

Well-being, Values and Improving Lives¹

Valerie Tiberius tiberius@umn.edu

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Abstract

While large scale crises such as global poverty or climate change require large scale solutions, individual agents – as consumers, activists, voters, and leaders – certainly must play a role. This chapter proposes a theory of individual well-being that affords a strategy for generating reasons to do better by the world that also promote long-term self-interest. The theory defended characterizes well-being in terms of value fulfillment over time, and it holds that a person's current values might be in need of improvement or modification to count as best for the person over time. After an overview and brief defense of the theory, the chapter turns to the question of how a person's values might be modified and improved in ways that benefit both the person and the planet.

Keywords

Consumerism, Morality, Personal projects analysis, Preferences, Self-Improvement, Values, Well-being,

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With the growth of the global economy and the world population have come a variety of growing pains (or, less euphemistically, problems): climate change, an increasing gap between rich and poor, health consequences associated with the availability of cheap but nutrition-poor food, large scale economic upheaval, and so on. Of course, there have also been some good consequences of economic growth (a decrease in the percentage of the world's people who are poor, malnourished or illiterate), but the trajectory of the largest problems is troubling: for example, global climate change threatens to undo much of the progress that has been made and to make certain problems (such as the gap between rich and poor) much worse.

Large scale problems require large scale, structural solutions that draw on the resources of governments and institutions. Nevertheless, it is worth thinking about the individual's role in guiding the world toward real progress, if only because the policies that large institutions devise must ultimately act on individual people. Individuals contribute to large scale problems in at least three ways. First, in the

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aggregate, individual consumer choices exacerbate problems such as climate change. Second, lack of individual attention to and concern for large scale problems influences corporate and government policy or allow such policies to go unchecked. The preferences, choices, interests and votes of individual citizens do play a role in creating and maintaining global problems. Moreover, insofar as institutions or organizations aim to change behavior through regulation, policy or consumer incentives, they must consider the motives and values of the individual. Third, the institutions and organizations whose policies may have large scale effects are led by individual politicians, policymakers and businesspeople. As this volume attests, corporate leaders with the right values can make a difference on a large scale.

One way to frame the problem of the individual's role in furthering solutions to global problems that will be familiar to philosophers is as the problem "why be moral?" Think of it this way: there are various actions that individuals could take (using public transportation, for example) that are such that were everyone to take these actions, some large scale problems (climate disrupting carbon emissions) would be reduced. From the point of view of self-interest, individuals prefer the convenience of driving alone in their cars. There is a moral reason to sacrifice convenience for the sake of avoiding global catastrophe, but this moral reason does not move many of us. Hence the question: why be moral? Or, in other words, why care about the moral reasons that there are to sacrifice our own interests? This brief description grossly oversimplifies, of course. It's not actually clear what we have moral reason to do in cases of collective action problems, for instance. But I think the basic conflict between self-interested and moral reasons can be found in many cases of individual contribution to global problems. Even if the coordination problems could be solved so that individuals would know that their actions were not in vain, there would still be people who would not want to sacrifice their own comfort, convenience or money for the sake of the greater good.

Solutions to the "why be moral?" problem have ranged across two extremes. The Hobbesian response takes self-interest in its narrowest sense (self-interest as survival and desire satisfaction) and holds that our reasons to act morally depend on an enforcement mechanism that makes it worth our while in this narrow sense. The Kantian response, on the other hand, rejects the demand for self-interested

reasons to be moral: the moral law imposes rational requirements on us and these imperatives give us reasons independently of our self-interested desires.

There have also been responses in the middle that weave self-interest and morality together so that moral reasons and self-interested reasons are not so starkly distinguished. In this paper I explore the resources of one such middle path. I take the goal here to be to articulate an ideal of a good human life that locates moral reasons in the overall pursuit of well-being for an individual in a way that is constrained by psychological reality. The middle path is attractive insofar as it characterizes an ethical life in such a way that it doesn't demand so much of us that there's no hope for it.

This is a very large goal, obviously, and I can only make incremental progress in a single paper. The bulk of the paper is devoted to presenting an overview of a theory of well-being as value-fulfillment. I will not be able to argue conclusively for the view, which would require defending it against the alternatives; rather, I'll just explain what it is and why it is attractive. One of the things that I think is promising about the theory is the way it leads us to think about personal transformation or improvement, where making changes in one's life in response to global moral crises is one example. I'll turn to an explanation of this promise in the second part of the paper. Here, I'll consider how well-being as value-fulfillment creates opportunities for critical evaluation and development of one's own preferences in ways that would, for example, contribute to the moral challenges we face – opportunities, to use Ramón Mendiola's metaphor, to change from a caterpillar to a butterfly.

## 1. Well-Being as Value-Fulfillment

### *1.1. Overview*

The big challenge for theories of well-being is to explain both why well-being is good and why it is good for the creature whose well-being it is. In other words, to use some philosophical jargon, the best theory must capture both the subjectivity and the normativity of well-being.<sup>2</sup> Theories that define well-

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<sup>2</sup> In philosophy, "normative" refers to what *ought* to be, or what we have good reason to do, as opposed to the purely descriptive matter of what *is*. "Normative" has quite a different meaning in philosophy than it has in the social sciences, so I will avoid it in what follows.

being in terms of people's psychological states such as their desires or feeling of satisfaction have a ready explanation for the subjectivity of well-being, but have a more difficult time explaining why it gives us good reasons to do things. Theories that define well-being in terms of objective values do better at explaining why well-being is supposed to generate good reasons, but they have a greater challenge explaining the special connection to the individual subject. I think that the way to meet the challenge is to define well-being in terms of psychological features of individual people that are subject to improvement toward an ideal. In particular, I think we should define well-being in terms of individual *values* (rather than our desires or our satisfaction with life) where achieving or fulfilling our values constitutes an ideal in a sense that helps confer reason-giving status. The idea of a "value-full" life (the adjective I've coined to correspond to the noun value fulfillment), I will argue, does constitute an ideal and one that is sensibly identified with well-being.

Following this strategy leads us to the value fulfillment theory of well-being (VFT), which says that a person's life goes well to the extent that she pursues and fulfills or realizes things that she values.<sup>3</sup> The best life for a person is the one in which she gets the most value fulfillment she can, given her circumstances, and what is good for a person now is to do what contributes to some specification of the best, value-full life. In short, we live well when we realize what matters to us. This includes achieving certain states of affairs (such as career goals) and also maintaining the positive affective orientation that comprises valuing something. If your values include your own enjoyment, relationships with family and friends, accomplishing something in your career, and contributing to certain morally worthwhile projects, then your life goes well for you insofar as you have good relationships and career success, make a moral contribution and enjoy what you're doing, as these continue to be the things you care about. A value-full life is an ideal in at least two respects: First, we value many things and some values are more "fulfillable" than others: for example, values that do not suit our talents or circumstances are not easy to achieve and tend to produce frustration. Second, because pursuing what we value is something we do over time, some

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<sup>3</sup> For a similar approach to the relationship between values and well-being see Raibley 2010. For an earlier but more detailed discussion of my own view see (Tiberius 2008).

combinations or arrangements of values are better than others: some values frustrate the pursuit of others, for example. Further, a value-full life is an ideal that is relative to the individual subject insofar as the values that are included in the ideal are a person's own values and may differ from person to person. In the remainder of this section, I'll explain in more detail some of the key elements of the theory.

## *1.2. Values and Valuing*

To value something (in the sense that is significant for well-being) is to care about it in a special way. We take our values to give us reasons to do things and we take our values to be the standards for how well our lives are going. For example, if you ask someone how her life is going, she may reflect briefly on the important domains in her life (family, work, health) and consider how she is doing in terms of these important ends.<sup>4</sup> Values, then, are well suited to play a central role in a theory of well-being because they are the very thing that people take to make their lives go well.<sup>5</sup>

I take a person's values in the relevant sense to be comprised of patterns of relatively robust attitudes (such as emotions and desires) that we take to generate reasons for action.<sup>6</sup> For example, if you value your job, then you will be disposed to enjoy what you do, to feel proud when you get promoted and disappointed when you don't do your best work; when you reflect on how your life is going you will tend to think about how you are doing in your work as relevant to this question and you'll tend to take your job into account when you're making plans for the future. Valuing, therefore, has both an affective and a cognitive dimension – it involves our emotions and our judgment. We should be inclusive about what

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, overall life-satisfaction is highly correlated with domain satisfaction (Schimmack & Oishi 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Mere desires are not like this; people can have desires that are trivial or even unworthy of satisfaction from their own point of view. This is not to say that the satisfaction of our trivial desires is worthless according to the value fulfillment theory. VFT can say that the satisfaction of even fairly trivial desires (e.g., for a beer this afternoon) is relevant to overall well-being when it contributes to something the person values such as enjoyment, relaxation, or health.

<sup>6</sup> We can also use the word "values" to refer to the objects of our valuing attitudes, that is, to what is valued. For a more detailed version of the account of valuing and values see Tiberius 2000 and 2008. For sympathetic treatments see Raibley 2010, Schmuck & Sheldon 2001, and Anderson 1995. These are specialized notions of valuing and value. These terms are not perfect, but they seem to me better than the alternatives. Many values (in my sense) are like "goals", but it seems odd to describe a friendship as a goal. "Personal projects" comes closest, but I think it's stylistically awkward and also conveys something more intentional than necessary. We can value something in the sense I mean (health and happiness, for example) without making it our personal project. I do think, though, that many values are instantiated in personal projects and goals that are intended to fulfill them.

counts: people can value activities, relationships, broad aims, ideals, principles, particular goals that serve these more general ends, and so on. This characterization of valuing has features that make it compelling on its own as an account of valuing (as opposed to wanting or desiring). It also comports better with psychological research on values than philosophical theories that identify valuing with either a belief or a desire (Smith 1995; Dorsey 2012; Lewis 1989; Tiberius 2008). Below I'll discuss in more detail four distinctive features of values and valuing that are relevant to well-being and then I'll turn to the question of why it makes sense for a theory of well-being to focus on valuing in this sense.

First, to value something is to care about it in a particular way, and to care about something is, at least in part, to have some positive affective orientation toward it.<sup>7</sup> Other things equal, we are *motivated* to pursue or promote the values to which we are committed and we are disposed to react emotionally when these values are helped or threatened. For example, a mother who values being a parent is relatively robustly disposed to enjoy spending time with her child, to feel proud when he tells her she's a great mom, to be ashamed when she forgets to pick him up from school, and so on. Further, she takes her being a parent to justify certain decisions and plans she makes for her life, including decisions that require sacrificing other things she wants, and she takes 'being a good parent' to be highly relevant to how well her life is going.

Second, because of the role they play in deliberation, planning and action, values are "robust" in the sense that they are relatively stable and do not evaporate under moderate reflection. A person might *like* something or think that it is valuable, but do so only very briefly, or in a casual, unreflective manner that would disappear under the merest scrutiny, or in a way that plays virtually no role in her psychic economy. Such capricious attitudes do not plausibly reflect what a person genuinely cares about, who she is, where she stands, or what she thinks it is to live well. This feature of the view should not be taken to imply that our values can't change. It's unlikely (though not impossible) for the most basic values (e.g., health and happiness) to change, but change in instrumental values and how values are specified is likely

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<sup>7</sup> For an illuminating discussion of caring see Jaworska 2007. I agree with Jaworska that caring does not have to involve reflectiveness (one of the main theses she defends in this article), but I do not take caring and valuing to be quite the same thing, as will become clear.

to be a necessary feature of most normal lives. What kinds of changes in our values are recommended is a difficult practical problem, one facet of which we'll take up in section 2.

Third, to value something, and not merely to want it, is to see it as the kind of thing that generates *reasons* for you—as tending to justify responding in certain ways to it, and limiting how you might reasonably respond to it. Again, this feature of valuing has to do with the role that values play in our lives. Our values structure our choices and our assessments of how we're doing, and this is just another way of saying that we take them to give us practical reasons.

Fourth, on this view of values, we can see that (for most people) values themselves will exhibit certain patterns of mutual reinforcement and coherence. Some values will be more “core” than others in the sense that they are used more often in explanations of the importance of other values. For example, the value of (psychological) happiness is likely to be a core value for many because it will be appealed to in explaining what is important about other values such as sports, hobbies, and friendships. I do not assume that values occupy a rigid hierarchy (though they may for some people); rather, values are more likely to be arranged in a web of mutual support with some values more centrally located than others. Notice another feature of this web: the centrality or “core-ness” of a value does not necessarily track its motivational strength, since there is more to valuing than having the relevant motivations. Notice also that some values will be merely instrumental (the value of money is usually like this), but even intrinsic values can vary in degrees of centrality; happiness may explain the value of more instrumental values than, say, a particular friendship though both are valued (in part) for their own sakes. Further, the means-end relationship is not the only way in which values are related to each other, as we'll see in the next section.

Given these four features of values, we can see that a person's values (in the sense relevant to her well-being) are not necessarily identical with what she would report her values to be (say, on a values survey). Values, in the sense relevant to the value fulfillment theory, are complex psychological states that come in degrees (some may be more emotionally entrenched than others, for instance); they may not always be recognized for what they are by the person who has them. For example, most people value

health and happiness, but it isn't necessarily the case that people would put these at the top of their list if you asked them to enumerate their values. Nevertheless, if a pattern of emotional dispositions exists to promote health and happiness, and these ends play an important and stable role in decision making, they are values. Furthermore, these four features of values imply that values can be refined and improved. Each of us starts out with certain very basic proto-values that develop in normal human infants: typically these include comfort and the attention of our parents. As our values develop, they are shaped by our surroundings and personalities, and more are added as we experience the world: we add values that are instrumental to comfort and parental attention, we add new interpretations of how our basic intrinsic values can be realized, and we even add new intrinsic values over time (likely by a process of association). But the sets of values we develop could almost always be better – that is, they could be more emotionally suited to us, better justified, more stable, or more coherent. Values (unlike mere preferences) have built in standards for improvement.

With this account of values in hand, we can ask why a theory of well-being should focus on values rather than desires.<sup>8</sup>

First, because values do have constitutive standards for improvement, the appeal to values better explains how well-being constitutes a good goal or a goal we have good reason to try to achieve. Many of the unintuitive implications of desire theories stem from the fact that we do not take all of our desires to give us reasons that justify action. But values just are those patterns of attitudes that we take to be reason-giving, and our taking them to be so is reinforced by the fact that values are held to standards of improvement. Further, values have both a cognitive and an affective aspect, which gives a value based theory an advantage in explaining two different ways in which we can assess whether or not something is good for us. First, we sometimes challenge or change our view about what is good for us in the light of judgments about what is worth valuing. For instance, a person who discovers she cannot conceive a child

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<sup>8</sup> One might think of values as a special subset of preferences that has a particular role in our deliberation, planning and assessment of how our lives are going. In this way of thinking, the value fulfillment theory is not fundamentally different from standard preference satisfaction theories of well-being; it is, rather, a variant of such theories.

might reconsider how important biological connection is to the real value of being a mother and she might decide that it would be best for her to adopt. Second, we sometimes challenge our judgment of what is good for us on the basis of our emotional responses. We sometimes realize just how much something matters to us because we notice that we feel down when it is taken away from us, or elated when it comes back into our lives (Stocker 1990). When this happens we learn from our feelings that there are things about our well-being of which we were not aware. Because values have these two dimensions, they are well suited to explain how both manners of change constitute improvements to our views about what is good for us.

Second, values are especially related to subjects, unlike mere desires: people identify themselves in terms of their values and values are, by definition, of particular importance to people from their own point of view. Values have special relevance to well-being, then, insofar as well-being is a value that has a special relationship to the subject.

### *1.3. Value Fulfillment*

What it is for a value to be fulfilled or realized and what it means to say that one life has more value fulfillment than another are obviously very important for VFT. Values, like desires, bring with them standards for success, and living up to these standards is part of value fulfillment. In the example discussed above, it's easy to see how valuing one's job entails standards of success or fulfillment: whatever counts as doing well at your job fulfills that value. But standards for values are not always so obvious. Some values are such that we succeed in their terms by having the right attitudes or being a certain kind of person. Nevertheless, there are standards for values in the sense that there are ways of responding appropriately or inappropriately given the nature of what is valued (Anderson 1995). Moreover, most values encompass standards that are objective in the sense that whether or not we fulfill them is not a matter of whether we believe we are fulfilling them. There is something to meeting the standards that our values impose that goes beyond our subjective experience. In this respect, value fulfillment is similar to desire satisfaction: you may fail to get what you want without knowing it (say, if you are seriously deluded), and you may fail to fulfill your values, though you believe otherwise. Finally,

if we are going to achieve what matters to us, it is not only success in terms of what is valued that matters, but also the valuing attitudes themselves. We require some stability in our valuing attitudes if we are going to succeed by the standards we think are important. Value fulfillment, then, is succeeding by the standards of that value while continuing to think that these standards are important to how well your life goes.

Assessing *total* value fulfillment requires attending to the relationships between values. People's values are typically complex. We value some things largely as a means to others (for example, you might value running marathons as a means to the values of health and fitness), but (as I mentioned above) values are inter-related in other ways besides as means to ends. Some values are expressions of other, more abstractly described values. A person who values music may value playing the piano as a way of valuing music. In this case playing the piano is valued intrinsically, not as a means to appreciating music; the piano player does not value a distinct musical good that is brought about by playing the piano. Some values impose constraints on other values. For example, a person who values honesty will be constrained in how she pursues her career goals. For most people who value honesty, it is not just another desirable in the hopper, rather, the virtue of honesty acts as a limiting condition on what sorts of means to other ends are permissible. Considerations about the various ways in which values can be related to each must be taken into account when we evaluate total value fulfillment and we ask whether choosing one path over another promises more overall value fulfillment.

#### *1.4. Value-Full Lives*

The complexity of systems of values and the fact that values themselves are open to interpretation mean that there will be no single, well-defined best life for a person overall or even at a particular time. This is in part because there aren't precisely defined units of value fulfillment and in part because there are different ways that values can be successfully organized even for a single person. If the units of fulfillment were precise, we could rank possible lives in terms of minute gains and losses. If there were only one way for a particular set of values to be realized together, then there would be a clear sense in which there is a best life for a person. But this is not how values are. Instead, the value fulfillment

approach tells us that the good life for a person overall is one of the lives in a set of roughly equivalently value-full lives that constitutes a model of a good life for a person.<sup>9</sup> Like a model home with no clothes in the closets or a model airplane with no functioning toilet, the model of well-being simplifies real life: none of the best lives that comprise the model include every detail (what shampoo the person uses, how many holiday cards she sends); rather, they include the relatively large, important features of a life. As with other models that have a practical purpose, the model of a good life shows us which aspects of reality are relevant to the practical purpose at hand, which in this case is to make decisions about how to live or how to help others; in other words, its simplification is tailored to the purpose for which we are using it. Further, the model of well-being allows that a person might live an equally good life pursuing somewhat different values to different degrees, especially at an early point in the person's life. We can represent this by thinking of the model as a set of simplified best lives.

People achieve well-being, then, to the extent that they live a life like one of lives in the set of best lives. What is good for a person to do is what will contribute to one of the best lives that is currently available to her, or to what will contribute to one best way of realizing the model, given her circumstances. Contributions come in degrees, as does the goodness of an action or decision for a person. The value fulfillment theory defines well-being in terms of a model of a good life for a person that must be brought to life by translating the important features into actual decisions and actions.

This way of thinking about well-being moves a lot of the action to the application of the theory. When we apply a theory of well-being we do so for some practical purpose. For example, we might be interested in making a decision about our own lives, helping someone we know, helping strangers on the other side of the world, or making policy that will improve the well-being of current citizens of a town or future generations of a nation. There are different points of view one can take on the question of what it is to live a good human life for these different practical purposes. At the highest level of abstraction from the particular details of people's lives we can imagine paradigmatically good lives that include successful

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<sup>9</sup> Raibley (2012) uses the notion of a "paradigm" where I prefer to talk about a model. I think it is just as useful and perhaps a bit more precise to think about a set of best lives for a person that is a model of well-being.

valuing and pursuit of values that most people have and that fit together well: meaningful work, close personal relationships, health, and enjoyment, for example. This perspective is appropriate when our goal is to improve the lives of a large population of people. As our eyes move down from the abstraction to a specific person whose life we want to improve, the model must be brought to life by filling in the details of how these values are to be instantiated and how they will function together over time. This is an appropriate perspective for making ordinary decisions about one's own life or for helping a friend or relative.

An analogy might help to explain this way of thinking about applying a model of a good life. Think of the model of well-being as like a AAA vacation trip-tik.<sup>10</sup> It gives you rough guidelines for how to have a good road trip, given certain parameters that you assume at the outset (e.g., do you prefer country roads or highways, do you want to stop for certain tourist attractions or take the most direct route to a specific destination?). The trip-tik does not tell you exactly where to stop for gas, which restaurant to go to, or how long to stop. You have to make decisions at this level of detail as you go. Further, if you change your mind as you're driving, or if something goes wrong, you might need to improvise and pick up the map again later or revise the map. Similarly, the theory of well-being tells us the rough outlines of a good life and it explains why this life is good for one person while a different life is good for someone else. But the theory does not identify a good life in detail; this is something that must be done through the practice of living by engaging in reflection, planning, gaining experience, observing the effects of these experiences and so on. The value fulfillment theory, like the trip-tik, plots a good trip in general, but leave the details open for negotiation. We negotiate the gap between real and ideal as we try to improve our lives or the lives of others.

Further, exactly how you use the map will depend on your purposes, just as the way that the model of a value-full life will guide decision making and ethical practice depends on your purposes. If you are using the trip-tik to calculate how much you'll spend on gas, you don't need much specification:

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<sup>10</sup> The American Automobile Association (AAA) trip-tik was a customized paper map, usually used as a vacation planner.

the distances will be roughly the same no matter whether you stop to eat at a truck stop or a local diner. But if you want to use the trip-tik to plan a meeting with some friends, you'll have to get much more specific. Similarly, there are different uses to which we could put a theory of well-being and how much the model of well-being must be specified in detail depends on what question we're trying to answer and what we're trying to achieve. For example, if you are making policy for a large population, you will want to think about good human lives in general terms, leaving the model fairly unspecified. On the other hand, if you want to help a friend decide whether to quit her job and join the circus, you'll need a much more detailed conception of what a good life is for her.

To summarize the discussion of this section, here are the main features of the value fulfillment theory:

- Values are relatively stable, emotionally entrenched, reason-giving patterns of attitudes.
- A good life for a person is one in which she pursues and fulfills what she values over time where those values are emotionally suitable and seen by the person to make her life go well.
- The best life for a person is the one in which she gets the most value fulfillment she can, given her personality and environment.
- Because what counts as fulfillment of values is imprecise, we cannot define the best life for a person in fine detail. Rather, for any person there is a broadly characterized model of a good life or set of good lives that can be specified in different ways.
- How the model should be specified depends on what question you're trying to answer and what you're trying to accomplish by applying the theory of well-being.
- What is good for you now is to do what contributes to some specification of one of the most value-full lives.

It is worth addressing one glaring objection to this theory, before we move on to the next section. One might think that *values* are too inclusive to be at the heart of individual well-being. In particular,

since people have *moral* values, defining well-being in terms of values seems to collapse the divide between self-interest and morality too easily and to make it impossible for a person to sacrifice her well-being for her moral values. Notice that this is also a problem for preference satisfaction theories (often called the problem of self-sacrifice; Heathwood 2011).<sup>11</sup> The answer to this problem for the value fulfillment theory is that the values that are relevant to our well-being are those we take to provide standards for how well our lives are going for us. This leaves room for distance between a person's moral values and the values that constitute her well-being. A person who has no other values besides her moral values will not be capable of sacrificing her welfare for morality, but this isn't so obviously unintuitive.

## 2. Changing Values and Improving Lives

The value fulfillment theory recognizes that we are concerned to shape our lives in response to what we value, and that while our values do have a psychological basis they also pull us out of our own heads toward objective and inter-subjective standards of success. Some values do this more than others, of course, and some people do value idiosyncratic things in idiosyncratic ways. But most people have some values with standards of success that go beyond how they feel about them. These standards of success afford one mechanism for criticizing the status quo, that is, for assessing how one's life is currently going and imagining how it might go better.

This mechanism is basically an instrumental one: the basic values are taken as given and one asks how well one is doing at living up to these values. Does the value fulfillment theory provide a mechanism for asking about the intrinsic worth of one's values; in other words, for asking whether "one's ladder is up against the right wall"? I think it does provide such a mechanism, in virtue of the long-term perspective that VFT takes. I'll explain how this works in the next section.

### *2.1. Value Fulfillment and Holism*

In the overview, I said that what's good for a person to do *now* is what will contribute to a good life overall. This makes it seem like the value fulfillment theory privileges the long-term and discounts

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<sup>11</sup> The value fulfillment theory is also inclusive in the sense that it does not put moral constraints on what a person may value; individuals may have immoral values, just as they may have immoral preferences. This fact means that increasing aggregate well-being will sometimes require trade-offs, just as for preference satisfaction theories.

what we might call momentary well-being. This is true, and VFT is holistic in the sense that it takes the worth of welfare segments to depend in part on their role in larger sections of a life. Of course, in application the theory cannot follow a top-down approach: because we do not know how an entire life (or a long segment of it) will go, we must pay attention to the quality of smaller segments and the short term. I think holism of this sort is a very plausible view about the well-being in the relevant sense: well-being as a central aim of human deliberation, planning and decision making about how to live one's own life and how to help other people.<sup>12</sup> We do not tend to deliberate separately about what is good for us at this moment and what is good for us overall. We deliberate about what is good for us with a concern for the short term and an eye to the future.

Furthermore, holism is suited to the value fulfillment view, because values are relatively stable patterns of attitudes that are not typically the kinds of things we can fulfill in the moment. One can satisfy a desire for gustatory pleasure in an instant, but a person who *values* gustatory pleasure must organize her life so that she has opportunities for it that fit with the other things she does and the importance of some of this organizing will only be detectable from a bird's eye point of view. Of course what happens in the moment is important to many values too: you won't fulfill the value of gustatory pleasure if you turn down every opportunity to eat something tasty in the moment and, in general, momentary experiences of pleasure contribute to a pleasant life overall. The point is that a certain priority to the long term, and to the overall shape of a life, is built in to a theory that focuses on values.

As a holistic theory, the value fulfillment theory gives in principle priority to the model of a value-full overall life. (The priority in practice is constrained by our epistemological limits – the fact that we don't have the bird's eye point of view). This feature of VFT provides a needed critical perspective on our *current* values, goals and desires. That we need some critical perspective on our current values is clear from the observation that these can have bad long-term consequences for our lives overall. The

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<sup>12</sup> I don't mean to rule out the possibility that there is another sense of well-being – well-being at a time – that is distinct from what it is to be doing well overall (Velleman 2000). I have been persuaded by Anna Alexandrova (2013) that the assumption that there is just one notion of well-being worthy of our attention is probably not tenable.

point of view of one's whole life provides a critical perspective on our current values for which there is a natural rationale. After all, we are interested in living good overall lives and this interest motivates us when we think about well-being.

So, VFT allows us to critically evaluate our desires and values by assessing them in relation to each other, and as to whether they will contribute to living one of the best overall lives we could live. You might think that this is still a means-end evaluation: the goal is a value-full overall life and individual values are assessed for their instrumental value. But this appearance is misleading. When our focus is on values rather than desires, we see that how the fulfillment of one value affects the fulfillment of another is not always a question about an instrumental relationship. Certainly, some of the important relationships between values in a system are instrumental. But not all intrinsic values are created equally; different values function in different ways in people's psychic economies. In particular, there are certain moral values, and values that define one's self-identity more generally, that function as constraints even on the pursuit of other intrinsic desires. Consider: Jane has an intrinsic desire for her own pleasure and comfort; she also intrinsically values being a morally decent person. Being a morally decent person, according to Jane (and, indeed, many of us) means not even considering harming others for the sake of our own comfort. Deliberating about the satisfaction of which intrinsic value would bring more satisfaction or fulfillment overall would be what Bernard Williams has called "one thought too many" (Williams 1981). For this reason, too, some intrinsic desires can be bad for us in ways that are not reducible to means-end failures. Having desires that cause Jane to ponder whether she ought to buy a fur coat or exploit her cheap labor source (if these are things she's morally against) can be bad for her because they undermine her identity as a morally decent person. A desire or value can affect others in the system by instrumentally preventing their fulfillment, but it can also affect them by its mere presence: the existence of the desire can undermine the identity that is partly constructed by the intrinsic value in question.

Holism, together with the focus on values, gives the value fulfillment theory a way of assessing the merit of certain values that is not instrumental. Rather than asking whether a particular value is a

means to a given end (for example, as we might ask whether a certain activity is a means to pleasure or life satisfaction), we ask what values fit together into a life that succeeds according to the standards imposed by these values over time. This standard of assessment is coherentist, not instrumental, because there is no fully specified description of the end to which individual values are a means.

## *2.2. Applying the Theory: Individual Change and Global Crises*

With a theory of well-being in hand, we can return to the question with which we began and ask what it is to improve one's life, and where the demands of morality (as imposed by global crises, for example) might be included in this improvement. This part of the chapter will be, unavoidably, rather programmatic. The aim here is to point to the questions and research that would be particularly salient if the value fulfillment theory were accepted.

In general, according to VFT, we can assess how a life is going and how it might go better by asking three kinds of questions:

- 1) Given a person's values, their relative strengths and standards for success, how well is the person doing at fulfilling them, or succeeding in terms of them?
  - a. Is the person taking ineffective means to ultimate values?
  - b. Are there more effective means to ultimate values that the person isn't currently taking?
- 2) To what extent are these values and these standards of success the right ones, given the overarching goal of a value-full life?
  - a. Are there some values the person would be better off without?
  - b. Could some values be re-interpreted with different standards of success?
- 3) Are there values that the person does not have currently but which would make her better off in terms of value fulfillment?

So far, the theory I've described is quite abstract. It posits the ideal of a value-full life, but does not say anything about what these values are or how they are prioritized. To get from the general to the particular we need to know how various common human values can be pursued successfully over time.

More specifically, we need to know what normal human values are, how people tend to define success in terms of them, what particular plans or projects conduce to this success, what psychologically tenable options there are for changing these values or their associated standards (either rejecting them completely or redefining them), what obstacles people tend to confront when they try to change their values, and what kinds of commitments tend to foster value fulfillment over time.

Answering these questions requires a great deal of empirical information. One source for the relevant empirical information is the work that has been done in positive psychology. Particularly useful for our purposes are studies on the well-being effects of materialistic values and of personal projects. Typically, in positive psychology, well-being is measured by assessing global life-satisfaction, domain satisfaction, and/or positive and negative affect. These measures are taken to constitute what Ed Diener (1984; Diener et al. 2003) calls “subjective well-being” and they have become central to much of the work that is done by psychologists (including even psychologists who have different conceptions of well-being<sup>13</sup>). I believe that VFT recommends taking this research seriously for the following reason: people do tend to value their own subjective well-being as psychologists have defined that notion, and the value of SWB is likely to be part of a value-full life in the long term. Indeed, the fact that these hedonistic measures of well-being are taken to be a kind of default in psychology is some evidence that these values are deeply entrenched, at least at this moment in history. Further, there is a great deal of evidence that SWB is at least correlated with other near universal values such as health and intimate relationships (Tiberius & Plakias 2010).

The value fulfillment theory gives us direction as we confront the vast body of literature on the psychology of well-being with the aim of thinking about improving lives. I think the right approach is to start with a set of near universal, fairly uncontroversial, general ultimate values that are likely to be part of a value-full life over time. Life satisfaction and emotional happiness are two of these, and we could add health, intimate relationships and the welfare of one’s friends and family. Taking these as our

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<sup>13</sup> Even eudaimonist psychologists very often take themselves to have the burden of establishing that their constructs are correlated with SWB defined in terms of positive affect or life-satisfaction (Waterman 2013).

presumptive starting points, we should then look for evidence of what sorts of projects, goals and specific values produce success in terms of the presumptive values; evidence for projects, goals and specific values that are incompatible with success in terms of these presumptive values; and evidence for the human capacity to change or modify the ways in which we characterize and pursue these (and other) values.

Personal projects analysis, a research program founded by psychologist Brian Little, is a particularly promising source of the requisite information, because of the way personal projects are defined and the kinds of research questions that have been central to this program. Personal projects are defined as “extended sets of personally salient action in context” and they tend to be nested in hierarchical structures with more ultimate goals or values occasioning specific tasks. One of the things that psychologists who study personal projects are interested in discovering is which projects (or features of projects) are conducive to happiness and flourishing. Researchers are discovering that “individuals experience well-being [SWB] to the extent that they are engaged in personal projects that they appraise as estimable, meaningful undertakings that are manageable, both supported by and redound to the benefit of others, and positive and rewarding” (Little et al. 2007: 40). Meaningfulness and manageability turn out to be often at cross purposes, so one challenge for choosing good projects is to strike a balance between what is important and what you can actually do. This is precisely the kind of empirical information that VFT calls for, particularly if our ultimate purpose is to use the theory to think about how people’s values and projects could be changed for the better.

Once we have a way to think about improving lives, we can ask how this framework could be used to make the case for personal change that is instrumental to solving global crises. As a first step, what I will do in the remainder of the paper is to articulate the questions that would need to be answered in order to find a path away from “consumerism”, that is, an argument for transforming one’s life – or one’s business – into one that is less resource-intensive (where this could mean a life in which one advocates for better large-scale policy regarding the consumption of resources).

First, what ultimate values are served by consumerism? In other words, what are consumerist values a means to, or what ultimate values do they instantiate? The answer to this question will be different for different people, of course, but some generalizations seem warranted. Material goods are often a means to pleasure, enjoyment, friendship, love, and security. They might also be, for some, constitutive of status or power.

Second, does consumerist behavior serve the ends it is meant to serve? Does it make us happy, increase the quality of our friendships, and so on? There is evidence that people with materialist values (people who care a lot about having consumer goods, money and fame) are less subjectively happy than people with less materialistic values (Kasser 2002). But it is important to observe that consumption may serve some values very well in the *short* term, and this reveals a pervasive obstacle to non-consumerist changes in values. This obstacle is the urgency of the short-term perspective and its inevitable conflicts with the long-term. To live a life that we are happy with, we can't just do what we want at every moment. We have to have standards for what it means to live well, and we have to meet these standards, which requires making some short-term sacrifices. At the same time, we can't just ignore the short term, since ultimately a whole life is made up of experiences that happen in the moment, and since there's always uncertainty about the future. It won't do to deny the urgency of the short term and yet if we want to live good lives overall, we must put it in perspective. Insofar as opting to consume less means denying short-term enjoyment, acknowledging this pervasive obstacle is important as we think about improving lives.

Third, insofar as having material goods is constitutive of a more ultimate or intrinsic value, is this ultimate value (say, status, reputation, or comfort) one that is part of a value-full life? If it is, could that ultimate value be interpreted or specified in a different way? The value of fame or status might be difficult to maintain in the long-term, since these values are necessarily comparative and one's relative merit in these terms is highly likely to fluctuate over time; these might be values that one is better off without, even if they are intrinsically valued. Comfort seems on better footing as a component of a value-full life, but one could argue here that while having certain material goods signifies comfort in many

cultures, we could reinterpret these values so that our notion of its fulfillment does not rely on using up a lot of scarce resources.

Fourth, are there other values that people already have that could be used to anchor a reduction in consumerism? How could these values be specified or interpreted to best promote value fulfillment over time in such a way that would help with our problems? Values that come to mind include peace of mind, lack of stress, financial security, the well-being of one's children, being a good parent, being a decent person, and virtues such as thrift, justice, or compassion. These are widespread values at varying levels of abstraction that could be used to build a case for individual changes in consumption, charitable giving, or advocacy for policy responses to global crises. As discussed above, traits of character might be especially useful values to think about in this context insofar as they impose limits or constraints on behavior. For example, someone who identifies herself as a thrifty person might have various policies that comprise this virtue – always fix small appliances rather than throwing them away, always turn down the thermostat overnight – such that following these policies has a kind of priority over satisfying other desires.

Fifth, are there values that it would be good for people to have (value not currently in play that would contribute to greater value fulfillment) that could anchor a reduction in consumerism? For those who do not have the values mentioned above, or for whom these values do not play a significant role in their decision making, there is an argument to be made for the importance of at least some of them. For example, lack of stress has significant positive consequences for mental and physical health, and for the health of one's intimate relationships. Trying to keep up with the Joneses is stressful and living more simply might promote a less stressful life. It might also be possible to make a case for something like the value of sustainability itself. Consider some of the literature on consumerism that has attempted to brand materialistic values as a disease called "affluenza". The positive counterpart to this strategy is to promote the value of a sustainable lifestyle as a value that fits well into a good life over time. Of course, the promotion of a sustainable lifestyle as an ideal or virtuous way of living has not been effective so far, and

it might be that efforts to introduce new values are less likely to be successful than efforts to reinterpret or to promote more effective means to already existing values.

If we want a deep understanding of how people can improve their own lives in ways that will make a greater contribution to solving global problems (rather than exacerbating them), these are the questions it makes sense to ask. Earlier I said that we require different things from a model of well-being depending on our purposes. What that means in this context is that a serious attempt to answer these questions would take a different form depending on whether we are asking as policymakers or activists trying to change populations, as individuals trying to change our own lives or the lives of our friends and families, as corporate leaders aiming to change business practices that will profoundly affect employees and consumers, or as educators who are trying to help students navigate the various demands of trying to live a successful life. Large scale efforts must proceed on the basis of our best information about what the target population is like in general, the kinds of values they have, and how they are able to succeed in terms of them. Individual efforts require a more reflective and imaginative process. This too requires information, but it also requires that one try to imagine how else one could live one's life by reflecting on what matters most.

### 3. Conclusion

According to the value fulfillment theory of well-being, a good life is a life in which you succeed in terms of the set of values that suit you emotionally, that you take to make your life go well, and that are mutually achievable over time. The theory is not fundamentally different from familiar desire satisfaction theories. It still makes the individual the ultimate standard for her own well-being and it takes very seriously subjective concerns and interests. Unlike desire satisfaction theories, however, the value fulfillment theory does make room for evaluating one's values, goals, projects and desires that goes beyond the assessment of means-end efficiency. In other words, VFT makes some room for thinking about whether one's ladder is up against the right wall. It does so by positing an ideal of a good life that puts the things we care about together in a coherent way, and by paying attention to the subtle ways in which some values function differently from mere desires.

There is also, of course, a direct moral appeal to be made. Insofar as the opportunity for everyone to achieve a value-full life is a morally compelling goal, the value fulfillment theory would support an argument that we are morally obliged to respond to global crises that hamper people's ability to live this kind of life. But the special contribution of the value fulfillment theory, in my view, would be that it finds a place for reasons to care about and respond to global crises in the overall pursuit of well-being for an individual. It finds a place for the critical evaluation of our values and personal projects that respects the psychological reality that we are creatures who care most about ourselves and those we love.

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