is an alternative that I favor, one that can be described as bottom-up rather than top-down. It begins with this or that human being and asks: what is good for him or her? Let's suppose that, as it happens, because of the peculiar talents and temperament of the individual in question, one thing that would be very good for him is to study philosophy. In saying this, we make no commitment to the thesis that it would be good for *every* human being to do the same. We are committed only to recommending philosophy to those who are sufficiently like him in the relevant ways. Next we move on to a second individual: suppose we come to the conclusion, based on his individual characteristics, that one thing that would be good for him is to study mathematics rather than philosophy. And so on. After we have carried out this investigation for a large enough number, we will be in a position to realize that a general pattern is emerging: one thing that is good for all of these individuals is the flourishing of their minds. Of course, that generality is compatible with saying that each of them cognitively flourishes in different ways.

You can easily see, by this point, where I am heading: I believe that this bottom-up approach will lead us to see that what is good for individual human beings consists not only in this or that style of cognitive flourishing but in addition this or that style of flourishing in many other dimensions as well—affective, sensory, imaginative, and so on. This can still plausibly be counted as an Aristotelian way of thinking about well-being, because of the important role it assigns to first nature and its development. But this kind of Aristotelianism, unlike the top-down variety, can affirm the thesis that what is good for a creature is determined not by its membership in some

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<sup>6</sup>Here my thinking is indebted to Jeff McMahan (2003, 145–159).

larger group, but solely by its own capacities, which may be different, to a greater or lesser extent, from those of other members of that group. It enables us to speak very generally about what is good for human beings, just as astrophysics strives to speak quite generally about the nature of black holes. But just as astrophysics arrives at conclusions about black holes or other objects of scientific investigation by an examination of many particular cases, so too the theory of well-being that most attracts me treats statements about what is good for human beings as grounded in the evaluation of individual cases.

As I noted several paragraphs back, it is often thought that the most basic guiding idea of Aristotelianism is that individuals are always members of kinds, and that what is good for any individual is determined by the kind to which it belongs. I am rejecting that thesis, but suppose, for the moment, that it is accepted for the sake of argument. It is important to see that even if it is accepted, Aristotelianism would still owe us an explanation of why what is good for an individual should be determined by the *biological* kind to which he or she belongs, and not some other “socially constructed” kind—that of a lawyer, for example, or a cook, or a police officer. After all, we can say that someone’s law practice is flourishing—a point that can also be expressed by saying that he is flourishing as a lawyer. So, an Aristotelian can be asked: what entitles you to assume that someone’s well-being consists in that which makes him flourish *as a human being* as opposed to a lawyer (if he happens to be a lawyer)? To many non-Aristotelians and anti-Aristotelians, it looks as though an Aristotelian approach smuggles into its theory an assumption that can easily be called into doubt: namely, that the way biology divides up the world into categories ought to dictate to us how we live our lives. It would be a lame response on the part of an Aristotelian to reply that we come into the world, through no choice of our own, as human beings, whereas we occupy our several social roles at later stages and often by choice. The temporal priority and necessity of our humanity does nothing to show why our nature as human beings ought to be treated as a guide to what is good for us.

As I have argued, a theory of human well-being that resembles Aristotle’s more than that of any other canonical figure can nonetheless be defended, but only by abandoning a top-down strategy in favor of the bottom-up approach I have outlined here. The most important ingredients of this approach, to recapitulate, are these: We come to this subject already knowing that some pursuits (real or imagined) are non-instrumentally good for those who undertake them. (Others are of neutral or negative value: it will be just as important to dwell on such cases.) There is no valid requirement of neutrality that requires us to set aside our knowledge of some of the things that fit into these categories. We can see from the many different kinds of examples of lives that are good for those who live them that human well-being takes many different forms. But that leaves open

the possibility that they might also have something in common, and there is explanatory value in grouping them into kinds, just as Moore and Ross grouped absolute goods into kinds. An Aristotelian conception of value, as I conceive it, should be treated as a theory that makes a surprising discovery about the importance of our humanity to what is good for us. It does not start with that point as an axiom.

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