

The Weight of Things
Philosophy and the Good Life

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Introduction

It's not every day that we examine our lives. Some of our happiest moments take place when we are least in the mood for examining anything. You look at your child, the view from a mountaintop, your new car, or whatever it is you most enjoy, and you think – I want nothing more than this. Or you don't think at all; you just enjoy.

Reflection can begin for many reasons. On major birthdays we can wonder whether we are moving in the right direction. A brush with a serious illness is often a time of reflection about what really matters and what doesn't. At the end of life, you may find yourself asking whether you got to have the life you wanted.

Sometimes it's other people that get us thinking. After reading about customs in another culture, we might wonder whether our lives are missing something, or theirs are misguided. A friend's life takes some strange turn and we begin to think about our priorities – and our friend's.

All of these situations drive us toward *philosophy*: toward questions of value, of what is better or worse, of the way we *ought* to live. They have been dealt with by ethicists since ancient times, though in some periods more directly than in others. For Plato and Aristotle and all the ancient schools that came after them, the question about how we should live is a question about the “highest good,” the ultimate thing I ought to aim for. The nineteenth century was another period of direct and intense focus on questions about life as a whole. “Good” is too bland a word for the life Nietzsche admires – he urges his readers to “live dangerously.” “Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!” he writes. The existentialists of the twentieth century were also in the business of addressing the

question of how to live, but the flavor is again something new. It may not be possible to live a life that is simply good, they suggest, but we can live with a more honest acceptance of the human condition.

Philosophers today still address the most fundamental questions about how we should live. Is happiness the only thing that matters? Robert Nozick says “no,” making an argument that is a model of the way argumentation can be brought to bear on these “big” issues (turn to Chapter 4 quickly, if you’re skeptical of the possibility of having rational debates about values). What else *could* you place at the core of living well? Two contemporary views that demand to be taken seriously are Peter Singer’s and Martha Nussbaum’s. In *How Are We to Live?* Singer argues that living well means living with a focus beyond oneself. Strongly influenced by Aristotelian ideas, Martha Nussbaum stresses the realization of basic human capabilities in *Women and Human Development*.

Despite the historic and contemporary philosophical interest in the good life, today people wanting to think about life issues will likely head to the religion or psychology or self-help sections of the bookstore. This is partly the fault of philosophers themselves. Rare is the book of philosophy that’s designed to be enjoyed. The three authors I’ve mentioned are good writers, but only Singer aims for general accessibility.

The problem with consigning the topic of living to psychologists and religious writers is that they don’t ask the questions philosophers do. Is living well bound up with religion? The books from the religion shelves assume one thing, without taking alternatives seriously. Most of the books from the psychology section assume a secular answer, without taking the religious answer seriously. Is there really any right way to live, instead of different right ways for different people? That’s a question that an “advice” or “how to” book won’t broach. Is there one thing that ought to be everybody’s aim? It might be inspirational to read a book that says so, but there are arguments on both sides. For those who want to thoroughly think through for themselves what really goes into living well, what’s just “icing,” and what doesn’t matter at all, a philosophical approach fits the bill.

The issues worth spending time on are the ones that actually come up in people’s lives. To tackle a full range of issues, we’ll need to acquaint ourselves with lots of different lives. We’ll encounter Leo Tolstoy, Victor Frankl (a concentration camp survivor), the fourth-century desert saints, bereaved parents, mountain climbers, philanthropists, Wal-Mart employees, the cyclist Lance Armstrong, an escaped slave, and many more.

Looking at lives is also a way to test the plausibility of abstract theories. You can say that happiness is all that counts, or morality, or whatnot, but these claims become plausible (or implausible) only in light of the data of concrete lives. Sometimes the perfect test case is hard to find in the real world, so some of the people to be discussed live only in literature, movies, and the imagination. We'll talk about Neo from *The Matrix*, the butler in *The Remains of the Day*, and many other intriguing characters.

I began thinking about the main issues of this book during an unsettled period of my own life after my children were born. Having children brings about a change of focus. The sense of ultimate worth most people find in being parents calls into question previous assessments of value. You *did* want to leave your mark, or make a success of yourself, or make the most of a talent. Maybe these things are still important, and in your sleep-deprived, baby-besotted state, you're just losing your grip. Or maybe they aren't. Even as children grow older, life is never exactly the same, and you continue to think about what your priorities were, and are, and should be.

As a new parent, my focus shifted away from career and toward family, but also from the whole world to my own world. Before we became parents, my husband and I were active members of Amnesty International, the human rights organization. Our relationship got off the ground in a setting that directed our attention far beyond ourselves. At one memorable meeting, shortly after the 1994 Rwandan genocide, a Tutsi speaker talked about her memories of the massacre. At another meeting, we met a man who spent eight years on death row until he was vindicated and released. After our children were born, we continued to be card-carrying members, but it was just so hard to make it to the meetings. Had our priorities changed for better or for worse?

The shifts of attention from work to family, from the whole world to my world, trigger a new reflectiveness. So does the sense of vulnerability all parents experience. Before kids come along, it's not hard to muster the fatalism it takes to bicycle on busy roads, get wheeled into surgery, or consume raw oysters. But fatalism about your kids, or about your kids' Mom or Dad? It's out of the question. Are the things that matter most really frighteningly vulnerable to good and bad fortune – or is there some way around that conclusion? Being a parent makes you think about the matter, where before it might have seemed remote and abstract.

Whatever individual circumstances initially get us thinking, examining our own peculiar situation leads to thoughts about what is good and bad, possible and impossible, high priority and low priority, in a human life. This book will explore all those issues, considering what has been said, what could be said, and what stands up best in the face of evidence and argument.

I'll begin by talking about an especially vivid question – just what difference it makes that everything comes to an end. Just about everyone experiences a moment in life when transience seems connected to meaninglessness. My nine-year-old son occasionally likes to shock me with the utterance, “We’re all going to die anyway, so what’s the point?” I think he gets the question from the *Calvin and Hobbes* comics that he adores, but this is a thought that can be seriously troubling. Midway through his life, despite accomplishments anyone would envy, Leo Tolstoy began to have thoughts of transience that disrupted and transformed his life. He *had* to believe in an eternal God to restore his sense that his life was worth something. Is transience a genuine problem? Is religion the only solution? That’s one of the basic questions this book tries to address. I broach it in Chapter 1 and come back to it toward the end of the book.

What must we aim for, to live good lives? The question is huge and it seems arrogant to even attempt an answer. To make any headway, you’ve got to ponder whether lives full of this or full of that always go well. Who am I to say? I discuss the whole business of being judgmental in Chapter 2, considering some very strange lives that will probably convince you that one life really isn’t just as good as another. There are better and worse aims we can adopt. But what are they? I turn to the history of philosophy for possibilities, considering first the ancients and then the nineteenth-century Utilitarians in Chapters 3 and 4.

The building process starts in Chapter 5. What are we trying to build? When all is said and done, I don’t think there is any such thing as “the good life,” a single way of life that’s better than any other. Whether it’s a life of philosophical contemplation, or religious piety, or champagne and caviar, no specific way of life can claim to be uniquely good. Nevertheless, some lives do go better than others. Taken as a whole, a life sometimes has to be called good (or bad). What we want to build is an explanation: what makes some lives good and what makes others not so good? Without anointing any one specific lifestyle as “the good life”, we can identify the features that good lives share. Conceivably, there could

be just one such feature, but when we look at a rich variety of real lives, the conclusion we've got to reach is that there are many. In Chapter 5, I explore what these things might be. Is there one list of necessities that's relevant to every life? I come to that question in Chapter 6, placing it in the context of an emotional debate about the life prospects of people with severe disabilities.

Because I think there are many necessities, I think we inevitably have to cope with being pulled in many different directions. I explore what means we have for resolving conflicts in Chapter 7. It's tempting to think that morality has a pre-eminent place in life, that it's the sole important thing or the overriding thing. Is it? Examining the status of morality is the business of Chapter 8.

In Chapter 9, I come back to Tolstoy's crisis, and, more generally, the role of religion in living well. If you think of religion as a great divide, and you want to know which side I'm on, I'll let you know right now that my position is going to be (annoyingly?) diplomatic. There was something right and something wrong with Tolstoy's conviction that he could find no meaning in life without religion.

Chapter 10 wraps things up and ties a variety of loose ends. If there are necessary aims, are there also optional aims – things it's good to aim for but only if you want to? Where do the things we care about most fit in – taking care of our families, making art (if that's your passion), running marathons, cooking great food, making a positive difference in the world, expressing ourselves, learning about the universe we live in? Whether or not you're persuaded by my arguments, my hope is that you'll be drawn into the centuries-old debate about these ultimate questions.

Chapter 1

— This Mortal World —

Nothing lasts forever. The project you've worked on all year will be completed and forgotten in a flash. Some day you'll be gone, along with your children and your children's children. Even a book, a major artwork, or an important theory can make a splash and then fade into obscurity.

Thoughts like these can shape the way we live our lives. If you want to overcome transience, you might choose to focus your energy on whatever promises a longer-lasting result: home improvement, rather than a party; your marriage rather than temporary friendships; publishing a book instead of an article; getting to heaven rather than making the most of this mortal life.

But why make any of these choices? Is transience really any problem at all? Perhaps *you* react to the mortality of all things with complete indifference. Are you making a mistake?

LEO TOLSTOY FOUND IMPERMANENCE profoundly troubling. By the time he reached the age of 50, in 1878, he had earned fame and acclaim for *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, he had amassed abundant wealth, and he had brought nine children into the world with his devoted wife. Nevertheless, as he lived and worked at his vast estate near Moscow, surrounded by his family, everything started to fall apart. The crisis was brought on by the thought that nothing lasts forever. People die, things decay, fame fades, great moments pass. "Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they may have been, will be forgotten and will no longer exist,"

he wrote in his autobiographical *Confession*. “What is the fuss about them?” These were no idle philosophical ruminations. “My life came to a standstill,” Tolstoy wrote. He plunged into a depression, stopped writing, and withdrew from his family.

Why should life be worthless if nothing lasts forever? I can emotionally sympathize with Tolstoy’s mood of despair. In a bad enough mood, I can find it pointless to put any energy into things that pass quickly – Thanksgiving dinner, a child’s birthday party, even a vacation. But is there really no point to life if nothing we do has lasting significance? Intellectually, it’s not so easy to understand Tolstoy’s crisis.

There really seem to be loads of things with no lasting result, but undeniable value. A child spends an enjoyable hour building sandcastles at the beach. Nobody records the event and all memory of the event eventually disappears. How can it be denied that this small slice of the child’s life is worth something? And come to think of it, why doubt that a quickly forgotten Thanksgiving dinner, or birthday party, or a great vacation, has some value?

Intimations of worthlessness seem to come from looking upon these events from a remote perspective. You imagine yourself a denizen of a future millennium. It’s the year 10,000 and life as we know it has virtually disappeared. You look back at a special moment in the year 2000 and it’s something of vanishing significance. What seemed vastly important at the moment now seems vastly unimportant.

But is hindsight, from such a distant point in time, really 20/20? Maybe from that far off, we actually can’t see accurately. We are in the position of someone looking at an object from a great distance. What comes to mind is a scene from the movie *The Third Man*: looking down from the top of a Ferris wheel, a shadowy criminal, played by Orson Welles, remarks to a friend that the people below look like ants; they can’t really be worth caring about. That’s his excuse for selling watered-down vaccines on the post-war Viennese black market, and causing the suffering and death of innocent children. And it *seems* for a moment like he is right. But not for long. People aren’t ants just because they look that way from afar. Likewise, an enjoyable hour at the beach isn’t valueless just because it seems that way if it’s imagined from the perspective of a time far, far in the future.

Was Tolstoy’s crisis a result of adopting the year 10,000 perspective too often? Maybe – but there was more to it than that.

EACH OF US IS running out of time. The amount of future I'm going to get a chance to enjoy is getting smaller and smaller. And then, there's no way of making up for the diminishing future by revisiting the past. I can't take trips backwards and have a second helping of periods of time I particularly enjoyed. The human condition gives each of us the problem of our mortality, and doesn't mitigate the problem by providing any opportunities for time travel. If we dwell on it, we can be alarmed by the sense that the moments of our lives are a diminishing and non-recyclable resource.

We get used to the elementary facts about death and time. Once we lose our capacity to be shocked by them, it's interesting to think about how these facts are experienced for the first time. My own children were completely unaware of death until they were about three years old. An awful smell was permeating the house and the exterminator said it was coming from a dead squirrel trapped in a wall. I vividly remember my daughter saying, "People don't ever die, do they?" I thought honesty was the best policy and gently admitted that people do die some day ("when they're very, very old and they're ready" – no reason to cover all painful topics at the same time). Both my daughter and her twin brother found this fact devastating, much to my surprise.

Midway through his life, it's as if Tolstoy re-experienced a child's first awareness that someday she is going to be "discontinued." In his story "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," written soon after *A Confession*, he describes the terror of facing imminent death in gruesome detail. Ivan Ilyich becomes ill after a minor accident and soon realizes that he's sliding unstopably toward the end. He simply can't come to terms with his predicament. "In the depths of his heart he knew he was dying but, so far from growing used to the idea, he simply did not and could not grasp it." Tolstoy agonized over his own mortality for many years, but could never take it in his stride.

Is it even possible to look at our mortality head on and accept it? An affirmative answer comes from a surprising place. Viktor Frankl was uprooted from his home in Vienna in 1942 and sent to a series of four concentration camps. A neurologist and psychiatrist, Frankl often found himself counseling prisoners at the brink of death. He encouraged them to find solace in the thought that the past is not nothing. Though his wife and parents were killed, he survived and wrote a detailed description of life in the camps, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In the book, he explains his conception of the past this way:

[I]n the past, nothing is irretrievably lost but everything irrevocably stored . . . Usually, to be sure, man considers only the stubble field of transitoriness and overlooks the full granaries of the past, wherein he had salvaged once and for all his deeds, his joys and also his sufferings. Nothing can be undone, and nothing can be done away with. I should say *having been* is the surest kind of being.

As long as I'm living I can take satisfaction in the events of my past, like the day I was married. Frankl's more radical suggestion is that when I'm gone, those events won't exactly disappear. Though now over, my wedding day is a frozen and unalterable part of the past. It will remain there, safe and secure, even after I'm gone.

But wouldn't it be better if the past were a permanent reality *and* we lived forever? No, Frankl says. Death is actually a blessing, because it gives us the urgency to get on with our plans and projects. Without the inevitability of dying some day, we would wile away our days in an eternity of procrastination. Why learn to play the guitar now if you can learn in a hundred years, or in a thousand . . . ?

Frankl does not mean to deny that the Nazis committed terrible crimes by murdering millions of people. They forced upon their victims drawn-out deaths involving almost unimaginable suffering. They deprived them of years of their lives and inflicted devastating losses on their loved ones. Frankl's goal was to help people come to terms with just one critical element of their obviously terrible situation – the elementary fact of human mortality. By helping them accept *that*, he thought he could ease their pain.

I hope many prisoners were comforted, but fear some were not. These deaths were going to be terribly tragic, even if the elementary fact of death is not. When people die too young or with too much left undone, what has been stored in the "granaries" of the past is just not enough to constitute a complete human life. Ivan Ilyich could have found no comfort in Frankl's words. As he lies on his deathbed, ruminating about the way he's spent his life, he finds little to savor in his past. He has wasted his energies on maintaining appearances – indeed, he thinks he's dying because of a trivial accident that took place while he was hanging draperies (Tolstoy is ambiguous about the true diagnosis). His life was short and pointless and now the lights are about to go out. Having lived his life badly, nothing can help him but more time – which (to his horror) he doesn't have.

But what about Tolstoy? At the time of his crisis, he had already accomplished more than most people ever will. His own private granary was overflowing with golden grain. Tolstoy was a prime candidate to be comforted by Frankl's ideas. If we visualize the two of them in the same room, should we imagine Tolstoy the patient being comforted by Frankl the psychiatrist?

Tolstoy would have been a particularly challenging patient. Storing things in the granaries of the past may keep them alive – and keep us alive – in some nebulous sense, but can't possibly satisfy the strongest appetite for permanence; and Tolstoy had a very strong appetite. Besides, as hard as it is for us to grasp, Tolstoy had come to find little value in any aspect of his life; in his own mind, at least at times, he *was* Ivan Ilyich. Could he at least have appreciated death for the way it helps us get on with the things we want to do? Even that would have been a tough sell. Tolstoy didn't seem to need the deadline that death provides. He'd always worked and lived intensely, even when death was nowhere in his thoughts.

For most of us, the shock of confronting mortality gradually dissipates. An unforeseen death or a health crisis can briefly make us think about our mortality, but most of the time we're happy to allow a thick curtain to veil our inevitable end. Children learn to draw that curtain early on. It's now been six years since my children first learned about death. For many months they returned to the subject with an intensity that only grew. A particularly intense round of tears turned out to be the last of it. When the subject of death comes up these days, they don't dwell on it.

To fully understand why the fact of mortality had such a persistent grip on Tolstoy, we need to look at the matter from another angle.

THERE IS A LONG tradition in philosophy that sees transience as inherently negative and permanence as inherently positive. This view is expressed most fully and eloquently by Plato. Ten years before his crisis, Tolstoy learned Greek and read the classics, including Plato, untranslated. (He said the originals were "like spring-water that sets the teeth on edge, full of sunlight and impurities and dust-motes that make it seem even more pure and fresh," while translations were like "boiled, distilled water.")

Plato conceives the world around us as a pale imitation of a more glorious reality. We live in a world of ceaseless change, of becoming,

that's accessible to our senses. But beyond the reach of our senses, there's an invisible world of being. The many beautiful things around us owe their beauty to the one imperceptible beautiful thing in that other world – what Plato calls beauty itself or the form of beauty. For each Many in the perceptible world of becoming (many tall things, many triangles, many chairs), there is a One in the other realm.

Change is an inherently negative trait of the world of becoming. The badness of change is a brute fact – there is no explaining it. It's not that Plato thinks transitory things and activities are devoid of all value. He doesn't adopt the Ferris wheel perspective from which everything seems worthless. There are good acts, good people, good books – all occupants of the world of becoming. Such things can even be imbued with a great deal of goodness. But they suffer from a fundamental metaphysical defect – as good as they may be, they are impermanent. One source of Tolstoy's crisis was an acute sensitivity to this "defect" (if it really is one). Since all his worldly accomplishments were transient, his life seemed hopelessly flawed.

Can we overcome transience? We're stuck "down" here in the realm of becoming; we can't live our lives in the superior realm of the unchanging. But Plato sees ways for us to reach in the direction of permanence. For one, you can do so intellectually. If you reflect on the nature of beauty itself (or goodness, or justice, or any other "One") and try to understand what it really is, then you are contemplating the permanent things in the realm of the forms. You don't actually become permanent yourself, but you get a kind of intellectual respite from ceaseless change. We can also try to conduct ourselves in a way that conforms to the form of justice, or create art that conforms to the form of beauty. We won't become permanent ourselves, but we can have the satisfaction of creating, so to speak, mirrors in which the permanent realm is reflected.

The hope of actually escaping death is expressed in one of Plato's greatest dialogues, *The Phaedo*. The setting of this dialogue is the prison cell where Socrates has been condemned to spend his final days; a jury has convicted him of blasphemy and corrupting the young. At the end of the dialogue Socrates drinks the hemlock, fulfilling the jury's sentence of death. Socrates, as Plato depicts him, soothes his grieving friends by explaining why death does not terrify him. Our souls, he says, have a chance of departing for the realm of the forms after death, depending on the life we have led. Devote yourself too much to bodily things while

you live, and your soul will be too weighted down to escape your body and consort with the forms when you die; but live a philosophical life, contemplating the forms, and your soul will leave the world of becoming and dwell among permanent things forever. (Some commentators have questioned how serious Socrates – or Plato – is about this. Is he just comforting his distraught followers with a childish story? He does say, later in the dialogue, “No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief . . .”)

We can only satisfy the craving for permanence if we live a life that’s very different from the conventionally successful life. We must not be focused on the superficial glamour of good looks, money, and material possessions. We must not even be focused on our spouses and our children. Plato depicts Socrates as being exemplary in this regard, when he has him respond coolly to his wife and children when they come to the prison to see him just before his death.

If permanence must somehow be achieved in a life that’s worth living, what recourse do we have if we can’t quite bring ourselves to believe in Platonic forms? Many of the great world religions postulate permanent realities and ways of “connecting” to them. The earliest books of the Bible depict a covenant between the “chosen people” and an eternal God. By having a relationship to God and obeying his laws, there is the promise of a kind of escape from the flux of ordinary life, though not a way to survive death. The emphasis changes to overcoming death in the New Testament. Life everlasting is the “good news” and the promise of the Christian gospel. Buddhists seem to positively embrace impermanence, but even here, there’s a Platonic element. The enlightened *arhat* is released from the cycle of rebirth but dissolved into the never-ending flux of being. Plato’s path to permanence may seem obscure, but kindred routes are familiar to religious people everywhere.

TOLSTOY’S CRISIS WAS RESOLVED gradually. At first he turned to philosophy and science for a way out of his predicament, but he found no satisfying answers there. Then he turned his attention to the peasants on his estate. He wondered how they went on in spite of the realities of disease and death, and concluded that their religious faith was the key. As he worked in the fields by their sides, gradually, by a sort of osmosis, their faith was transmitted to him.

Tolstoy's original problem was a painful sense of transience, and the part of religion that interested him solved that problem. How did he get over the feeling that nothing matters? He writes:

Whichever way I put the question: how am I to live? the answer is always: according to God's law. Or the question: is there anything real that will come of my life? the answer is: eternal torment or eternal bliss. Or, to the question: what meaning is there that is not destroyed by death? the answer is: unity with the infinite, God, heaven.

Union with the infinite was the essence of faith, for Tolstoy, and he saw this element equally in every religious tradition. The rest of religious doctrine, for him, was just myth making, and he wrote about the stories of the Bible with undisguised contempt. (“[N]o other faith has ever preached things so incompatible with reason and contemporary knowledge, or ideas so immoral as those taught by Church Christianity. This is without mentioning all the nonsense in the Old Testament . . .”). A truculent critic of the Russian Orthodox Church, he was ultimately excommunicated.

Tolstoy's new-found faith changed his life. He became contemptuous of his famous novels and turned over their copyrights to his wife. Yes, great novels are relatively permanent, more permanent than dinner parties or Moscow balls; even more permanent than children. But they are not eternal. Returning to literature only sporadically, he began to devote himself to writing essays on religious themes. Now he despised the high society life the rest of the family enjoyed during sojourns to Moscow; he grew impatient with the clutter of children, teachers, servants, and visitors that surrounded him the rest of the year at the family's estate in the country. Intermittently, he gave up meat, alcohol, and sex. Later in life, Tolstoy would periodically abandon his family to help the poor during periods of famine or to briefly live in the austerity of a monastery.

To live “for permanence” means adopting a set of priorities and letting them guide life decisions. Depending on the sort of permanence we think possible, and the way we think it can be achieved, it might be to live as Socrates did, or as Tolstoy did after his conversion, but the craving for permanence can shape our lives even if we feel no hope of linking ourselves to other-worldly realities. The warriors of heroic sagas like the *Iliad* think it's worth it to die bravely on the battlefield, never to return

to the warmth and security of family life, because fame will make them immortal. They take comfort in the belief that the memory of their great deeds will endure. In a more modern vein, we may be driven by the desire to leave behind books, artworks, musical masterpieces. Those with talent and initiative can make a lasting difference to the way a business is run, to the way a city is organized, to the prevalence of a disease, to the beauty of a park. Less ambitiously (but no less satisfyingly), we can leave behind children who go on living after we die, and (we hope) have their own children, and so on for many generations.

The craving for permanence can even drive us to focus on the past. By investigating your ancestry, you can feel like you're a part of a family that goes back hundreds of years. History, biography, and literature can also give us the sense of defying time. I recently spent a couple of weeks living in the ice age; later I traveled to nineteenth-century Russia, and then I stopped off in Rome during the first century. It was exhilarating getting out of the twenty-first century for a while and I am thankful to the novelist, the biographer, and the historian who gave me the opportunity.

For Tolstoy, the permanence of books and children and fame was really no permanence at all. He had these things in spades, and they gave him no relief from his sense of meaninglessness. Without transcendent realities – a supreme being, and an afterlife – there was no possibility of living a good and meaningful life.

In the United States today, where the vast majority of people give a central place to religion in their lives, there are plenty who agree with Tolstoy about the connection between God and life. Religion is the linchpin of a good life. If there is no God, we *ought* to be just as miserable as Tolstoy was during his crisis. This is the message of many popular Christian self-help authors – like Rick Warren, author of the mega-hit *The Purpose Driven Life*. Tolstoy's version of Christianity is worlds away, but he is the patron saint of the basic theme: if there is no God, our lives really are of no account.

It's harder to find overt signs of the non-religious focus on permanence. It sounds distinctly unmodern – pompous, even – to say you are motivated to write books by a desire to leave behind something permanent, or you want to have children so you can live on in your descendants. We don't often talk that way. But that doesn't mean we don't feel that way. I would like to think that when I am gone, my children and grandchildren will still be around. If I could take credit for a

War and Peace, I think I'd feel a lot better on my deathbed. But would it make sense to give feelings like these a big role, or even a small role, in charting my course?

Is it really vital to overcome transience, in some way, shape, or form? Later on we'll return to the topic of permanence and take a stab at some answers. We cannot begin to do so without first tackling more fundamental questions.

Chapter 4

Is Happiness All That Matters?

Parents have simple wishes for their children, or so it appears when they proclaim that they just want them to be happy. If we weren't sold on reason (or virtue) as the only ingredient of living well, maybe we ought to switch to a different candidate for sole ingredient. Just plain happiness might be what we're looking for.

Plain happiness is nothing as subtle and complex as *eudaimonia*. Happiness, in the plain sense, comprises pleasant states of consciousness (in fact "pleasure" is a virtual synonym): the good feeling of a hot shower, the euphoria of being in love, the sensation of eating chocolate, the pleasant sense of absorption you get from being engrossed in a good book, the pleasure of getting a joke or satisfying curiosity, sexual pleasure, enjoying the coziness of a fire, the pleasure of listening to Mozart, the satisfaction of looking back on a period of your life and judging that things have been going well for you.

Plain happiness fluctuates all the time. You could plot your levels of happiness (and unhappiness) on a graph: think of levels of happiness on the y axis and times on the x axis. A graph of your happiness levels for today might start at the "origin" and move up and to the right along a diagonal path, if you began the day neutrally and steadily became happier and happier. You could use graphs like this to give yourself daily scores for happiness, using the area under the curve to compute your total. An omniscient happiness accountant would be able to give us each one big happiness score at the end of our lives.

Could happiness be the only thing that figures into the assessment of lives, considering that there are so many other things we want, like

friends, family, success, and material possessions? Nobody could deny that we place other things on our “wish lists,” but the suggestion is that we want the other things for the happiness they generate. Happiness is the only thing that *directly* contributes to the goodness of our lives. If happiness is the only important thing, why is it sometimes reasonable to do things that cause us unhappiness? For the sake of the happiness we anticipate experiencing in the long run. We go to the dentist, take a course in organic chemistry, and the like, because we figure that later on these things will result in greater happiness.

If happiness is the only thing that counts towards making our lives good, it could count in different ways. It could be that only *my* happiness figures into making my life good or bad. The happier I am (and the less unhappy), the better my life is going. On this view we look at a person as a happiness *consumer* when we evaluate his or her life. The alternative is to look at a person both as a consumer and as a *producer* of happiness, and take into account the difference his life makes to the happiness of all people.

Putting it in a nutshell, the view I want to focus on in this chapter champions the lives of the people who are themselves the happiest. We’ll call it the “Simple Happiness View.” Philosophers call it Hedonism, from the Greek word for pleasure, but that can create confusion, because we ordinarily think of a hedonist as someone who focuses on particularly mindless forms of pleasure; he’s the “eat, drink, and be merry” sort of character. A Hedonist, in the philosophical sense, simply says that the sole correct measure of whether a person’s life is good or not is the total amount of happiness *that person* experiences over the entire course of his life. A life with more happiness is better than a life with less; the best life is the one with the most happiness.

The talk of measuring is not to be taken too seriously. There isn’t really an omniscient happiness accountant. We have gas meters and water meters; we don’t have happiness meters. And we don’t need them. We have a rough idea of who is especially happy and who is not; which options will bring us more happiness and which less. The question is whether the exclusive focus on amounts of happiness makes sense. Could the truth about the best life be this simple?

BEFORE TRYING TO ANSWER, let’s pause to ask whose theory the Simple Happiness View is. Is it actually any philosopher’s position?

Epicureanism was a post-Aristotelian rival of Stoicism that identified our final good – our ultimate end – not with virtue but with pleasure. So this is a reasonable first stop on any tour of Simple Happiness View terrain. Though Epicureans value pleasure and pleasure alone, they have some additional distinctive commitments. A day, a week, a year, a life, doesn't go well, they say, when experiences fluctuate from being extremely pleasurable to being extremely painful. To assess a life, it's not just net pleasure (pleasure minus pain) that we need to assess. A graph showing a very flat line above the x axis represents a better life, for the Epicureans, than a bumpy graph depicting higher net pleasure. The Epicureans conceive of a pleasant life as a calm and tranquil life. (If this seems familiar, that is because for the Stoics, too, tranquility, imperturbability, absence of passion, are marks of a good life. Those aren't inherently good ends, for the Stoics – they say only virtue is intrinsically good – but they do picture the good life that way.)

What must we pursue to secure this sort of steadily pleasurable life? A moderate amount of food, alcohol, sex. Plenty of philosophy. An appreciation of the beauties of nature. Aristotle and the Stoics have more admiration for the life of the statesman than the Epicureans do, because the latter see such a life as inevitably full of highs and lows. The most pleasurable life, for the Epicureans, involves retreat: picture spending most of your time sitting in your garden philosophizing with a small group of friends, and you will have a fair idea of the Epicureans' conception of the good life.

Next stop, nineteenth-century England, and the Hedonism embraced by the Utilitarian school of moral philosophy that was developed initially by Jeremy Bentham and then by John Stuart Mill. The Utilitarians did not conceive of the task of moral philosophy in the way the ancients did. For Bentham and Mill, the first question of moral philosophy is not about the life, taken as a whole, that each of us should aim to live. The primary moral questions are about the rightness or wrongness of actions. We are making no error if we pluck moral quandaries out of the context of whole lives and try to resolve them. Is it right or wrong to tell a lie? The Utilitarians answer by saying that lying is not intrinsically right or wrong, but right or wrong depending on the consequences in a particular situation. Which it is depends on how much good or bad results from a particular lie, taking into consideration all who are affected, both in the short term and in the long term. But what is good and what is bad? Bentham says the only intrinsic good is pleasure, and

the only intrinsic bad is pain. If you add up the pleasure minus the pain for everyone affected by telling a particular lie, you will know whether or not to do it.

Bentham is clear about how to use pleasure and pain to determine rightness and wrongness, but can we also use pleasure and pain to assess how well a life is going? It seems like the only way we could assess a life, if Utilitarianism is correct, would be on the basis of amounts of pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. If happiness is the only intrinsic good, then a life could only be good if the person who lived it “consumed,” over time, a great deal of happiness. And that’s what the Simple Happiness View says. Could there be any doubt that Utilitarians espouse the Simple Happiness View?

Well, yes. Suppose I love nothing better than to sit by my window watching the world go by while playing tiddlywinks and drinking tea. One day I see a child fall off a bike. Helping the child would interrupt my game of tiddlywinks and leave me with a cold cup of tea. Honestly, it wouldn’t give me much pleasure to help. What should I do if I simply want my life to go better? Is my well-being derived from consuming as much pleasure as possible, in which case I should at the very least finish my tea before helping? Or is my well-being derived from doing the right thing, which is to produce as much total pleasure as possible – and get out there as fast as possible? Either answer is consistent with the idea that pleasure is the only intrinsic good.

Unfortunately, Bentham doesn’t say. The most significant issue for the ancients, what makes my life good, is not a question in the foreground for him. There’s the same indeterminacy in the writing of John Stuart Mill. If I want *my life* to be as good as possible, it’s not clear which way he would urge me to go when faced with a choice between maximizing my own pleasure, and maximizing total pleasure. However, there is *some* difference between Mill and Bentham on this score. Bentham thinks it really is possible for someone to enjoy tiddlywinks and tea more than helping an injured child. Pleasure, for different people, comes from different things. For one person, the greatest pleasure will be experienced at the symphony, for another the greatest pleasure will be experienced watching a boxing match. Mill, on the other hand, thinks that the pleasures that involve our higher faculties are qualitatively superior. They really feel better to us, and therefore should count more when we add up pleasures and pains before deciding on a course of action. Among these higher pleasures are the pleasures of doing the right thing. And so

Mill would not be as ready as Bentham to admit that the path that maximizes *my* pleasure could diverge from the path that maximizes *total* pleasure. Rushing to the aid of the child has got to be better both for me and for the child.

Still, even for Mill, there must be some situation that pits the greatest pleasure for me against doing the right thing and producing the greatest total pleasure. Maybe donating to the art museum would give me the greatest pleasure, while donating to the cancer society would generate the most pleasure for all. Which should I choose if I just want *my* life to go best? Would Mill espouse the Simple Happiness View, and identify living well with *consuming* lots of pleasure? Again, the question of the good life is not in the foreground for Mill, as it is for the ancients. He is focused on a different question: what is the right thing to do? Here it's producing happiness that matters, not just consuming it.

The Simple Happiness View is clearly one account of living a good life that Utilitarians could adopt. They could say that while morally we ought to always choose the option that produces the greatest good, our own lives are good or bad depending only on the pleasure we consume, and so sometimes making the morally right choice will involve a sacrifice of our own good. While our actions will be morally right, we will be making our own lives worse. On the other hand, Utilitarians could accept something like the ancient view, which sees virtue as the main ingredient of a good life. They could say that we make our own lives best by always doing the right thing and promoting total happiness, even at our own expense. The more good (happiness) I promote, the better my life is going. The Simple Happiness View seems like the more natural choice for a Utilitarian to make. We saw in the last chapter that it's hard to believe that how well a person's life is going depends entirely or even mainly on moral factors. And that becomes even harder to swallow when we shift from the ancients' conception of morality to the Utilitarians' conception. The Aristotelian virtues are closely linked to emotional stability and mental health, so they have some intuitive relevance to how my life is going. The person who scores high on Utilitarian moral criteria is someone who has a very positive impact on total happiness. Looking at a person's life from that perspective, exclusively, we'll have to ignore a lot of what seems most relevant to the way her life is going.

So much for who espouses the Simple Happiness View. In some moods, *we* do. All in one breath, new parents will say they want their child to have a good life, and they just want the child to be happy. We

advise our friends to do things “if it will make you happy.” We stop doing things because “it just wasn’t making me happy.” Happiness is at least a very important part of what we think a good life involves.

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT DEvised by contemporary philosopher Robert Nozick helps us examine whether or not happiness is really, ultimately, *all* that matters to us. We will be indulging in a bit of science fiction here. If your literary tastes run in another direction, don’t worry: soon we’ll return to the real world.

Suppose, Nozick says, there were a device called an “experience machine.” The machine controls your brain so that you experience a “virtual world” instead of receiving inputs through your senses from the world around you. If you’ve seen the movie *The Matrix*, you’ll find this easy to visualize. Think of the rebels in the movie reclining in those dentist office type chairs and putting helmets over their heads. The helmets link their brains to a computer that generates a virtual world they call “the matrix.” In the movie, the computer is malevolent, but don’t think of the experience machine that way. It’s run by very kind scientists. The computer in the movie at least partially controls the sort of virtual world that people experience. But the experience machine generates just the virtual world that you would prefer. You get to select the machine’s programming before you hook up. If happiness, to you, is climbing mountains, then you can request a virtual world with lots of mountain climbing. If happiness is feeling successful at your job, you can program that into your virtual world. Whatever you want to experience is possible: a loving spouse, charming children, friends who admire you, delicious food that doesn’t make you fat. If you find a certain pleasure in contrasts, you can include highs and lows instead of unrelenting good times.

Now, you’re not just being given the option to spend the afternoon enjoying some exotic experience. You’re going to spend the rest of your life hooked up. (Your bodily needs will be taken care of, so don’t worry – but let’s not take the time to imagine the details.) This sounds drastic, but you’re being offered the possibility of spending the rest of your life in blissful happiness. If you think knowing you are connected to a machine will put a pall on your happiness, the scientists will gladly oblige you by programming the machine to erase your memory of being connected.

Would you sign up? Nozick bets that you wouldn't, and he says that shows that happiness is not really the only thing that matters to you. The disinclination to sign up shows this because connecting to the experience machine would, for most of us, be the way to maximize our happiness. There must be other things we value besides happiness, Nozick concludes – things we could obtain in real life, but not in the experience machine.

Refusal to hook up is not actually so easy to interpret. It could be that we just don't have enough trust in scientists to place ourselves in such a vulnerable position. Maybe they wouldn't comply with our requests. They might want to conduct experiments on us. Or maybe, although the scientists are perfect angels, their machines have the potential to malfunction. Although real life doesn't guarantee us optimal happiness, we might think we're more likely to experience an adequately happy life in the real world.

To eliminate these distractions, let's change the thought experiment a little. The question is not whether you would choose to hook up, but whether you care whether you are right now hooked up. I regret to inform you, but it is just possible that you *did* make the choice to hook up a long time ago. It happened during the experimental days of your adolescence. And yes, you did check the box indicating a preference for memory erasure. So now, of course, you don't remember that fateful day when you lay back in that chair and the helmet was placed over your head. Ever since, you've been living in a virtual world. The friends you thought you had are virtual friends. This book is a virtual book. Your parents are virtual parents. But – now that you think about it – the last several years *have* been exceptionally happy ones! Before you read this, you did think your life was going very well. Do you now have a reason to see things differently?

Nozick predicts you will be discombobulated by these revelations. If you suppose you're hooked up to the experience machine, you will not think that your life is entirely good. I find that many people's thoughts are just what Nozick predicts. They think it would be a bad thing for the life they were living, no matter how happy it is, to be a life generated by an experience machine. There are some people, though, who don't see any problem with such a life. If you're one of them, consider the matter again after thinking a bit about the differences between life "on" the machine and normal life. What are those differences?

To begin with, if we're hooked up to the experience machine, we are dependent on scientists and machines. We are, in some ways, like a patient on life support, whose life can be disrupted, in an instant, by malfunctioning machines or incompetent doctors. In normal life, we enjoy comparative (though of course not absolute) independence.

Hooked up, we do nothing that benefits others. The "care" we take of our virtual children does not benefit anyone, the work we put into curing our virtual patients doesn't cure anyone. The cats we feed are just virtual cats. Our lives don't make a difference. In normal life, we can have a positive impact on others.

"On" the experience machine, we fail in all kinds of ways. Yes, it seems like you got a strike when you went bowling, but you didn't really. You think your daughter got you a lovely father's day present, but that's false. You think you got a raise, but you didn't. If I'm hooked up, nobody ever complies with my demands. I tell my children to do their homework, and although I have an experience which makes it seem like they do, there is no real compliance.

If you're hooked up, you take no risks, you have no real adventures. All that happens to you was planned ahead of time, and guaranteed to go as planned. This could even affect whether you have a chance to develop a real self. When life is entirely planned, you don't have a chance to learn, through trial and error, which activities really suit you, and which don't. In real life, as we grow older, we learn more and more about ourselves through our reactions to the experiences life throws at us.

Clearly, there are differences between ordinary life and life lived through the experience machine. Now that I've brought some to the fore, are you still satisfied with the "hooked-up" life? If you are, that may be because you can't imagine how the alleged problems you'd "suffer" on the experience machine could be problems if they didn't literally cause any suffering. Can there be a problem with my life that doesn't feel like a problem *to me*?

In normal circumstances, our problems typically do feel like problems. But it seems to me that they needn't always. Think of the horror many of us feel at the prospect of winding up in a vegetative state as a result of injury or disease. Many people think this is a worse situation than simply being dead and they prepare living wills in the hope of avoiding being in such a state. My being in a vegetative state is full of problems for others. People would be distraught about me, and my semi-living condition would make it impossible for them to grieve and

move on. Maybe as a result of seeing me like that they wouldn't be able to remember me as I used to be. My health care would be tremendously expensive. But aside from all that, it makes sense to think that in a vegetative state I would have problems directly, as well. My condition would be bad *for me*, even though I would have no conscious awareness of that badness.

Dependence, failure to benefit others, having false beliefs – all of these alleged problems on the experience machine wouldn't feel like problems. If I've programmed some altruistic experiences into the experience machine, I'm going to get all the satisfaction from them that I would get in normal life. If I'm not actually benefiting anyone, some would say that that's a problem for others, but not for me. To some, a problem *for me* has got to be a problem affecting my conscious experience. I can understand wanting to use the phrase "for me" that way, but there's this to say on the other side. It's good that I should have a good life – good *for me* in particular, because it's my life. If I'm right now living a bad life, without knowing it, that's bad *for me*, even though the problem may not feel like one.

The idea that there could be problems for me that don't feel like problems has an illustrious supporter – the great French philosopher of the seventeenth century, René Descartes. He was particularly concerned with the problem of having massively false beliefs, which is just one of the problems you would have in the experience machine. Let's consider how that issue arises in Descartes's thinking.

IT'S DESCARTES WHO DESERVES most of the credit for both Nozick's thought experiment and the scenario depicted in *The Matrix*. While Nozick was trying to make a point about values – and maybe the same can be said about *The Matrix* – Descartes's objective was to determine whether there is anything we can know with complete certainty. His ultimate goal was to place science and all knowledge on a secure foundation.

Seventeenth-century guy that Descartes was, he didn't envision being duped by a computer. He asks, in the *Meditations*, whether our conscious experiences could have been directly implanted in us by a nasty, all-powerful being, an Evil Deceiver, instead of coming to us from the world, by way of our sense organs, and our brains. Descartes invites me to see that it's conceivable that there is no physical world out there, and

that I have no brain or sense organs. Just conceivably, I could be alone in the universe, but for an Evil Deceiver who's filling my head (no, my soul) with visions of a table, a keyboard, my hands on the keyboard, the computer screen, the window, the trees beyond the window, the sky. All those things could be illusory.

After Descartes admits that his beliefs could be massively false, he discovers, to his delight, that there is one thing he can't doubt, and that's the bare fact of his existence. "I think, therefore I am," he insists. This famous sentence has the air of telling us something deep about the meaning of life, but to Descartes it expresses the simplest possible certainty. If I'm thinking about whether I exist, how could I possibly *not* exist? OK, he says, I exist, but what else can I be sure of? Descartes proceeds, baby-step by baby-step, trying to discover additional certainties. Using a combination of reasonably robust first principles and not-so-evident principles, he arrives at the conclusion that there is a God who is perfectly good. This is just as certain, he claims, as the proposition that I exist. Well, maybe. What's relevant for us is the next step. I have the strongest possible inclination to believe that there is a desk in front of me; there's nothing I can do to stifle that inclination for good (well . . . maybe for a few minutes, but inevitably the belief returns). If there's really no desk there, then God would have to be guilty of either deceiving me or allowing me to be deceived by another power. But deception is bad, Descartes assumes. God is good. He wouldn't deceive me *or* allow me to be deceived! So there must actually *be* a desk in front of me.

We have to pause here to note the amazing centrality this reasoning gives to our religious beliefs. If Descartes is right, I have to *first* know that God exists before I can know this desk exists (or my body, even). And an atheist is just out of luck. He *can't* have any rational basis for believing that the desk exists!

The relevant thing is Descartes's assumption that it would be a very bad thing for me to have loads of beliefs that are completely out of whack with reality. It's not a matter of causing me any conscious problem. It's just a bad thing, period. It's not something a perfectly good being would impose on me. This part of the argument seems to me to be very strong. A person whose entire understanding of the world around her is massively incorrect does have a problem, whether or not to her it feels like one. And that bears on what we say about people attached to the

experience machine and people in vegetative states. It's a problem for them to be in those states, even though the problem does not take a conscious form. You can have a problem, without being aware of it.

Question for *Matrix* fans: Do the characters in the movie see sheer deception as a problem? I think they do, but their motivations are complex. The rebels exit virtual reality and stay in the real world partly because they want to avoid being deceived, but also because that's the only way to stop the evil computer from taking over the world. It's not *just* the badness of unconscious deception that motivates them. And then there are characters willing to return to virtual reality, with memory erasure, despite knowing they will wind up completely deceived. This doesn't show they don't find deception problematic. Reality has turned out to be ugly and miserable, and the virtual world of "the Matrix" is reasonably pleasant. It's fair to say that those who return do see being deceived as evil; they just see it as the lesser evil, compared to non-stop reality-based unhappiness. And so the movie's characters don't behave in a way that conflicts with my point: being massively deceived is a problem for me whether or not it feels like one. Good and bad things for me are not always things that feel good to me or feel bad to me.

IF I'VE MADE MY case so far, then the door is now open to saying there are good things besides happiness, and bad things besides unhappiness. I think we ought to walk through that door. Happiness really isn't all that matters. Imagine your own child growing up and reading about the experience machine in a magazine. She decides that this is her goal in life and begins to spend all of her time planning what kinds of programming she will request. You would certainly have ample reason to object. There are the worries about whether she will be safe. Equally, you're going to be aghast at the prospect of your child being "dead" to you. You will not be soothed much by her reassurances that she will have you programmed in as a denizen of her virtual world. But beyond all of that, I think you're probably going to be disappointed by the life your daughter plans to live. This is not at all what you wanted for her. There is something fundamentally bad about that life, even if the badness will never be felt by your daughter.

We've mulled over various candidates for the nature of that badness. There are the problems of dependence, of being deceived, of doing nothing for others. But there are more. Aristotle would complain that

life hooked up is an unnatural life. You might complain that it's a life in which body-based talents like piano playing and swimming and cooking can't be developed. It's also a life that makes no contribution to knowledge or culture. On the other hand, the goodness that's available in the experience machine may not be exclusively the goodness of being happy. Possibly intelligence and good character are available and they may contribute directly to the goodness of our lives, not just indirectly, by making us happier. The list of things that might be good besides happiness, and bad besides unhappiness, grows longer and longer.

Once we start thinking that happiness is all that matters, that idea has a grip on us that's difficult to loosen. I've tried to loosen it by throwing out a wide variety of apparent good things and bad things, but they won't all be retained. In the next chapter, I start a more systematic inventory of what really ought to be considered essential to a good life.

But let's pause before moving in that direction. Like the bad guy at the end of the horror movie, let's let the single-factor view of a good life have one final rampage. Why not say that our lives go well just so long as we get what we want, whatever that may be? The person whose every desire is fulfilled lives a great life, and the person whose desires are constantly frustrated lives an awful life. At the end of the nineteenth century, the American philosopher William James championed this idea in its baldest conceivable form: “[T]he essence of good is simply to satisfy demand. The demand may be for anything under the sun.”

The desire-fulfillment theory (as it's sometimes called) sounds identical to relativism, but it isn't, exactly. The desire-fulfillment theory takes a stand on what matters. Relativism takes no stand. It pays equal respect to the view that desire-fulfillment is good, if that's what some individual or culture says; and to the view that the frustration of desires is good, if that's what some individual or culture says. And some cultures actually do. As we saw in Chapter 2, it seems as if the culture of the desert saints valued the frustration of desires. Our lives go best, they thought, the *less* that our physical desires are fulfilled. A proponent of the desire-fulfillment theory could not go along with that.

The desire-fulfillment theory also sounds a lot like the Simple Happiness Theory. After all, usually when we get what we want, we feel happy, and when we don't get what we want, we feel unhappy. But again, these two views are not exactly the same. Think of a happy son who is hooked up to the experience machine. If his desire is to be a reliable son,

and his real mother is on her deathbed (with him nowhere in sight), then the verdict of the desire-fulfillment view is that his life isn't going so well. The Simple Happiness View says his life is going great, so long as he's happy.

The basic idea of the desire-fulfillment theory is attractive: the idea is to connect what's good for you with what *you* want. The view demands neutrality toward what you happen to want, thereby respecting *you* as a fashioner of your own desires, values, and choices; on the other hand, it honors the fulfillment of your desires, values, and choices as a good thing. By all appearances, this is an idea that's admirably egalitarian. It's an idea that seems to comport well with valuing and honoring individual autonomy.

But does it really? The trouble is that it's only in an ideal world that people are truly fashioners of their own desires, values, and choices. Many of our desires are the result of manipulation, misinformation, or downright deception. We want the things we are encouraged to want by commercials and billboards. After seeing enough commercials for the latest, greatest new car, you might find yourself wanting one very badly; if we say it's good for your life if you succeed in getting yourself one, are we really honoring *you* as fashioner of your own desires, or are we honoring some Madison Avenue advertising firm?

Maybe you can disentangle what you really, truly, deeply want from your more casual material longings, and maybe the desire-fulfillment theory might make a distinction so that there's more good in the fulfillment of the former. The problem is that in many cases there is no clear line. A 16-year-old girl can ardently wish to be the tenth wife of an elderly Mormon patriarch. And he might cite her wants as justification for going ahead with the marriage. But if he says her life will go better if she marries him, we know he's not honoring her as a shaper of her own life. Her desires have been ingeniously manipulated by a multitude of means so that the patriarch can use them as an excuse to fulfill his own.

Even where there is no clear-cut manipulating going on, a person's desires can be shaped by circumstances so drastically that respecting the desires is really just acceding to the circumstances. In *Women and Human Development*, contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes the "adaptive preferences" of women in traditional societies who acquiesce in their own discrimination. Sometimes it's easier to collaborate than go through life feeling angry and aggrieved. For example, she speaks of an Indian woman who happily does all the housework,

even though she does grueling work outside the home and her husband barely works at all.

Because of these worries, proponents of the desire-fulfillment theory tend to decorate the theory with all sorts of carefully crafted qualifications. It's not any desire that ought to be fulfilled, but only the desires that are formed in the right way. These first-class desires are formed freely and rationally. Proponents have to define "freely" and "rationally" carefully, so that they don't abandon the neutrality of the theory. They can't allow themselves to think that rational desires are aimed at some set of intrinsically good things, because they don't want to be committed to any such thing.

Many contemporary philosophers have views that, on close inspection, are forms of the desire-fulfillment theory. For example, the dominant form of Utilitarianism today identifies the good we should be trying to maximize not with pleasure or happiness, but with the satisfaction of preferences, or (sometimes) *rational* preferences; a satisfied preference is much the same as a fulfilled desire. One of the most influential political philosophers of our time, John Rawls, defines what's good for an individual as the fulfillment of a rational life plan. A life plan is something you establish early in life that encompasses the key things you want, and how you will try to obtain them. A person who fulfills his life plan will have fulfilled many of his key desires, so Rawls's account of what's good for an individual is a variation on the desire-fulfillment theme. Your life plan is rational if it doesn't involve errors of logic and you make your plan "with full awareness of the relevant facts, and after a careful consideration of the consequences."

It's a popular theory with undeniable appeal, but even with careful tinkering, the desire-fulfillment theory runs into problems. What if you have no life plan, or you even have an irrational life plan? Suppose, for example, your plan is to establish a career in your twenties and thirties, and then have children around the age of 40 (when fertility in women precipitously declines), though motherhood is critically important to you. An irrational life plan! But if it succeeds, isn't that cause for celebration? It seems clear that a life can go well despite the fact that it *doesn't* fulfill any rational desire or plan.

And on the other hand, sometimes a life does not go well even though it does fulfill a rational desire or plan. Here's a case of a person with well-informed, non-manipulated, deep and stable desires for his own life that have come to be thoroughly fulfilled. The man's name is Shridhar

Chillal, and he lives in Poona, India. I would know nothing about him except that he's in the *Guinness Book of World Records* because he has the longest fingernails in the world – 20 feet worth on one hand. The weight has caused permanent nerve damage on that side of his body, resulting in permanent deafness; his nails stop him from engaging in normal activities or even getting a good night's sleep. Illogical? Irrational? He made his plan with full information and has what he wants most: the longest fingernails, fame. He thinks the disabilities are a reasonable price to pay for his success and has no regrets.

The desire-fulfillment theory, however we tinker with it, would have to recognize Shridhar Chillal's life as a great one. That makes me uncomfortable with the desire-fulfillment theory. Undeniably, there's some importance in getting what we want. In none of the examples that I've discussed can we entirely dismiss actual wants. But it does seem like there's more that ought to be considered when we take stock of whether someone has led a good life or not. Certainly, we are not prepared to pronounce a life a failure, solely on grounds that a person did *not* get what he most wanted. In fact, great lives seem to be able to encompass great disappointments. The paraplegic does not walk again, the author doesn't get the fame he wants, the political activist doesn't get his candidate elected – if the desire-fulfillment theory were correct, these kinds of failures would be absolutely pivotal to our assessment of lives. They are not nothing, but they are not as central as the desire-fulfillment theory would have it.

The appeal of the desire-fulfillment theory should not be forgotten as we begin to fashion a new account of what it is to live well in the next chapter. We need to grant some importance to desire-fulfillment. But getting what you want is no more plausible than virtue or happiness as the *sole* factor affecting whether or not our lives go well.