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Happiness and the Good Life

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ABSTRACT

Holland argues that environmental deliberation should return to classical questions about the nature of the good life, understood as the worthwhile life. Holland's proposal contrasts with the revived hedonist conception of the good life which has been influential on environmentalism. The concept of the worthwhile life needs to be carefully distinguished from those of the happy life and the dutiful life. Holland's account of the worthwhile life captures the narrative dimension of human well-being which is revealed but inadequately addressed by hedonic research. Environmental concerns are better understood from a non-hedonist perspective. An Aristotelian version of this perspective also offers the institutional focus which Holland suggests is required in environmental deliberation.

KEYWORDS

Happiness, welfare, Kahneman, narrative

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE GOOD LIFE

In his recent paper *Must We Give up Environmental Ethics?* Alan Holland criticises both mainstream environmental economics and mainstream environmental ethics. At the end of the paper he offers two proposals about the way forward in our deliberations about the environment. The first is methodological, that ethical reflection needs to become more institutional in its focus: 'Where ethical reflexion needs to be concentrated more than at present … is upon institutions – for example the regulatory *institutions*, the research and decision-making *institutions*, or the *institution* of property rights, ownership and so forth' (Holland, 2006, p.134). The second proposal is normative, that ethical reflection needs to return to the classical questions about the nature of the good life:

> [W]e need to rethink our governing notions of the "good life" if we are to address the ethical issues raised by our environmental predicaments in a more fruitful way. Specifically, we need to move away from a focus on preference satisfaction and towards the notion of a worthwhile life. (Holland, 2006, p.137)

In sketching his own views on how we should rethink our concept of the good life, Alan Holland makes three claims: first that the concept of the good life is best characterised in terms of a worthwhile life; second that central to the worthwhile life are meaningful relations, both with respect to other human beings and to the natural world; third that a worthwhile or meaningful life has a narrative dimension.

In this paper I want to explore Alan Holland's normative proposal in detail. I do so by putting it into a critical dialogue not with standard environmental economics or mainstream environmental ethics, but with another important line of argument in recent economics and environmental thought, that is the revival of an Epicurean hedonist conception of the good life. The good life consists in hedonic happiness – in pleasure and the absence of pain. Developments in the empirical study of the measurement and determinants of happiness in hedonic psychology have led to a revival of hedonism in economics. Its revival has been influential on many recent environmentalists on the grounds that it shows how improvements in human well-being can be decoupled from increasing economic growth and consumption. In section 2, I outline the environmental promise of hedonism. In the rest of the paper I examine Alan Holland's alternative approach to the good life in terms of a worthwhile life through a contrast with modern Epicureanism. In section 3, I explore the conceptual space that the concept of a worthwhile life might occupy in relation to that of the hedonically happy life on the one hand and other concepts closer to it such as that of the flourishing life on the other. In doing so I raise some worries about a form of moralism to which the concept of the worthwhile life might be subject. In section 4, I consider empirical work from within recent hedonic research itself that shows the significance of the narrative dimension of human well-being and the problems

that hedonism has in capturing that dimension. In section 5, I outline ways in which the environmental promise of recent hedonic research might still be sustained from within a non-hedonic perspective. I finish with some comments on Alan Holland's methodological proposal by considering the implications of the arguments for the institutional dimension of environmental deliberation.

2. HAPPINESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

While modern mainstream neo-classical economics assumes a preference satisfaction theory of well-being, its founding figures such as Jevons, Edgeworth and Marshall were hedonists. This hedonic tradition has undergone something of revival under the influence of hedonic psychology understood as 'the study of what makes experiences and life pleasant and unpleasant' (Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz, 1999, p. ix). The claim is made that developments in psychology and the brain sciences allow for the robust measurement of pleasures and pains in ways that allow for empirical investigation of their determinants. The revival of the empirical investigation of the determinants of subjective welfare need not in itself entail a commitment to a hedonic account of welfare. The paper of Kahneman, Wakker and Sarin (1997), 'Back to Bentham? Explorations of Experienced Utility', which most explicitly announces a possible return to Bentham, retains a question mark. Kahneman and Sugden more recently note the possible limitations of a purely hedonic approach: 'human well-being may be thought to depend, not only on the sum of moment-by-moment affective experiences … but also on other aspects of life, such as autonomy, freedom, achievement, and the development of deep interpersonal relationships, which cannot be decomposed into momentary affective experiences' (Kahneman and Sugden, 2005, p.176).[1] However, some economists, such as Layard, have taken it that an affirmative answer is owed the question of whether we should return to Bentham. He claims that classical hedonism of the unreconstructed Benthamite kind offers the best basis for public policy (Layard, 2005). Whether one takes the view that subjective welfare should be *a* component of human well-being, as Kahneman does, or *the* only constituent as Layard does, what both perspectives involve is a return to a substantive conception of the good life that allows that individuals can make mistakes about what makes their life go well. Classical hedonic theories of well-being of the kind that Layard develops are subjective state theories about the content of well-being: well-being consists in being in the right psychological state. However, they are not committed to subjective determination (Wood, 1990, p. 55; O'Neill 1998, ch.3) – that what is good for an individual is determined by her preferences. What people believe will make them hedonically happy may not be what in fact does make them hedonically happy. Consequently one cannot simply take individuals' given preferences as expressed by their willingness to pay for a good to be a reliable guide to hedonic well-being.

Individuals' preferences are a reliable guide to hedonic well-being only if at least two conditions are met: first, personal hedonic well-being is the object of their preferences; second, they are able make reliable judgements about what will make them happy – 'that individuals are able to make reasonably accurate predictions of the hedonic consequences of their actions' (Kahneman and Sugden, 2005, p. 168). For reasons I outline in section 5 there are often good reasons to question the first condition. However, it is the second condition that has been principally questioned in recent hedonic research. A much discussed claim in the literature is that individuals will sometimes fail to forecast how happy they will be in virtue of 'hedonic adaptation' (Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999) – the tendency of the intensity of at least some good or bad experiences to lessen as individuals adjust to a new state of affairs in which they find themselves. In addition, many of the goods offered in market societies are positional in nature: their worth to any individual is affected by the possession and consumption of those goods by others. The fact of adaptation and the positional nature of certain goods are taken to provide an explanation for the hedonic treadmill effects to which increases in income and consumption are subject. While relative income is a good predictor of life satisfaction, changes in total income are not. Beyond a certain minimal point increases in the total wealth of a population are not matched by increases in life satisfaction. As people get more they want more and hence their overall life-satisfaction remains stable: 'Even though rising income means people can have more goods, the favourable effect of this on welfare is erased by the fact that people want more as they progress' (Easterlin, 2001, p. 481). Correspondingly, the argument goes, if one wants to improve well-being the best policy is to focus on those goods that are not subject to these treadmill effects, such as personal relationships and intrinsically worthwhile work.

These empirical findings of recent hedonic research have made the field particularly attractive to environmentalists. They offer the possibility of a de-coupling of economic growth and ever increasing levels of consumption from the improvement in welfare. Much is made of the research that increasing GDP has not been matched by increasing life satisfaction. Typical is the diagram for the UK shown in figure 1. One recent survey for China even shows a fall in life satisfaction during the period of rapid growth in average incomes since 1994 (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006, p. 16). The environmental promise of the hedonic approach is that sustainability can be achieved by taking individuals off the hedonic treadmill to which material consumption is subject and refocusing public policy on those goods that really are correlated with life satisfaction and which do not require a pattern of ever increasing material consumption (Porritt, 2003). The central correlates of life satisfaction are familial relationships, secure and intrinsically worthwhile work, health, personal and political freedoms, and the quality of wider social relationships in a community including, especially, the degree of mutual trust within a community. A transition to sustainability through reduced consumption can be rendered consistent with an improvement

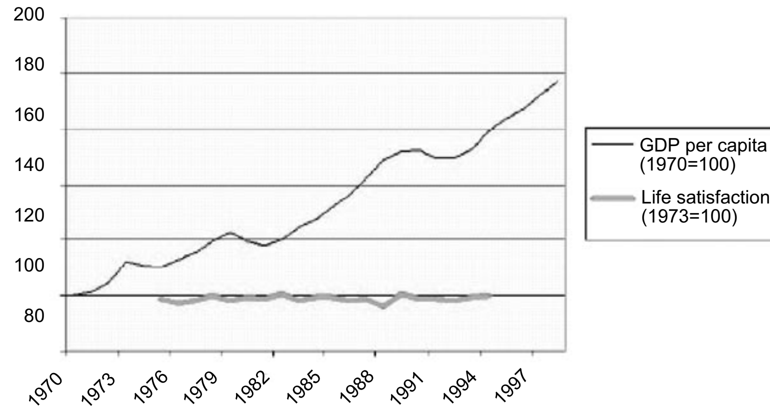

FIGURE 1.: UK life-satisfaction and GDP per capita 1973–1997
(Donovan and Halpbern, 2002, p. 17)

in the quality of people's lives. Hence the attraction of hedonic accounts of well-being for environmentalists and green economics (Shah and Marks, 2004; Marks et al., 2006).

The revival of the hedonic conception of well-being by environmentalists represents not so much a return to Bentham as a return to Epicurus. Central claims in the environmentalist's hedonic argument are variations on classical Epicurean themes. The central aim of Epicurean philosophy is to free individuals from the false beliefs that are the source of insatiable desires for objects that bring not hedonic well-being but anxiety and dissatisfaction. The cause of unhappiness lies in mistakes in the identification of the nature and sources of happiness. People want the wrong things through false beliefs.

> The stomach is not insatiable as the many say, but rather the opinion that the stomach requires an unlimited amount of filling is false. (Epicurus *Vatican Sayings* 59, Inwood and Gerson, 1988, p. 31)

In particular, the unlimited pursuit of wealth and luxury is founded upon an error about happiness: 'Natural wealth is both limited and easy to acquire. But wealth [as defined by] groundless opinions extends without limits' (Epicurus *Principal Doctrines* 15, Inwood and Gerson, 1988, p. 27). Once the sources of happiness are properly understood, the goods required for happiness are limited. Recent hedonic research can be understood as offering empirical confirmation of these classical Epicurean claims. Hedonic happiness is not to be found in the pursuit of wealth and ever-increasing consumption, anymore than in the

vain pursuit for immortality, but rather in health and good personal relations. It adds to the traditional Epicurean list of the goods, work that brings intrinsic satisfaction and more public dimensions of the good life such as freedoms and political participation and trust within communities.[2] The new Epicureanism is a return to a classical conception of the good life of the kind that that Alan Holland suggests we should pursue – indeed it reveals the promise of such a return. Moreover, it includes among the goods required for that good life, that which Alan Holland takes to be central to a worthwhile life – meaningful relations. However, while the approaches show some convergence, there are clear differences between the hedonic conception of the good life that is recommended by the new Epicureans and the conception of the good life as a 'worthwhile life' that is defended by Alan Holland.

3. THE WORTHWHILE LIFE

Hedonic theories of well-being are subjective state theories of welfare. Well-being consists in being in the right subjective states. The concept of the worthwhile life belongs to one of a class of concepts, such as that of a flourishing life, that belong to objective state accounts of well-being. Well-being on an objective account consists not just in being in the right subjective states, also in objective states that cannot be reduced to subjective experiences. The list of examples that Kahneman and Sudgen outline in describing 'those aspects of life … which cannot be decomposed into momentary affective experiences' is a fairly standard one: 'autonomy, freedom, achievement, and the development of deep interpersonal relationships'. The most influential current account of an objective state account of well-being is that of Sen and Nussbaum, which focuses on capabilities to achieve valuable functionings, where functionings refer to 'the various things a person may value doing or being' and capabilities to 'substantive freedoms to achieve alternative functioning combinations' (Sen, 1999, p. 75). In focusing on a worthwhile life Alan Holland puts special emphasis on meaningful relations: '[T]he living of worthwhile lives depends, among other things, on our ability to sustain meaningful relationships' (Holland, 2006, p. 137). However, I take it that the 'among other things' is important here. The concept does not preclude other dimensions of human well-being that cannot be captured by the concept of meaningful relations.[3] Why use the concept of a 'worthwhile life' rather than a flourishing life? Firth (2008) notes one possible reason is that the concept of a worthwhile life has a moral dimension which that of a flourishing life may lack. However, for that reason there is a danger of a particular kind of moralism in the use of the term. A satisfactory theory of the good life needs to carve out a conceptual space between the hedonically happy life and the morally dutiful life. It is this space that I will explore in this section.

Consider first the relation of a good life to a hedonically happy life. Malcolm, in his memoir of Wittgenstein, concludes with the following passage:

> Before losing consciousness he said to Mrs. Bevan … 'Tell them I've had a wonderful life!' By 'them' he undoubtedly meant his close friends. When I think of his profound pessimism, the intensity of his mental and moral suffering, the relentless way in which he drove his intellect, his need for love together with the harshness that repelled love, I am inclined to believe that his life was fiercely unhappy. Yet at the end he himself exclaimed that it had been 'wonderful'! To me this seems a mysterious and strangely moving utterance. (Malcolm, 1984, p. 81)

The troubling contrast for Malcolm here is between 'a wonderful life' and an unhappy life in the sense of a life that is full of intense suffering. The question it raises is whether a life of suffering could be called a wonderful life. Now from the purely external perspective of the spectator no doubt the answer to that question can be yes. From the point of view of an external spectator an unhappy life can be rich and admirable and in that sense wonderful. Biography is testimony to this fact. Malcolm however is not discussing a purely external spectator's perspective. It is Wittgenstein who claims about his own life that it is wonderful. This is what looks mysterious. While the absence of suffering is not a sufficient condition for a good life, it looks like a necessary condition. From the point of view of the agent a life full of physical and mental suffering cannot be a wonderful life.

In a later footnote Malcolm adds a passage in which he has second thoughts about his claim that Wittgenstein's life was 'fiercely unhappy'. First he had good friends, 'people who not only admired him but loved him'. Those friendships are 'a source of richness in his life'. Second, he had his work:

> [H]e was engaged in prolonged and intensive intellectual work … Typically he was dissatisfied with what he wrote. Nevertheless, he was continually arriving at fresh insights, seeing connections between one region of thought and another, spotting false analogies, trying out new ways of tacking the problems that have kept philosophy in turmoil for several centuries. I find it impossible to believe that this activity of creation and discovery gave him no delight, even though he always felt that it came short of what was needed. In a letter to me in 1943 he said that philosophical work is 'the only work that really gives me satisfaction. No other work really bucks me up'. (Malcolm, 1984, p. 84)

Malcolm concludes that 'though there was plenty of pain, there was also joy – and much that was "wonderful"' (Malcolm, 1984, p. 84). Malcolm's description of the richness of Wittgenstein's life is not hedonist. It is really having good friends and making real intellectual developments that matter, not just the experience of doing so. Yet experiences of delights and joys still do matter. They are part of a good life for an agent. This strikes me as right. The absence of pain and suffering and presence of some joys and delights is a necessary condition for

a good life. However, that this is the case does not entail that it is a sufficient condition in the manner the hedonist suggests.

Some of the distance between the hedonically happy life and the good life is captured by a passage in Chekhov's short story 'Gooseberries', in which the character Ivan Ivanovich expresses despair on coming across a completely happy man:

> Seeing this happy man, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of despondency that was close to utter despair. (Chekhov, 1982, p. 141)

The reason for the despair is that such happiness is possible only given blindness to the suffering of others.

> It's obvious that the happy man feels contented only because the unhappy ones bear their burden without saying a word: if it weren't for their silence happiness would be quite impossible. (Chekhov, 1982, p. 141)

While it might be an exaggeration to say that without the silence of the unhappy happiness would be impossible, it is true that for any sensitive person, consciousness of the unhappiness of others is a source of unhappiness. There are limits to such sensitivity in a good life. A life spent in constant painful sensitivity of the pain of others would not be a good life. However, neither would a life in which consciousness of such pain was forever absent. This is the source of the horror that Chekhov's character feels in coming across the perfectly happy man. However, in developing this thought Ivan Ivanovich adds a further comment which appears to me to highlight another possible confusion – namely of the good life with the dutiful life. He offers the following earnest advice to the young character Pavel who he is addressing:

> Pavel … don't go to sleep or be lulled into complacency. While you're still young, strong and healthy, never stop doing good … If life has *any* meaning or purpose, you won't find it in happiness, but in something more rational, in something greater. Doing good. (Chekhov, 1982, p. 143)

If there is a problem with this advice for Pavel it lies in its moralistic tone. The advice 'never stop doing good' looks much too strong. In contrast to the hedonically happy life, it looks as if one is being offered simply the moral or dutiful life. The worry is that an agent on this conception will have no projects of their own without direct moral purpose. Duty exhausts the content of life. However this looks implausible as an account of what makes a life go well for an agent. One need not have conversations with one's friends, walk in the hills, read a book, listen to music, do some gardening and so forth, either with the direct purpose of doing what is morally good or as an indirect means to achieving the purpose of doing what is morally good, say as a form of relaxation which has the end of recharging the moral batteries. These goods are goods quite independent of any moral purposes.

The moralist account of the good life also threatens to alienate a person from central projects of their lives. The threat of such alienation arises for any account of morality that entails that a person's projects be treated as expressions of an impersonal and impartial perspective. To take a standard example, one does not visit a sick member of one's family simply as a particular exercise of a general moral demand. One visits them as an expression of the particular relationship one has to that individual. The problem arises not just with special relationships, but also potentially with ethical projects. Consider the well-known example offered by Williams which raises problems not with impersonal theories of morality generally but more specifically with utilitarianism.

> George is an unemployed chemist of poor health, with a family who are suffering in virtue of his being unemployed. An older chemist, knowing of the situation tells George he can swing him a decently paid job in a laboratory doing research into biological and chemical warfare. George is deeply opposed to biological and chemical warfare, but the older chemist points out that if George does not take the job then another chemist who is a real zealot for such research will get the job, and push the research along much faster than would the reluctant George. Should George take the job?

On the basis of any plausible utilitarian calculus George should heed the advice of his older colleague and take the job. It will issue in the best consequences both for George's family and for wider circle of affected parties. However, Williams suggests that to do so would undermine George's integrity. The problem with the utilitarian position is that it demands that George treat his own projects and commitments as simply one set of preferences to be put into the utilitarian calculus with all others. It alienates him from the central projects and commitments with which he identifies (Williams, 1973, pp. 116–117).

However, at the same time, Williams's example also highlights the ways in which ethical commitments are not simply externally related to the characterisation of a good life. It would be an error to treat the two as entirely separate, to treat commitments as unrelated to the good of the agent. In places Sen does appear to assume that the two can be treated in this way. For example, in drawing the distinction between a person's 'overall achievements (whatever she wishes to achieve as an "agent")' and her 'personal well-being' Sen makes the following observation:

> The distinction between agency achievement and personal well-being arises from the fact that a person may have objectives other than personal well-being. If for example a person fights successfully for a cause. Making a great personal sacrifice … then this may be a great agency achievement without it being a corresponding achievement of personal well-being. (Sen, 1986, p. 37)

He later adds the following remark:

> At the risk of oversimplification, it may be said that we move from agency achievement to personal well-being by narrowing the focus of attention through ignoring 'commitments'. (Sen, 1986, p. 38)

The claim made here does involve a misleading oversimplification. Williams' example points to the way that certain commitments are central to how an agent's life can be said to go for the agent. There is something awry with the argument that Sen offers here. At least part of the problem lies in an inference he appears to draw in the first passage quoted – that since 'a person may have objectives other than personal well-being' the pursuit of those objectives cannot be part of a person's personal well-being. Hence well-being is what is left when we ignore such commitments. The argument is flawed. A great many of the constituents of well-being are not themselves pursued as a means to well-being. Consider friendship. If a friendship is properly constituted, I act towards my friend for my friend's sake not for the sake of my own personal well-being. It does not follow that friendship is not a central constituent of well-being. The good life for an agent is not the same as the dutiful life, but neither is it a life that is left when ethical commitments are stripped away. Certain ethical commitments are central constituents of what makes a life go well for an agent. The concept of a worthwhile life might be understood as a way of capturing the ways in which there can be an ethical dimension of a good life. The danger it runs is of falling foul to a form of moralism. A defensible account of the worthwhile life will need to be distinguished from the dutiful life – the worthy life rather than the worthwhile life. And it needs also to include a proper recognition of the necessary psychological dimension of well-being.

4. NARRATIVE AND THE LIMITS OF HEDONISM

> A worthwhile life, a meaningful life, is a required context for a meaningful relationship; it must also admit of a narrative, a true historical one, I mean, not a fictional one, and cannot simply be conjured up. (Holland, 2006, p. 138)

While the concept of a worthwhile life may suggest a moral dimension to the good life, it is not this dimension that is the centre of Alan Holland's account. His account of the worthwhile life focuses on meaningful relations. Central to his account of the worthwhile life as a meaningful life is the role of narrative. In this section I will argue that the significance of the narrative shape of a life is one that emerges from recent hedonic research itself, and that it points to problems with a purely hedonic account of the good life.

A central finding of hedonic research is that global evaluations of the particular episodes of lives as a whole depart from what would be expected from a simple summing of momentary pleasures and pains (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). The most well-known and widely discussed examples are Kahneman's

experiments on episodes of pain. Episodes of painful experiences which are prolonged by additional but less intense pain produce better global evaluations by subjects than a shorter episode without the additional less intense period of pain (Kahneman et al., 1993; for discussions see Beardman, 2000; Broome, 1996; Gustafson, 2000; Perrett, 1999). Global assessments of an episode of painful experiences are a function of the peak intensity of the experience and the intensity of the last moment of the period, and not of the duration of episodes. Now in this context one possible response is to claim that the subjects make an error of judgement: '… in the absence of any valid reason for the choice, the preference for the long trial must be viewed as a violation of temporal monotonicity – and as a mistake' (Kahneman et al., 1993, p. 404). In their original paper Kahneman et al. suggest that the mistake may be one of memory: because the longer episode ends better the subjects have a more favourable, but inaccurate memory of it. However, what might matter for respondents may be simply the overall shape of the episode (cf. Beardman, 2000; Gustafson, 2000). There is some evidence for this claim in other contexts.

Consider the work of Diener et al. (2001), which produces similar results for global valuations of different fictional lives. On the one hand a very bad life which is prolonged by some additional more moderately bad years was evaluated by respondents as better than a life without the additional bad years – an effect they term the 'Alexander Solzhenitsyn Effect'. On the other hand, respondents will evaluate a very good life which is extended by additional years of more moderately good years as worse than the very good life without those additional years – an effect they call the 'James Dean Effect'. In both cases duration was not significant in the judgements as to how well a life went. In both cases it is the addition of the years at the end of the life that matters: adding the additional years in the middle of a life does not have the same results. The end of a life or an episode has particular significance. There are clear reasons for being cautious in considering the implications of such studies. The claim that the respondents are in error for departing from a simple hedonic sum is one that I will question below. However, there are very good reasons for strongly hesitating in endorsing their judgements. There is a difference between spectator judgements on the shape of a life and what is good for an actor living that life. For example, it is not clear that for the actor additional good years would not be good simply on the grounds that they don't come up to the standard of previous years how ever glorious this might be from the point of view of the external spectator. One would certainly reject such judgements for the purposes of public policy.

Whatever one thinks of the judgements about the shape of lives made in these particular studies, there are contexts in which departures from a simple hedonic summing of moments over a period on the basis of the shape of a life are rational. The narrative structure of an episode or of a life matters to the global valuation one can properly make of it. Moreover, the ending of an episode or of a life has particular significance in characterising that structure. One much

discussed version of this might be called the Orson Welles effect. Consider the following lives:

> Orson Welles. His early career is full of success. He directs one of the most important films in cinema history. As his life progresses it is a story of failed promise. He ends his life doing voice-overs for fish-finger adverts.
>
> Welles Orson. He starts his life doing voice-overs for fish-finger adverts. His talents develop as his life progresses. He ends his life directing one of the most important films in cinema history.

The life of Welles Orson goes better than that of Orson Welles. This is true even if all the good moments in the life of Orson Welles are equally as pleasurable as all the good moments in that of Welles Orson and all bad moments are equally as bad so that the total hedonic value is identical. It does so in virtue of the narrative structure of the life (cf. Velleman, 2000, ch. 3). A life that is one of improvement is better than one of decline.

The difference between the lives here cannot be caught by simply adding the hedonic enjoyment of contemplating your life going better (Feldman, 2006, ch. 6). In the first place such enjoyment is itself parasitic on the good in question. One takes delight in an improving life because it is better. It is not better because one takes delight in its improvement. Second, a life of a person can better in virtue of its structure in ways that the person may not be subsequently aware. Consider the example the life of William Rowan Hamilton. His early work on optics has been of lasting importance. Its continuing significance is recorded in the eponymy of 'hamiltonians'. Hamilton in his later life worked on quaternions which he believed 'to be as important for the middle of the nineteenth century as the discovery of fluxions … was for the close of the seventeenth'. In so doing Bell describes him as an 'Irish Tragedy':

> Hamilton's deepest tragedy was … his obstinate belief that quaternions held the key to the mathematics of the physical universe. History has shown that Hamilton tragically deceived himself … (Bell, 1953, p. 396)

Bell's characterisation of Hamilton's work on quaternions is exaggerated. Quaternion theory had an important role in the development of vector-analysis, although the development involved putting aside features of the theory that Hamilton had thought were particularly important. However, quaternions did not meet the ambitions that Hamilton had for them as offering a discovery of a value equivalent to calculus. Or so it seemed until the work of Li He:

> A Chinese physicist, Li He, in a paper entitled 'Quaternions and the Paradoxes of Quantum Dynamics', resurrected quaternion theory and showed that the replacement of quaternions by vectors had disguised important assumptions in quantum theory. He demonstrated the usefulness of a development of quaternion theory along the lines that Hamilton had originally projected … [I]t has meant

> a total reassessment of Hamilton's work. Far from constituting a tragedy, his later work on quaternions will be remembered in the terms Hamilton believed it would be, as one of the greatest achievements in the history of mathematics. (O'Neill, 1993, p. 30)

This last passage is a piece of fiction. Li He and his paper do not exist. However, were it to be true Li He would have transformed Hamilton's life. What matters for Hamilton are his actual achievements, not just any pleasure he may have taken from them. Li He would have transformed Hamilton's life for the better by rendering his final work the achievement he had hoped it to be (O'Neill, 1993, ch. 3). He would have done so not just from a spectator's perspective but from the perspective of what mattered to Hamilton himself.

Part of what is at stake in considering these different approaches to the global value of a life or an episode is the object of valuation. If the global value of an episode or a life is a function only of 'moment-by-moment affective experiences' then the shape of an episode cannot matter as such. If all that matters to valuation is the intensities of pleasures at different moments, then it looks plausible to claim that global valuations of episodes should track aggregate totals of pleasures, regardless of shape. Narrative shape can only enter the sum to the extent it is itself a source of affective experience (Feldman, 2006, ch. 6). Narrative shape matters when one turns to those 'other aspects of life … which cannot be decomposed into momentary affective experiences' (Kahneman and Sugden, 2005, p. 176), such as autonomy, freedom, achievement, and the development of deep interpersonal relationships. This is particularly evident in two items on that list, achievement and deep interpersonal relations, both of which have a narrative dimension. With both, the evaluative significance of different moments cannot be ascertained independently of their place in a larger pattern of events. The significance of Hamilton's work on quaternions cannot be judged independently of the subsequent work to which it gave rise. Whether his later work is a tragedy as Bell has it or is something else depends on that pattern of subsequent work. Similar points apply to personal relationships. If what matters is a relationship that is in good order, and not simply the experience of a relationship that is in good order, then judgements about the value of different moments in an episode or a life cannot be ascertained independently of the larger narrative context. Moments of pleasure and pain are valued in terms of their significance in the development of the relationship not simply in terms of the independently determinable intensity. Painful moments of difference and argument can be redeemed by later reconciliation, especially where the earlier moments are a source of new understandings that are the basis of a deeper relationship. Pleasurable moments can turn out to be moments of illusion that are shattered by later arguments. The significance of events in personal relationships is dependent upon their place in a larger narrative context (O'Neill, 1993, pp. 53–54).

This narrative dimension to the appraisal of how well lives can be said to go has particular significance for environmental valuation. It does so for at least two

reasons. First, the narrative dimension of human well-being is particularly apparent in the environmental sphere. In environmental valuation history and process matter (Holland and Rawles, 1995; O'Neill, 1993, ch. 3 and 2007, chs. 5 and 6; O'Neill and Holland, 1999, 2003; O'Neill, Holland and Light, 2008, chs. 9–12). Our environments matter to us in virtue of embodying a history that provides the context through which we are able to locate and transform the narrative shape of our lives. Environments embody personal histories and the history of the communities to which we belong. Natural processes provide a wider context in which our human lives take their significance (Goodin, 1992).

The narrative dimension to environmental valuation has implications for environmental policy. It limits the substitutability of other goods for the loss of environments that matter. In particular, monetary compensation for some kinds of environmental damage cannot be understood as a means to restoring affected agents' welfare to a previous level (O'Neill, Holland and Light, 2008 pp. 195–199; Goodin, 1994, p. 587). It also gives us reasons for scepticism about the treatment of environmental policy in an ahistorical manner as purely a matter of identifying some list of different valued items in the environment and maximising value over those different items (O'Neill, Holland and Light, 2008, pp. 167–179). Against that approach it offers the basis for the more historical characterisation of nature conservation that Alan Holland and Kate Rawles outline in their report for The Countryside Council for Wales, according to which conservation is about 'preserving the future *as a realisation of the potential of the past* through securing the transfer of … significance' (Holland and Rawles, 1994, p. 37).

A second reason why the narrative dimension to the appraisal of how well lives can be said to go has particular significance for environmental valuation lies in the ground it offers for care about what happens in the future. A hedonist has to make what happens after our deaths purely a matter of impartial moral concern. If well-being consists in having the right mental states of pleasure and the absence of pain, then as Lucretius famously noted what happens after we die cannot affect our well-being anymore than what happens before we are born (Lucretius, 1965, Book 3, 967–971). Both are a matter of indifference to us as far as our own well-being is concerned. Hence, concern for future generations is purely a matter of impartial ethical concern. In contrast, once we recognise that the narrative shape of a life matters, then we have concerns for the future that are grounded in our own current projects and relationships rather than a purely impartial ethical commitment. For example, it matters to Hamilton's assessment of his own life what happens after his death. If the narrative shape of our lives matters then what happens after our deaths can matter to how well our life can be said to go now. The narrative structure of our lives is shaped by events that continue after our deaths (O'Neill, 1993, ch.3; 2006; 2007, ch. 5). What happens in the future is not a matter of indifference as far as our own lives are concerned.

5. THE HAPPY LIFE AND THE WORTHWHILE LIFE

While the revival of Epicureanism among environmentalists does offer an account of the good life that appears at first sight to have considerable environmental virtues, it does not in the end offer a sound basis for understanding the way we should value our lives and the roles of environmental goods in them. What then is left of the real promise that recent hedonic research appears to offer as a way of decoupling growing consumption from increasing economic growth and material consumption? I think the defender of a more objective state account of the good life can still welcome those findings.

In the first place an objective state account does not deny that hedonic well-being matters. What it denies is that it is the only thing that matters. As I argued in section 3, a life without pleasures and of great suffering would not be a good life for the agent – however wonderful it might look from the perspective of an the external observer. The discovery of just what does bring delight and pleasure to life, and what brings anxiety and suffering matters from any plausible account of the good life.

Second, it is not clear how much of recent hedonic research is actually about hedonic well-being at all. Consider the question asked in life satisfaction surveys: 'All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?' (Layard, 2005, pp. 242–243). To ask that question is to ask people for their judgement as to how well their lives are going. It is not thereby to ask them to consider a sum of the different moments of pleasure and pain. Other things matter – how well the central relationships and projects of their lives are faring. For example, if you were pressed if asked how satisfied you are with your life in terms other than a numerical score, the kind of reply one might give is that your job is terrible, but you have great family and friends. Your answer offers an appraisal of what you have been able to do or become in dimensions of life that are significant to you, not simply how many and how intense have been feelings of happiness. The interpretation of the results as being about 'subjective welfare' is founded on a scope confusion between 'an assessment of subjective welfare' and 'a subjective assessment of welfare'. Life satisfaction surveys capture the latter, not the former. For that reason it is not surprising to see a convergence in the findings of recent hedonic research and those in the more eudaimonic tradition as to what the main determinants of a good life are (O'Neill, 2006).

However, once the distinction between the subjective assessment of welfare and the assessment of subjective welfare is granted more care needs to be made in discussing different treadmill effects. A distinction needs to be drawn between two different treadmills, the hedonic treadmill and the satisfaction or aspiration treadmill (cf. Kahneman and Krueger, 2006, p. 16). The claim that there is a hedonic treadmill is a claim directly about hedonic experience – that agents adapt to a particular level of stimulus. While the hedonic treadmill directly concerns

levels of subjective well-being, the aspiration treadmill in contrast concerns changes not in well-being but in the assessment of well-being. As they get more their assessment of how well they are doing does not alter, not because hedonic adaptation leaves welfare itself unchanged, but rather in virtue of a revision of their standards for assessing their welfare. As they get more their aspirations change and the standards by which they judge their welfare are raised. If there is a treadmill in which aspirations change to meet improved circumstances, it does not follow that levels of welfare have stayed the same. On an objective assessment welfare may have improved. Nor does the satisfaction treadmill show that there is anything self-defeating with shifting standards of assessment as such. That people aspire to do and become more with their lives as their conditions improve is as such to be expected and is consistent with the claim that their lives have improved over various dimensions. Alan Holland has echoed Frank Knight's claim that man is 'an aspiring rather than a desiring being' (Knight 1922, p. 473; Holland, 2002, p. 30). Whether an aspiration treadmill is to be deplored or to be welcomed depends on the grounds for the changes in aspiration.

In some contexts changes in aspiration are self-defeating since founded upon mistakes about the good life or forms of social comparison that are deleterious to all. At least some of the recent work on treadmill effects echoes Hirsch's arguments in *Social Limits to Growth* concerning positional goods. The race for goods that signal status and relative income is self-defeating since they are necessarily positional goods, that is goods whose worth to a person is affected by the consumption of the same goods by others. Each individual makes an individual choice for a good whose worth is affected by the same choice by others. In markets the promise to each individual that a good will make them better off will not be realised, since collective consumption of that good will mean that no one will be better off. Increased income and consumption is not matched with any increase in life satisfaction (Hirsch, 1977). However, not all aspiration treadmills are of this kind. Indeed in some conditions an increase in dissatisfaction with life conditions is a sign that things are going better rather than worse. Consider adaptive preferences in conditions of poverty, where 'desires and pleasure-taking abilities adjust to circumstances…to make life bearable in adverse situations' (Sen, 1999, p. 62). In this context, if increased knowledge leads to a fall in satisfaction as aspirations improve then this is to be welcomed. A similar point holds in some perfectionist contexts where a person is exercising capacities that are part of what it is for a life to be improving but becomes increasingly dissatisfied as she does so. Consider again Malcolm's descriptions of Wittgenstein:

> [H]e was engaged in prolonged and intensive intellectual work …Typically he was dissatisfied with what he wrote. Nevertheless, he was continually arriving at fresh insights, seeing connections between one region of thought and another, spotting false analogies, trying out new ways of tackling the problems that have kept philosophy in turmoil for several centuries. (Malcolm, 1984, p. 84)

Wittgenstein's dissatisfaction in this context is a symptom of increasing accomplishment, not of failure.

Satisfaction is parasitic on more basic goods. To paraphrase Aristotle: a life, an episode in life or an achievement is not good because we are satisfied with it; we are satisfied with it because we believe it to be good. It is truth or falsity of the beliefs about the good that do the work in distinguishing those aspiration treadmills that we should avoid and those that are benign. The move to a more objective state account of the good life allows distinctions to be drawn between where treadmills are a sign of mistakes about the nature and content of well-being and where in contrast they are signs that life is genuinely improving. It is through a more non-hedonic account of well-being that we are best able to understand the implications of the empirical findings of work within what has been understood as the hedonic tradition.

6. INSTITUTIONS, LIMITS AND THE GOOD LIFE

I want to finish by turning from Alan Holland's normative proposal about the good life to consider briefly his methodological proposal that ethical reflection on the environment take a more institutional focus. The point has implications for the revival of Epicureanism among environmentalists. Central to the environmental promise of Epicureanism is its claim that there are limits in the material goods required for a good life. This claim is not peculiar to the Epicurean tradition. Epicurus's claim echoes older statements in the Aristotelian tradition. Thus Aristotle writes in the *Politics* '[T]he amount of household property which suffices for a good life is not unlimited, nor of the nature described by Solon in the verse "There is no bound to wealth stands fixed for men". There is a bound fixed …' (Aristotle, 1948, book 1, ch. 8). However, the mention of the 'household' here signals an institutional dimension to Aristotle's discussion that is absent in that of Epicurus. For Epicurus, the source of the pursuit of goods without limits is cognitive. It lies in false beliefs about the good. The solution is the realisation of the right set of beliefs about the nature of the good life. For Aristotle in contrast the source of pursuit of limitless goods lies not just in false beliefs but in particular institutional conditions. The forms of acquisition that aim to meet needs that are characteristic of the household economy are contrasted with the forms of acquisition that are characteristic of the commercial world in which wealth is pursued for its own sake. It is within the particular institutional setting of the market that acquisition appears to lack limits: 'There is no limit to the end it seeks; and the end it seeks is wealth of the sort we have mentioned [i.e., wealth in the form of currency] and the mere acquisition of money.' (Aristotle 1948, book 1, ch. 8).

Aristotle's distinction between these two modes of acquisition has had a wide influence on subsequent critical discussion of market societies (O'Neill, 1993, ch. 10). For example, it reappears explicitly in *Capital* in Marx's account of the

absence of limits in the processes of capital accumulation (Marx, 1970, ch. 4). Polanyi takes the distinction to provide the starting point for understanding the effects of the disembedding of the economy from social and moral relations in market societies (Polanyi, 1957, pp. 53–55). Something akin to Polanyi's thought is to be found in Alan Holland's comment that 'markets, far from being institutions that are innocently revealing of uncontaminated preferences, are in fact highly specialized institutions, part of whose function is to *release* us from a variety of well-grounded inhibitions and communal obligations that are normally in place' (Holland, 2006, p. 126). There is nothing in the Epicurean account of well-being as such that rules out the kind of institutional dimension that is to be found in Aristotle. Neurath's 'social Epicureanism' provides an example of a marriage of institutionalism and a hedonist account of welfare (Neurath, 1925, p. 415). However, the background debate between cognitive and institutionalist approaches matters.

Recent invocations of hedonic well-being by environmentalists do sometimes fall into the more narrow cognitive focus on shifting beliefs. They then claim sustainability is a matter of persuading the wealthy they can live happier lives with less. Such accounts are weak on the way that the institutional context of firms and individuals drives the ever-increasing patterns of consumption of commodities. Sustainability is not going to be the outcome of simply shifting people from error. It requires institutional change. Deliberation about the conditions for sustainability needs the more institutional focus that Alan Holland proposes for ethical reflection about the environment.

NOTES

[1] Kahneman and Sugden have competing views as to how one should respond to this possible line of thought: 'Kahneman argues that experienced utility is a component of the social good and hence that measures of experienced utility provide useful information (but not the only useful information) for policy-makers. Sugden favours a conception of normative economics which emphasises the satisfaction of individuals' preferences, even if preferences fail to meet conventional consistency conditions, and even if preference-satisfaction conflicts with well-being.' (Kahneman and Sugden, 2005, p. 178)

[2] I discuss this further in O'Neill, 2006.

[3] I should add here that I think that a relationship can be meaningful only for a subject able to interpret as such. In that sense there can be no meaningful relationships in nature that are independent of the human interpretative activity. For a different view see Firth, 2008.

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