Well-Being and Choosing Goals

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1. The Rational Aim Thesis

It is a widely shared view that any plausible account of well-being needs to be agent-relative. After all, what makes a life go well must affect how things go *for* the respective person, and that – at least to some degree – must be assessed by her. Her assessment must be reflected in her subjective attitudes. However, that leaves a lot of room for interpretation. For example, if Hans is a person with little ambition, he contents himself with modest goals. He is just one of those happy-go-luckies who don't strive for much, and what he strives for seems easily fulfilled. He is therefore deeply satisfied with his life. But is his life *really* going well? Maybe, but not necessarily.

There are attempts that try to differentiate between the various subjective attitudes a person has so that it can be explained why some options are better for the respective person than others.[1] One of the most interesting accounts, the so-called informed desire theory, maintains that it is the person's desires she would have if she knew all the relevant facts about herself and her circumstances whose satisfaction provide the right kind of criterion in order to assess her well-being.[2] If Hans knew that he has great talent in music, and that his engagement in music-related activities would fulfill his life much more than his current habit of watching TV all night, he could and most likely would lead a better life.

While simple desires or hedonistic experiences[3] can lead us astray – after all, we desire all sorts of things that might be contrary to our well-being[4] - informed desires are supposed to be free from such error. However, they face other difficulties. It is far from clear whether a person with simple desires like Hans will really appreciate the facts that her informed and merely hypothetical desires are directed to. He might never have the experience necessary to develop desires like wanting to practice music.[5] Moreover, the satisfaction of informed desires does not necessarily affect the well-being of the person in question.[6]

Consequently, what makes our life go well seems pretty difficult to assess. Yet, there is another general idea that maintains the following: *Well-being is a function of the goals a person pursues*.[7] In the course of our life we attempt to realize projects, ideals, plans, relationships, and commitments. If we want to lead a good life, a lot depends on which goals we pursue, how we relate them to each other, and how we succeed in their pursuit. Maybe, such a goal-related account provides us with an explanation of what makes a person's well-being especially hers without getting hung up with the above mentioned problems of the informed desire theory. But what does

the relation between the adoption and ensuing pursuit of goals, and well-being, exactly consist of? There is one answer that indicates a little more. Let me call it the "Rational Aim Thesis". It entails the following:

(RAT) "Well-being is advanced by the success in one's rational aims".[8]

Relating well-being to rational goals rather than to informed desires has two advantages:

(1) It can account for the fact that (rational) goals are already adopted by the respective person, whereas informed desires more often than not lack this connection to a person's commitment.[9]

(2) It can accommodate the fact that we are temporally extended agents. While most desires prove episodic and momentary, goals represent objects of our intentions which can be in the distant future. When we settle on them, we commit ourselves to actions with regard to them over a certain time span. They thereby allow us to control and guide our life over an extended period of time which in turn can have a greater effect on how well a person's life goes in its daily instances.

The RAT therefore seems worth being investigated. In the following, I will first examine in more detail what the basic tenets of the RAT are. It is based on two conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to prove the respective goals rational. What we have to assess in practical deliberation is therefore (1) whether single goals do have valuable properties that give us reasons to adequately respond to them, and (2) what relation between various goals holds, so that some goals can be taken to provide reasons for the pursuit of other goals, and hence enjoy priority over others.

It is up for grabs, however, whether these conditions really account for what makes our aims rational, and hence advances our well-being. While I share the assumption that plural value properties provide reasons for behaving with regard to them, I harbour the suspicion that the second condition that I will call the "priority view", is at least misleading, and therefore fails to adequately underpin the RAT. Before I turn to a more detailed critique of this second condition, let me first endeavour to show what the first condition actually amounts to. What does it exactly mean that *aims* are *rational*, that we need to be *successful* in their pursuit, and that this *advances* our well-being?

2. The First Condition: Value Plurality and the Transparency of Well-Being

What renders our goals *rational* (according to Scanlon) are judgments about valuable properties these goals embody or have, and that in turn provide

reasons for a certain behaviour with regard to them.[10] We don't pursue rational aims in that sense if we don't respond adequately to their value properties. This can be due to an incorrect value judgment, or due to an inappropriate behaviour with regard to the valuable goal. E.g., leading a religious life is not a rational aim if we constantly engage in activities that are contrary to what a religious life requires.

"Goals" are considered to be the bearers of value properties. However, this doesn't imply any teleological understanding of value according to which only states of affairs are valuable, and therefore need to be "promoted"[11]. Goals are not just results that we bring about. They can equally consist in carrying out activities and/or displaying attitudes[12]. Just think of friendship as a valuable goal that doesn't - at least not primarily - yield reasons to promote states of affairs, but rather ways of interacting with people that are considered more or less typical for friends.

But goals not only bear plural value properties, and thereby provide reasons to behave with regard to them in various ways. I take it that the plural ways of having value properties also assigns these goals plural functions. The RAT remains silent with respect to the various functions goals can have. But it will prove helpful to differentiate them: goals can be instrumental if they serve as means to further, potentially final ends from which their value is derived. Goals are final if their values are not derived from any other goal. Final goals or ends can be states of affairs, but they can also be constitutive. Goals are constitutive[13] if they are entirely made up of activities like relationships, careers, or hobbies. Consider the following example of running:

It is a final end if I just do it for the sake of it. If I do it because I want to stay healthy, it is instrumental to the further end of staying healthy. If I run to get some exercise, running is not exactly a means. It rather constitutes getting some exercise, and thereby serves as a constitutive goal.[14]

Given the plurality of value properties, the plurality of valuing them, and the plurality of functions with regard to the source of these value properties, there are also plural forms of *succeeding* in pursuing and responding to them. Let us go back to the previous example of running. If it is a final end, a person is successful in pursuing that goal if she simply runs. If it is an instrumental goal, she is only successful if she really stays healthy – a state of affairs that can only be evaluated quite some time after the running took place. If it is a constitutive goal, she is successful only if she really gets some exercise. This will only be the case if some further conditions are fulfilled: e.g., she must not run too slowly, or for too little time. Consequently, we are only successful in the pursuit of a certain (rational) goal if our way of valuing it with regard to its function and with regard to its value properties we take as reasons is appropriate. E.g., to value friendship requires different attitudes and activities than living up to one's religious ideals or taking one's political commitments seriously.[15] Finally, what does it then mean

that our well-being is *"advanced"* if we succeed in the pursuit of our rational aims? Well, it seems to me that the reason why success in our goals is considered to advance our well-being is that we feel somehow rewarded for our engagement and effort in appropriately responding to the plurality of their value properties and functions.

The RAT obviously doesn't claim to provide a complete account of well-being, but just points to one of its supposedly major components. There are other goals like the avoidance of pain that enhances our well-being independently from whether we aim at it or not.

The reason, however, for concentrating on the successful pursuit of one's rational aims hinges on the difference between the first person, and the third person point of view. While the concept of well-being can serve as a criterion, particularly for benefactors, if we assess a person's life from outside,[16] it doesn't play a major role in explaining or justifying why we pursue some goals rather than others. If Hans was asked why he pursues the goal of watching the weekly soccer games of his home town he wouldn't answer that he does that for the advancement of his well-being. He would rather respond that he simply enjoys watching soccer games, that he is an ardent sportsfan, or that he likes meeting his friends in the stadion. What matters to him are the properties of his particular goal along concrete dimensions of value. Any general conception of well-being[17] thus appears to be "largely transparent"[18]. It just doesn't provide much guidance, and hence cannot serve as some kind of "master value" from which the reason for pursuing a goal can be derived. One would almost be led to the conclusion that the person deliberating about how to enhance that her life goes well doesn't need an account of well-being.[19] Consequently, the statement of the RAT that our well-being is simply "advanced" accounts for the fact that an all-encompassing account of well-being is *not* what justifies the pursuit of our goals from a first-person-perspective. As I pointed out earlier, these assumptions that underly the first condition of the RAT, namely that goals can be rational, and hence provide reasons seem compelling enough. I simply tried to bring to the fore that they have the advantage of providing us with a plural, and hence non-reductionist account of value. With regard to the choice of goals we deem valuable this leaves almost everything open. They can only be rationally assessed with respect to the correctness of our value judgments, and the appropriateness of our responses to the value properties that the goals we adopted bear.

But the reasons that support a goal also depend on the relation that holds between the various goals we pursue. Let me now turn to the second condition of the RAT, and examine what it exactly entails.

3. The Second Condition: The Hierarchical Structure of Goals

On first sight, the statement "if something is one of a person's aims, then (provided it is rational) success in achieving it becomes one of the things that make the person's life better"[20], leads to the following conclusion.

P1 Success in one's rational (and hence valuable) aims advances one's well-being
P2 Modest goals can be more easily fulfilled or achieved
P3 The more goals are fulfilled in number the more one's well-being is advanced
C One should adopt as many easily attainable goals as possible.

This conclusion, however, is absurd. It is further bolstered by the so-called summative view according to which the well-being of a person's life can be measured by adding up the amounts of momentary well-being her life contains.[21] But this is not what the RAT entails. Instead, how well a person fares during a certain period of time, depends decisively on how that period relates to others.[22] Many goals derive their value particularly from the degree they contribute to larger goals rather than providing little units of success that can be added up. We haven't taken into account, so far, that goals can differ with regard to their temporal reach, and with regard to their importance. These two aspects are often times interrelated, since goals that cover large spans of our life tend to be more significant. They simply affect more how well one's life goes, since they shape a large part of it.

This leads to another premiss which takes account of the hierarchical structure of goals:

P2* So-called comprehensive goals contribute more than others to a person's well-being. They are singled out by the degree to which these goals are worth pursuing, i.e. by their importance, and by the role that such goals play in a person's life.[23]

This premiss supports the following:

P3* Succeeding in more specific goals has special significance in virtue of their dependence, shape, and importance they receive from comprehensive goals.
C* One should adopt comprehensive goals and let them control one's more specific goals (if one wants to enhance one's well-being).

The supposed hierarchical structure of goals – comprehensive goals yield reasons for more limited goals, and thereby assign priority to them, defies the summative view of well-being. Goals derive their value also from their relation to other goals.

Whether the latter is a valid argument depends especially on P2* and P3*. We need to take a closer look at the idea of comprehensiveness[24]. What does it exactly entail? What conditions need to be fulfilled that it really has a greater bearing on our well-being?

Comprehensive goals are characterized by an ongoing commitment of the person who pursues them.[25] Hence, they are on top of the hierarchy[26] of goals, and lend the more limited goals priority in two ways. (1) They make the subsidiary goals rational in that they provide reasons for pursuing them. E.g., given that I pursue a university career, it is rational to give a paper at a professional conference. (2) They can give the more limited goals priority over other unrelated goals. E.g., I might have an interst in spending today at home, since my house needs cleaning. Given my career goal, however, attending a conference seems prevalent. Settling on a comprehensive goal is itself equivalent to attaching priority to that goal in the described way, and commit oneself to it.[27] Let me now investigate in more detail whether the priority view can adequately underpin the RAT.

4. The Priority View Doomed

In the following, I will try to show that the priority view needs further clarification. Is it really by way of comprehensiveness, i.e. long-term commitment, that goals can assign priority to other goals? In order to answer that question let me investigate in what way comprehensive goals actually have value so that they yield reasons for behaving with respect to them.

4.1. In-Built Exclusivity

Consider comprehensive goals like a marriage or a career. Do they really enjoy priority over other goals? Well, to some extent they might do. To pursue such goals certain other activities or choices are excluded by definition. Marriage, for example, entails that I don't look for another man. A career usually entails that I don't look for other paths of career or substantive commitments with regard to time. We would simply stop pursuing these goals if we didn't obey certain constraints. Negative constraints thus belong to the concept of a particular comprehensive goal. It is characterized by an in-built exclusivity that simply renders certain options ineligible. But what does this exclusivity imply? It only implies that there are limits with regard to the appropriate evaluation of these goals. If we go beyond these limits we give up the pursuit of the respective goal. E.g, we wouldn't show an adequate evaluation of a religious life if we just think of how to enhance our self-interest. Hence, one sense in which comprehensive goals do enjoy priority is that they have an in-built exclusivity. There are goals – and they turn out to be particularly those which require a long-term commitment – whose adequate evaluation implies the denial of even considering certain options which would conceptually undermine the pursuit of those goals in question. Priority in this sense comes down to in-built exclusivity.

However, there are also limits to this exclusivity, the RAT doesn't take into account.

4.2. Norm-Governed Goals.

Consider the following examples: Jane married Bob five years ago because she loved him and wanted to spend her life with him. As it turns out, though, Bob doesn't treat her very nicely. In fact, he lets her down and engages in many demeaning activities. Or: Sabrina studied biology because her father wanted her to do that. He thought that a scientific career would give his daughter the best job opportunities. Sabrina, however, deeply dislikes biology, and she is dissatisfied with her work in the lab.

Given that this marriage is Jane's comprehensive goal, it should have priority over many of her other limited goals in the above described way. Similarly, given that Sabrina settled on a career she is supposed to be constrained with regard to other choices. Neither the case of the demeaning relationship nor the case of the non-autonomous career choice, however, provides the priority needed to make the pursuit of other goals subsidiary. As it turns out, further conditions need to be fulfilled. The comprehensive goals themselves need to be worthwhile in order to gain the authority over other goals. They don't seem to fulfill that condition if we cannot upon reflection provide reasons that support them: a relationship doesn't seem to be justified if it is severely demeaning. A career is not well justified if it doesn't suit the talents and dispositions of the person whose career it is. In those cases, the persons in question rather have a reason to reconsider their comprehensive goals. Many comprehensive goals seem to be governed by standards, norms, or rules of social practice. Once these norms are breached, there are no reasons left to continue to pursue these goals. There is no need to further value them, since our very valuation has become inappropriate. If we don't take this into account, we fall prey to bootstrapping, i.e. we let all our pursuits be controlled by comprehensive goals on pains of irrationality.

In this case, priority comes down to compliance with norms, standards, and rules of social practice.

4.3. Constitutive Goals.

We learnt that the value of comprehensive goals is, at least to some extent, in-built, and subject to standards. This yields reasons for their appropriate evaluation. Further clarifications are needed with regard to the function comprehensive goals actually have. How do they assign value to other goals?

If we think of goals like friendships, commitments, and hobbies, it turns out that they consist entirely of activities and attitudes. They prove to be constitutive goals: e.g., by helping another person, by showing my affection and loyalty on an ongoing basis, I show one way of pursuing, and appropriately valuing friendship. The priority view, however, just seems to describe an instrumental relationship between goals, where certain goals serve as

means. But this is not true to the facts. The relationship between our goals is more reciprocal. Constitutive goals also have instrumental value in that they make us engage and let us be active.[28] These activities themselves are valuable in their own right by way of actually building up the comprehensive goal.

This still leaves us a lot of room to accommodate the various incompatibilites that arise due to circumstances. E.g., if Martha wants to continue to pursue her career as a dentist, there are certain options or goals she would simply not consider: she wouldn't look for another job, she would be willing to spend a reasonable amount of time in her office, she would simply do what is required from a dentist. Obviously, this still leaves a variety of possibilities given that that is not the only goal she adopted. Since she is married with Peter who also wants to pursue his career, for example, it restricts her choices with regard to location. The selection of a specific town receives importance compared to other equally attractive towns where they cannot pursue their careers together. But this is not by way of priority of the goal of a career, but by way of the value they attach to this long-term goal that in turn yields reasons for valuing it.[29] The ways of valuing it appropriately are varied, and they consist mostly of activities. Among the vast array of admissible activities we choose those that suit best our own conditions and circumstances in light of the fact that there are other long-term pursuits that need to be made compatible with.

5. Conclusion

I am at the end of my investigation into the conditions of the RAT. After having tried to clarify the assumptions that underly the first condition, I ventured to show that the priority view needs further specification in light of the assumptions of the second condition. Otherwise, it cannot provide an adequate understanding of the rationality of goals, and thereby fails to show in what way our well-being is advanced by it. It seems advisable, though, to replace the priority view by a conception of rational relations between goals: it is not by way of hierarchy, but by way of value properties and value functions that goals – and admittedly those that cover larger periods of time – provide reasons for behaving with respect to them. They have value properties that have an in-built exclusivity, and that are governed by norms. Adequate responses to such goals need to take this into account. By valuing these goals we also need to critically assess whether the respective goals live up to the norms they are governed by to avoid any bootstrapping.

As to their value function, comprehensive goals turn out to be constitutive. They are appropriately valued by carrying out activities. Obviously, the appropriate evaluation gives priority to some activities over others. But the activities do not just serve as means, but have a value of their own in that they actually build up the comprehensive goals. We pursue a comprehensive goal by carrying them out. The latter doesn't govern them hierarchically in

that sense. Usually, we have quite some room to choose activities that allow us to take the pursuit of other comprehensive goals into account. What remains are coordinating tasks among the activities that are admissible in order to adequately pursue constitutive goals. It seems more plausible to assume – and I cannot do more than speak of plausibility here – that the relation between goals advances our well-being if it is rational. This retains the idea of the relation between goals as potential justification for the pursuit of these goals, but gives up the idea that the relation needs to be hierarchical. In that sense the rational link between goals is more reciprocal.

After all, it is not goals that are out there and govern each other, but agents who pursue them, and who are in need to coordinate them as the circumstances require. Provided there is at least some coherence in our goals, i.e. that we are not torn between constant conflicts, our life might in fact go better. But it might nonetheless be advisable to reserve the concept of well-being to those who want to assess it from a third-person perspective.[30]

Notes

1 Cf. D. Sobel (1997): On the Subjectivity of Welfare, 504.

2 E.g., J. Griffin (1986): Well-Being. For a critique cf. J. Nida-Rümelin (1993): Kritik des Konsequentialismus. Cf. L.W. Sumner (1996): Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics.

3 Cf. H. Sidgwick (1962): Methods of Ethics, Book III, Ch. XIV.

4 Similarly, our experiences might be the result of sheer illusion Cf. R. Nozick (1974): Anarchy, State, and Utopia, 42-45. Nozick creates the figure of an experience-machine in order to show that our experiential life does not exhaust what is of value to us; cf. M. Bernstein (1998): Well-Being, 44.

5 C. Rosati (1995): Persons, Perspectives, and Full Information Accounts of the Good, 317-325, therefore maintains that hypothetical desires could only retain their critical function if they were within a person's "affective reach". Rosati also doubts whether a person can be fully informed without losing her "perspective' which is necessary for her well-being to be particularly hers. Cf. D. Sobel (1994): Full Information Accounts of Well-Being, 798-9.

6 This is why M. Murphy (1999):The Simple Desire-Fullfillment-Theory, 264-5, maintains that the simple desire theory should be preferred to the informed desire account. Cf. D. Parfit (1984): Reasons and Persons, 494.

7 Please note that, in the following, I will use the terms "goals", "ends", and "aims" interchangeably.

8 T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 123. Scanlon draws from J. Raz (1986): The Morality of Freedom, 318, who points out that "the well-being of the agent is in the successful pursuit of valuable goals". Cf. J. Raz (1994): Duties of Well-Being, 3: "In large measure our well-being consists in the (1) wholehearted and (2) successful pursuit of (3) valuable (4) activities." Cf. J. Nida-Rümelin (1996): Subjektive Wünsche und objektives Wohlergehen, 137.It should be added that the Ra-

tional Aim Thesis only claims to be effective once our biological needs are satisfied.

[9] This is what T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 119, calls the "narrow" interpretation of aims. Cf. J. Raz (1986): The Morality of Freedom, 298. Cf. J. Raz (1997): Incommensurability and Agency, 63-4.

[10] Cf. T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 120.

[11] Cf. T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 79-81.

[12] E. Anderson (1993): Value in Ethics and Economics, defends a theory of rational attitudes that express the appropriate evaluation of goals. T. Scanlon draws from Anderson's theory in that respect.

[13] Cf. S. MacDonald (1991): Ultimate Ends in Practical Reasoning, 31-65.

[14] I owe this example to D. Schmidtz (1995): Rational Choice and Moral Agency, 59.

[15] Cf. T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe to Each Other, 120.

[16] We can even look at our own life from outside, i.e. if we evaluate the course that our life took in old age.

[17] This leads Scanlon to maintain that this serves as an "evaluative Trojan horse, bringing within the notion of well-being values that are not grounded in it". Cf. T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 133.

[18] T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 141. Cf. J. Raz (1986): The Morality of Freedom, 295.

[19] This is what Scanlon suggests. Cf. T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 126 and 132. Cf. J. Raz (1986): The Morality of Freedom, 295.

[20] T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 119.

[21] D. Parfit (1984): Reasons and Persons, 497-8, criticizes the summative view as absurd, and draws a parallel to his "repugnant conclusion". Cf. D. Velleman (1991): Well-Being and Time, 330.

[22] Cf. D. Velleman (1991): Well-Being and Time, 330-1, points out that well-being is closely connected to the temporal relationships that hold between various goals or periods of life. Cf. M. Slote(1984): Goods and Lives, 311-326.

[23] Cf. T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 121.

[24] To my knowledge the term is coined by J. Raz (1986): The Morality of Freedom, 293.

[25] This is why M. Bratman (1987): Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason, considers plans as the representational content of intentions.

[26] A. Kolnai (1962): Practical Deliberation is of Ends, 210, already pointed to the hierarchical structure of ends. Cf. J. Raz (1986): The Morality of Freedom, 292; T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 122.

[27] Cf. T.M. Scanlon (1998): What We Owe To Each Other, 122-3. Cf. M. Bratman (1987): Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason.

[28] Cf. H. Frankfurt (1992): On the Usefulness of Final Ends, 82-94; cf. M. Betzler (2000): Warum sollen wir Ziele verfolgen? 237-258.

[29] A. Kolnai (1962), 198, has a similar train of thought.

[30] This is how G. Patzig (1996): "Lebensqualität" in der antiken Philosophie, 241, drawing on Aristotle conceives well-being as something "das

nach objektiven Maßstäben durch andere beurteilt werden kann und auch beurteilt wird".

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