

Well-being, Virtue and Education

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It is briefly argued that happiness is essential to well-being and that well-being is incompatible with ignorance of important aspects of our circumstances. Note is taken of the close link between virtue and happiness in ancient writers and the contrast between this and the modern view that Moral education and virtuous action are undertaken for the sake of society rather than the pupil or agent. Against this, it is argued that a life of well-being is incompatible with systematic wickedness, irrespective of whether the agent has reason to fear discovery and punishment. Contrary to the informed desire theory of well-being it is held that the range of opinions which can form the basis of a flourishing life is restricted and that a life of wickedness does not fall within it because of its necessary destruction of the bonds of human solidarity between the agent and others. Reasons are given for endorsing Plato's claim that no-one knowingly does wrong and that a life of wickedness cannot be the object of rational choice. Consequently, it is suggested, Moral Education is most expediently considered a matter of enabling pupils to become aware of this fact rather than of simply inculcating rules of social conformity.

KEY WORDS: moral education, well-being, virtue, informed desires, rational choice

I. Introduction

That educators must aim to promote the well-being of their pupils follows from the fact that if they do not, something is being done to those pupils solely for the benefit of others. We are therefore obliged to seek a coherent notion of what constitutes someone's well-being, and the relationship in which this concept stands to that of education and the practices it currently licenses. To this end it is proposed to explore the hypothesis that

whatever else may be included, to be in a state of well-being at least requires a combination of happiness, knowledge and virtue. Well-being is assumed to be something more than a mere state of body or mind and is to be understood as enjoying some kind of good or worthwhile life. Our enquiry must therefore consider the nature of such a life. The outcome of such an enquiry, it will be suggested, has implications for a number of currently important debates in the area of educational aims and practice.

II. Well-being and Happiness

Asking after someone's well-being will almost certainly bring a largely negative response if they have recently suffered some grave misfortune in their material circumstances. The same will normally be true if they are subject to gross oppression, abject poverty, pain or sickness. Even those who are philosophical in the colloquial sense and are able to bear such a situation with some equanimity would usually regard these circumstances as detrimental to their well-being. Only the saintly can regard them as contributing positively to their well-being.

We may, however, learn and be improved by moderate or temporary suffering or deprivation and to this extent such material circumstances are contingent to the underlying well-being of someone who, whatever their misfortunes, may nevertheless live a life of understanding, wisdom and virtue. Happiness is a less superficial aspect of well-being than mere good fortune. Even if not positively happy, someone may be resigned to material hardship or physical suffering while others, living in ease and comfort may be desperately miserable. Happiness is not mere pleasure though a life entirely without pleasure would seem less than satisfactory. Happiness of the more cognitive kind, contentment that one's desires were fulfilled or one's projects realised or on the way to being so stands in a somewhat closer relationship to what we centrally regard as well-being. We can normally regard ourselves as favouring someone's well-being when we help them to realise their desires or accomplish their projects, particularly when these are informed desires (Griffin, 1986) or well considered

projects.

III. Happiness and Ignorance

If happiness and well-being were synonymous, however, the utilitarian would not be embarrassed by the insight that it was better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a satisfied pig (Mill, 1859). The point has been widely made in both Literature and Philosophy. In a symbolic scene in Ibsen's (1867) *Peer Gynt* the hero dramatically refuses to allow his eye to be scratched to enable him to live happily with the Troll-Kings pig-daughter in her sty while believing her to be a beautiful princess in her court. McFall (1989) amusingly lists the various states of what she terms 'pig-happiness' (the happy idiot, the incompetent bottle-cap collector, the deluded fool etc.) in which a happy state of mind is only possible because of the individual's ignorance or limited perspective on life.

That mere happiness and contentment protected by ignorance do not constitute well-being may, indeed, be illustrated by any number of spectacular counter examples. We do not envy the well-being of the happy hunter about to walk into the jaws of a crocodile, the successful ruler shortly to be struck down by an assassin or Oedipus on his wedding night. Tragic irony arouses pity now, as well as fear for the future. The serenity of an adolescent with the mind of a child of five who will never advance further may seem enviable in a moment of sentimentality, but will also move us to tears.

In such cases it is not the impending misfortune alone but ignorance itself which diminishes well-being. We often consider that someone terminally ill has the right to be told, even though they may sometimes wish they had not been. Enlightenment is a good to which one is entitled, even though it will not enable one to change the outcome or increase our immediate happiness. Knowledge is essential to our well-being as well as happiness, and may sometimes take precedence over it.

If, in an educational situation, it sometimes appears that the benefit of knowledge is being resisted, it may not be the knowledge itself which is being rejected but the manner of its communication or its practical consequences. Young working

class males may be resistant to academic knowledge if it must be received in a posture of docility, fearing, perhaps, the loss of a macho scheme of values in which alone they can compete on favourable terms with their middle class fellow students. Western cultural hegemony may sometimes be criticised not because primitive ignorance and error are preferable but because it impoverishes those upon whom it is foisted by undermining an existing way of life without putting anything in its place. The victims do not become fully integrated into western culture but remain marginal and disadvantaged. The old culture is demeaned and destroyed and their inadequate knowledge of the new leaves them disempowered. The solution in both of these cases is not to leave ignorance undisturbed but to increase the knowledge and understanding of those concerned until they are able to interact on equal terms with other members of society.

With no knowledge at all, someone's life would be like that of an animal, no human life at all. This is the most fundamental argument for a human right to education (Wringe, 1986). As Oakeshott (1971) points out, the things most important to us as human beings are defined in terms of meanings and are therefore dependent on the cognitive. Insofar as our social nature is an essential part of our humanity, this too is dependent on knowledge and understanding. Our membership of human society depends not only on the social skills we have learned, and our knowledge of society's institutions but on socially shared values, goals and understandings.

To show that knowledge is an essential element of human well-being is not to show that the prolonged pursuit of knowledge is an essential element of the good life, or to agree with Plato (*Apology* 28D-30A) that a life devoted to the study of the best life for human beings in itself constitutes that best life. We have seen that well-being has other ingredients such as tolerable material circumstances and happiness. For some, given their temperament or our social arrangements, the sustained pursuit of knowledge may be incompatible with one or both of these. It is only ignorance with regard to important aspects of our circumstances or ignorance that isolates us from our fellows that is seriously detrimental to our well-being. The most we can say regarding the sustained pursuit of knowledge is that it may

form part of the legitimate good life for some.

IV. Well-being and Virtue

The crude ambiguity contained in the expression 'the good life' first becomes apparent in the dispute between the Stoics and the Epicureans. For Greek philosophers, there was no clear distinction between morality and prudence. To live badly was not so much wicked in our modern understanding of the term as foolish and could only be the result of error or muddled thinking. The righteous in the christian Beatitudes are not so much approved of or promised reward as already blessed. Virtue is literally its own reward. Even Cicero (*De Officiis* III, 28-32) in arguing for the Stoic position attempts to reconcile self-interest with morality by claiming that the virtuous man who prefers torture and death to dishonour is not only more virtuous than someone choosing the easier option, but supremely happy as well.

Kant (Paton, 1961) rejects by definition any overlap between the call of duty and the pleasure or advantage of the agent. Yet if these are essential to well-being and are construed as the fulfillment of desire, even informed desire, and conflict with the legitimate desires and interests of others, then it would seem that virtue, far from being an element in well-being, is an impediment to it. If we really loved our children and wished them well, the last thing we would do, on such a view, would be to bring them up to be virtuous for that would be to send them out into the battle of life with one hand tied behind their backs. Moral education on this understanding would be carried out not for the benefit of the pupil but for that of society, an exercise in social control, cheaper and possibly more effective than heavy policing (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970). Some justification for it might be found in the argument that those who profit from the fact that others are subjected to moral education have no ground for objecting when they are obliged to undergo it themselves. The process, however, would remain a coercive, even sinister one which the individual would have an interest in avoiding, preferring for herself some more attractive system of values according to which, perhaps, morality was the attribute of

slaves and dupes, good for keeping the populace in order but of no other relevance to the truly independent individual whose supreme interest lay in the pursuit of her own more egoistically conceived version of well-being.

Against this view of things it is proposed to argue that morality is part of the good life in both senses, not only virtuous but the most desirable life one could choose for oneself. In one sense, this is to sell the pass to those who, like Griffin, claim that well-being consists in the satisfaction of informed desires, for if virtue is a necessary ingredient of well-being the reflective and well informed agent will choose it. Altruism would simply be a sophisticated form of egoism. This, however, misses the point of the informed desire theory which is that desires are essentially arbitrary and that well-being consists purely in the satisfaction of the desires one happens to have. Reflection may serve the purpose of enabling us to order our priorities and may even lead us to perceive that we do not have certain desires we thought we had, or to realise that we have desires of which we were previously unaware. What we are left with after this process, however, is an essentially Humean situation in which the desires we have are emotive in origin and not the product of reason or rational justification. Another person placed in the same situation after a similar process of reflection, might prefer something different. Against this it will be argued that the virtuous life is to be preferred on account of its inherent features rather than because one just happens to like it. It will be held that there are limits to the kinds of life that can rationally be chosen under the aspect of a good or worthwhile life and that some of the examples characteristically advanced in support of informed desire account of well being lie outside those limits.

V. The Consequences of Wrongdoing

It is unlikely that when we bring our children up to be good, our motive is entirely one of social responsibility or concern for our own safety lest they abuse us in our old age. When we worry over our son's growing tendency to bully, we are not simply concerned for the interests of his younger sister. We may also believe it will be better for our son himself if he learns to be a

nicer boy. Part of the reason for this may be our awareness of the sanctions meted out against those who behave badly. We may simply not want to see him unpopular with others or taking the first steps on the road to a life spent in and out of jail.

The threat of sanctions, however, is no very convincing argument for believing that it is in our interest to behave morally. There have undoubtedly been many for whom, at a purely material level, crime and wrong-doing have paid and continue to do so. John White (1990) points to the examples of such tyrants as Hitler and Stalin who have found ways of avoiding the immediate ill-consequences of their wickedness.

As a matter of fact, the example of celebrated tyrants is not convincing. Accounts of their lives, and not just the violent ends of their lives, often suggest that their power brought them little happiness and that they should be seen as objects not of envy but of pity. That the tyrant has no friend is not a contingent, empirical observation, however, but analytic truth. White (p. 58) speaks of someone 'rich and powerful enough not to fear any personal disadvantages from cheating, lying or killing' but it is far from clear that there can be any such person. The consequences of cheating, lying and killing are not limited to the possibility of being found out and punished, nor to the pangs of conscience; some people may suffer no such pangs. The important consequence of lying and cheating, let alone killing, is that they destroy one's own sense of community and solidarity with others. If Hitler and Stalin enjoyed periods of well-being, this will have been at times when, like McFall's impossible idealists, they were able to believe in the rightness of what they were doing and think that others shared or would come to share that view.

Tyrants, racist mobsters, petty pilferers or whatever may care little for their victims and the loss of community with them may seem to be of small concern. If one is not an absolute tyrant or thoroughly compulsive deceiver, the limited circle of one's confederates may provide support and society. The Mafia boss, ruthless in his destruction of victims and rivals but devoted to the interests of his family and close friends would be an example of this. There may be honour among thieves and this perverse and limited circle of trusting relationships may provide comfort and a modicum of well-being along this dimension. As we saw,

however, a sense of well-being protected by ignorance is essentially illusory. Satisfaction with the limitations of social solidarity which necessarily result from wrong-doing can only co-exist with a limited vision of the human good. We need not fall into Griffin's error of supposing that the selfish or evil life must be narrow and cramped in the style and range of its undertakings and experiences. On the contrary, given the finiteness of human life and the certainty of death, the more august and grandiose the egoist's undertakings, the more vain and pitiable his isolation must seem.

VI. Choosing to Act Wrongly

Before confronting the objection that in the notion of social solidarity a subjectively appealing Aristotelian teleology is being smuggled in disguised as a universally necessary feature of human well-being, we must give some attention to the ways in which evil and wrong-doing actually occur in the real world. Ultimately, no doubt, this is an empirical matter, the complexities of which can only be unraveled by the careful ethnographic research of criminologists. Hopefully, however, it will be possible to say enough to cast doubt on the plausibility of someone deliberately choosing to pursue a life of evil as her version of the good or worthwhile life.

In real life, evil and evil-doing are rarely the consequence of such dramatic decisions. Many apparent evils arise from genuine conflicts of rights whose resolution must necessarily result in one party being wronged (Wringe, 1981) particularly if either determines to assert the full extent of their rights by force failing to recognise those of the other. On other occasions an explanation may be provided by misfortune, weakness or error. Circumstances of birth may lead one to see others, particularly the prosperous and law abiding as enemies to be outwitted, and one imagines these others to be similarly hostile to oneself. Carrying on the battle may even take the form of a kind of virtue, a refusal to compromise with the natural enemies of one's group. In other circumstances particular temptations may be too great to be resisted, or one may think one's actions are not wrong or do not seriously harm anyone, or anyone that matters.

One does not understand how one's actions affect others or one has not the imagination or even the experience of relating to others for this to be a consideration. That all of these cases arise from shortcomings of knowledge and understanding supports the platonic claim (*Republic* I,3) that we do not knowingly or willingly do wrong.

This may seem to be at variance with the experience of one's own conscious and deliberate ill-doing, but if we sometimes do things we know we should not, we are often able to find this excusable in the light of our generally virtuous conduct. We tell ourselves we are normally excellent husbands or wives, scrupulously conscientious researchers, humane and enlightened teachers or dedicated public servants. One is doing what one does for the sake of one's institution or one's children and anyway no-one is perfect. If this reasoning were valid, then despite our minor misdemeanors we should not really be wrong-doers at all for our deviancy would be justifiable. If, as is usually the case, it were not, then our wrong-doing would be the result not of choice but of error. Even cases of extreme wrong-doing may be the result not of deliberate malevolent choice but the consequence of a situation the individual gets into more or less unwillingly as the result of a series of steps which follow from each other in a logical and seemingly inevitable way. The great writers of tragedy have understood this process well and the story of Macbeth, who slips from fantasy to ambition and ambition to murder, may be taken as a paradigm example. None of these cases of wrongdoing result from decisions which the agent would regard as a valid choice of evil as a worthwhile way of life. They are, rather, the consequences of error, misjudgement, self-deception or weakness.

VII. Rational Choices and Pathological Compulsions

We may now return to the issue of whether the sense of community and human solidarity threatened by wrong-doing is an essential ingredient of a satisfactory human life or just something we happen to like but which others might be perfectly happy and able to relinquish without compromising their essential well-being.

It is a tenet of liberal belief (Kymlicka, 1989) that there are many possible versions of the good life and that the rational agent is in the best position to select among them for herself. Temperament, previous experience or personal attachment to particular individuals or places may play a part. This is quite different from total relativism or emotivism which suggests that any way of life is as good as any other. At very least the range of possible good lives is limited by the necessary features of a good life. An important area of moral enquiry is the attempt to discover what those features are and how far they are dependent on the values of a particular society. The result of such enquiries may be to constantly extend our appreciation of the range of possible good lives and modes of well-being beyond what is traditionally considered conceivable in a particular society. Psychological, social and institutional considerations may also limit the range of ways of life that are sustainable either for human beings in general or for a particular individual in a particular context. To be hopelessly engaged in the pursuit of a way of life that cannot be sustained or cannot in principle deliver the satisfactions it seeks is not, on any plausible interpretation of the term, to be in a state of well-being, however extreme the agent's state of euphoria in embarking on it.

Consideration of a range of possible kinds of decisions or quasi decisions may throw light on the question of what sorts of things may or may not plausibly be chosen as versions of the good life through which agents may achieve a measure of well-being. Sometimes, when someone rejects the ordinary humdrum pattern of everyday life we may applaud, congratulate or envy. The fulfillment and degree of well-being they enjoy will clearly surpass that which they would otherwise have had. This is the experience of numberless young people leaving the material and emotional security of their traditional home in the countryside to seek their fortunes in the city or the wider world. Sometimes happiness may be counterbalanced by anguish as in the case of the artist riven by guilt and sorrow as he deserts his family to follow his daemon, the heiress turning her back on fortune, friends and family to live in poverty with the man she loves, the promising young physicist who enters a religious order dedicated to the simple life, humility and physical labour. We may not think their decisions are the right ones but we can see why they

were made. However misguided we may think them, they are not capricious or bizarre. One can recognise the value that is being sought and the decision is plausibly a means of achieving it. One may feel justified in attempting to dissuade those who take such decisions, or delay their commitment in the hope that they will change their minds but not in locking them up or subjecting them to psychiatric treatment. Despite fundamental differences in judgement, mutual respect remains appropriate and the community of rational beings is maintained.

Decisions of this order may be contrasted with certain others. Someone without discernible reason might determine to commit suicide or suddenly announce her intention to pursue a life of meaningless poverty giving away her possessions to a particularly undeserving recipient for whom she has no particular affection. Someone might give up a productive and satisfying career to pursue a course of action that is blatantly banal, worthless or disreputable, such as building a model of the Taj Mahal out of discarded cigarette butts or pursuing a purposeless vendetta.

Such intentions may be surrounded by an impenetrable web of justification closely mimicking the sound reasoning that accompanies other bold or independent decisions and defended by appeals to individual liberty and independence, the subjectivity of value judgements, rejection of materialistic goals and received ideas, or whatever comes to mind. But however apparently cogent the link between premises and conclusions, others have no difficulty in perceiving that the choice makes no sense and the agent herself may see this also when clarity and insight return. Such a person has temporarily lost touch with the circle of rational beings and is alone, dependent for her well-being on the guidance and concern of others.

What now are we finally to say of John White's 'rich, politically influential person who prizes being able to control other people's lives on a large scale, making people afraid of him, bestowing and withholding favours in an arbitrary way, going in for costly adventures without regard to moral constraints and generally 'being wicked on a grand scale'. We may try to imagine such a person actually choosing the defiant isolation of an inveterate and amoral egoist as his conception of the good life, drawing on the community for the conceptual framework of his

understanding as well as for his material needs, but giving nothing in return except when he chooses. Though apparently living in the community he would actually be a parasite living off it. Such a project might seem to possess some characteristics traditionally associated with worthwhile activities. It would be demanding and challenging, could be pursued with consistency and economy and might extend human ingenuity to the limits. The same, however, is true of many trivial puzzles and other pointless tasks. These qualities alone do not establish that something constitutes a worthwhile and meaningful plan of life rather than a pointless obsession.

We are not here concerned with someone making a heroic protest against the petty constraints of a puritanical society in favour of some sort of freer morality which we may hope will eventually prevail. In flouting petty-minded public opinion such a person would be appealing over the heads of his immediate social milieu to the approval of a wider and supposedly more enlightened circle whose values he had internalised. He would at least be able to approve of himself and see himself as a member of that group, even though he had no actual personal contact with it. Its members might be the famous men and women who had made similar gestures in the past. It goes without saying that such a person would not be wicked at all except in the eyes of those for whom we and all enlightened people have little regard.

Here, however, we are concerned with someone who is truly wicked, destroying honest people, betraying his friends, bringing about the deaths of those dearest to him, who love him most and have given him most. We should be bound to pity such a person for the pointlessness and isolation of his life. If for some unaccountable reason we were concerned for his well-being, we would regret that, having but one life to live, he should spend it in such a negative, self-destructive and ultimately unrewarding way. Given the finite and unrepeatable nature of human life, close personal relationships are unique and cannot be replaced, great harms cannot be compensated for and relations of trust, once broken, cannot be entirely re-established. Penitence and reform may be little better than makeshift repairs. If we thought that our inveterate evil-doer saw and appreciated the full implications of his conduct yet continued with it nonetheless, we

should think of him as we think of the psychopath or crank responding to motivations that are ultimately unintelligible. It is difficult to see the point and purpose of such a life or the value it would be supposed to achieve, in what the well-being of the person living it could be said to consist or the form his happiness could take. Such figures belong not to real life, genuine human beings but to the world of second rate movies or science fiction.

VIII. Education and Well-being

The above account of well-being involving at least a degree of material good fortune and happiness, knowledge, understanding and virtue has important implications for certain key practical issues in the field of education.

Contingently in the modern world, our material well-being largely depends on our ability to contribute to the good of others. We are not all altruists but at least we are nearly all workers of one kind or another and this situation is widely regarded as morally satisfactory. Preparation for adult life and our entry into the adult community must therefore involve some initiation into the world of work or some preparation for it. There is little reputable place in the world of today for social groups entirely devoted to the leisured pursuit of cultured and intrinsically worthwhile activities and we must therefore disagree with Oakeshott's (1971) view that education is not designed to produce socially useful people. Not to be socially useful in some way is to be excluded from the great community of the adult world as well as being vulnerable in one's material interests.

Happiness which, as we saw, is an obvious and central ingredient in well-being will normally depend in part on a materially tolerable and independent life as well as upon a proper understanding of the nature of human life and its potential for worthwhile projects and undertakings. It may entail a healthy discontent with what is unsatisfactory and can be changed and a realistic appreciation and acceptance of what cannot. This capacity is a function of the wisdom which results from a knowledge of the physical universe and its workings and an understanding of human nature and the social world as well

as the thoughtful reflections of others upon it. These modes of understanding are to be procured both by personal and social experience themselves and through their representation in the arts and humanities. This knowledge-dependent aspect of well-being would seem likely to be most successfully engendered by an educational philosophy spelled out in terms of experiences and subject matters to be encountered as well as competences to be acquired. Comforting illusions, as we saw, have little contribution to make to human well-being, whether they relate to the human predicament in transcendental terms, to the difficulties facing humanity globally or to the vicissitudes of individual lives. They need to be faced squarely and honestly and pupils need to be equipped with the critical capacity to continue the consideration of such issues in the course of their later lives.

Our conclusions regarding the relationship between well-being and virtue have particular consequences for Moral Education for they would imply that good conduct is ideally to be secured not by coercive inculcation backed by the threat of sanctions but as a cognitive process enabling pupils to see where their true interests lie.

Such a process, however, is not without complications for we saw that in the real world the practice of virtue may not be precisely the same as conformity to the everyday practices of one's society. If life in one's society is oppressive and tedious, the most worthwhile and honourable response may be deviancy and rebellion, so that attempts to 'teach children the difference between right and wrong', as traditionally conceived may be misguided and counter-productive. True moral excellence, like any sort of excellence, may be misunderstood and provoke hostility and criticism. The moral conduct of human affairs is a complex matter requiring us to take account of multiple interests, multiple points of view and constantly shifting, often conflicting, criteria. It is therefore unsurprising if moral confusions and moral misapprehensions sometimes arise and some individuals persist in the mistaken belief that their well-being is best secured by the pursuit of personal advantage, regardless of moral considerations. This is particularly so when the external signs of material success are so easily recognised and so frequently endorsed by the adult world. Moral education

of the young can only proceed *pari passu* with the progressive moral enlightenment of society at large which, like all educational and social goals can only be approached progressively and with patience. Under these circumstances it is unsurprising if the apparently easier option of enunciating moral rules backed by authority, established by habituation and enforced by means of sanctions often appears tempting and may, indeed, sometimes be justified as a short-term emergency expedient.

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