
Chapter 3.4

A NOTE ON MEASURING WELL-BEING

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DO WE ADD IN REACHING OVERALL JUDGEMENTS ABOUT WELL-BEING?

Most of us, perhaps all of us, think that we can, in some way, aggregate well-being. By “aggregating” I mean merely that we can rationally move from judgements about how good certain components of a person’s life are to a judgement about how good the life is overall, and perhaps also that we can move from how well-off various individuals are to how well-off the group they form is. But to aggregate in these ways is not necessarily to add. The difference I have in mind between addition and aggregation will become clearer as the discussion proceeds, though one difference just stipulated is that adding is only one form of aggregating.

Some people think that we do indeed aggregate a person’s well-being by adding—for instance, adding one’s levels of well-being at various times to get one’s well-being over a long stretch of time. But I doubt it. What is more, many of them hold this independently of holding any view about what human well-being actually is. But can one decide the form of a measure of well-being without knowing the substance of well-being? Can one, for instance, hold that the form of aggregation for well-being is addition, while we are agnostic about substantive accounts of well-being? I doubt that too.

A SUBSTANTIVE ACCOUNT OF WELL-BEING

Let me take one particular substantive account. It is, to my mind, the most plausible one (Griffin 1986; 1996); it is also, I believe, the one most widely held among philosophers. It says that what makes a life good is the presence, not of a single substantive super-value (pleasure or happiness, say), but of one (or more) of several irreducibly different substantive values, which can be listed. For instance:

1. *Accomplishment*: doing in the course of one's life the sort of things (for example, finding a cure for AIDS, raising one's children well) that give it weight or point, i.e. the sort of thing which means that one's life is not wasted.
2. *Deep personal relations*: when personal relations become deep, reciprocal relations of friendship and love, they have a value distinct from the pleasure and profit they bring.
3. *Enjoyment*.
4. *Understanding*: knowing about oneself and one's place in the universe, including how to take account of the value represented by other people, is a good in itself.
5. *The components of human dignity*: living as a rational agent, being able to pursue a course through life chosen by oneself, is valuable over and above the happiness it might bring.

This sort of substantive account of well-being is now often called an "objective list" account (Parfit 1984, appendix I) though I should prefer calling it simply a "list" account because I have reservations about the objective-subjective distinction as it is used here (Griffin 1996, chapter II, section 6).

Now, it does not especially matter for present purposes whether the particular list I have given is quite right. What matters is that the right list may contain prudential values of a long-term, life-structuring nature. It usually takes a fairly long while for a "deep" personal relation to be a good-making feature of life (overcoming the natural distance between persons, even those supposedly "close" to one another); what we value is having a life containing personal relations of that sort. It characteristically takes the major part of one's productive life to "accomplish" certain things that have the sort of weight that ensures that one's life is not wasted. And living autonomously and at liberty is a way of living that one hopes will characterize one's whole life. Unlike pleasures, which can come in short doses, the realization of deep personal relations and of accomplishment and of rational agency are very long-term, often lifetime, projects.

CONSEQUENCES FOR MEASUREMENT

Let us see how these prudential values figure in our aggregating judgments. It seems to me that there are pairs of values such that *no* amount of one can equal a certain amount of another (Griffin 1986, pp. 83–89). For example, suppose that I am the sort of person for whom living autonomously causes stress and strain—more than the average amount. Just having to decide for myself causes me above average stress, and I am a rather bad practical reasoner and so take a lot of false turns in my life, which cause me more than average strain to straighten out. You, let us say,

are prudentially shrewd and offer to take over the general management of my life. Well, even if I thought you would do a considerably better job than I in reducing my stress and strain, I would not accept. So long as my autonomy caused me only common (though, as I have said, above average) stress and strain, not crippling anxiety, and so long as my false turns produced only common discomfort and embarrassment, not catastrophe, I should prefer remaining autonomous. And rightly so; autonomy is a major part of rational agency, and rational agency constitutes what moral philosophers have often called, with unnecessary obscurity, the “dignity” of the person. It is rational of me to think that *no* amount of stresses and strains, so long as they remained below the threshold just roughly indicated, could outweigh the value of my autonomy. Stresses and strains below that threshold still have a negative value, but still no amount of them would add up to the value of living life autonomously. I have elsewhere called this feature of certain pairs of values “discontinuity” (Griffin 1986, pp. 85–89). Addition is here defeated; one cannot add certain negative values, no matter how many, so that they become equal to a certain finite positive value.

There is something more here. Perhaps one can see how to add up “stresses and strains”. Perhaps all “stresses” have intensity and duration, and the calibration of those two dimensions would be at least a start on getting what we need for addition. Similarly for “strains”. But can one form any idea of adding up the component values of living autonomously? What would the components be? Each autonomous decision or action? Surely not. What we value is something already highly inclusive: we value living as an autonomous agent. It is a way of life that we value.

Take another example. Let us say that, having devoted virtually the whole of your productive life to finding a cure for AIDS, you finally succeed. It is an immense accomplishment, in the technical sense of that term introduced earlier. But this ambitious, striving life also involved its stresses and strains for you (though still, let us say, within the limits described a moment ago). Looking back, you ask yourself: would my life have been better, in terms of my own well-being, lived the way I lived it, or lived less ambitiously with no stress and strain but no accomplishment to speak of either? To answer your question, would you have to add up some components or other? I am not saying that one cannot point to a single place in the thought processes that go into aggregating values (that is, that go into reaching an all-values-considered judgement) in which we *might* be doing what could reasonably be called “addition”. My point is that we do much more than add. The most important part of aggregation is aggregating features or dimensions of life, not periods of it. In this particular aggregation we have to compare the value of this particular accomplishment and the disvalue of this particular sort of life of stress and strain. And here the crucial judgement, I should say, is that the value of this accomplishment is greater than (perhaps even discontinuously greater than) avoiding these stresses and strains. That final judgement is not a

matter of adding up time-slices, or indeed anything else. And it is not led up to by prior addition. There might be, as I conceded, some episodes of deliberation that can properly be considered addition, but the final valuing of this accomplishment is not arrived at by adding up anything. For example, pleasure can come in short doses. But even if one were comparing a life full of short-term pleasures with a sterner life of fewer pleasures but considerable accomplishment, one would not first add the values attached to the individual pleasures and then compare the sum to the value of the life of accomplishment. One would compare the two lives as wholes: how good is such a life of short-term pleasures measured against this life of accomplishment?

In the process of understanding *that* accomplishment is prudentially valuable, one also understands *how* valuable various tokens of it are. These are not independent pieces of knowledge. And in understanding how valuable a certain token is we understand how valuable it is *compared to* tokens of other things that one similarly understands to be prudentially valuable. One does not have to sum anything to arrive at these overall judgements; they are part of the initial judgement that such-and-such is valuable.

This point is related to a gap in the conception of adding levels of well-being at periods of time. How do we determine which periods of time to take? A minute? A day? A year? The answer depends upon what in particular one thinks one should look at, and a substantive account will tell one. If we know that pains and strains are bad, then we can identify episodes of pains and strains and weigh them. But what about accomplishing something with one's life? One cannot calculate the level of accomplishment between eleven and twelve o'clock and then between four and five o'clock, or today and then tomorrow, and so on. The appropriate time period seems to be a whole life, or something close to it, and the overall (aggregative) value of what someone has accomplished in life is not arrived at by adding time-slices.

The crucial judgment that I imagined one is having to make is how valuable what one has accomplished in the course of one's productive life, against the sort of stressful life one has had to lead. We do not arrive at that judgement by adding up value components of each and seeing which sum turns out greater. An example of "discontinuity", which this example may anyway be, simply makes this point especially starkly: a judgement of discontinuity is a judgement that no amount of, say, stress and strain (within the limits indicated) can add up to, say, accomplishment at the level one has reached. Of course, stresses and strains could come so thick and fast in a life that some other evil were present, but I am limiting the example simply to the ordinary stresses and strains that commonly come with a striving life. The way we seem to arrive at the crucial judgement is, rather, by comparing items that are already highly aggregated, namely something on the order of ways of life, what life deals one, what sort of person one is, and so on.

I do not want to deny that we aggregate. For instance, I should have to consider what I have accomplished in my life, how much I have enjoyed life, what frustration and pain I have suffered in the course of it, how rich my personal relations have been, and so on. It is not surprising that I should have to consider these various things, because the list account tells us that they are precisely what make up the quality of life. Having come to reflect on these things, then I should be in a position to estimate the value of my life as a whole. And I should do that by making the sorts of comparisons I sketched above—by comparing items that are already highly aggregated. I would not add.¹

NOTES

- 1 Some of the points in this short piece are elaborated in Griffin J, *Well-being*, pp. 34 ff., ch. V, pp. 243 ff.

REFERENCES

- Griffin J (1986) *Well-being: its meaning, measurement, and moral importance*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Griffin J (1996) *Value judgement*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Parfit D (1984) *Reasons and persons*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

