Leading a Life of One's Own: On Well-Being and Narrative Autonomy

JOHAN BRÄNNMARK

We all want things. And although we might disagree on just how significant our wants, desires, or preferences are for the matter of how well we fare in life, we would probably all agree on some of them having some significance. So any reasonable theory about the human good should in some way acknowledge this. The theory that most clearly meets this demand is of course preferentialism, but even pluralist theories can do so. However, then they will at the same time bring aboard a classical problem for preferentialism, namely that of discriminating among preferences. Not all preferences would seem to make contributions to our well-being and there should be some set of criteria which at least makes it intelligible why there is such a difference and that perhaps can even be used in order to evaluate hard cases.

In what follows here I will start with a brief overview of the kind of approach to the human good that I find most reasonable, namely a holistic one, and I will then go on to discuss how one should, given such an approach, discriminate between different preferences. I will start by explicating why some preferences might, because they have the wrong kind of structure, never contribute to our well-being and I will then go on to account for how even among those that can, many preferences still have this capacity lessened because of an impaired autonomy in the holder of them. Finally, I will conclude with a brief discussion of how such deficient preferences should be treated.

1. Holism about the Human Good

Most philosophical theories about the constituents of the human good are atomistic, or at least they seem to be (since most theorists in the field do not even raise the question of whether one really can, even ideally, judge the quality of lives by assigning values to discrete parts of lives and then simply run these through some function, preferably a simple additive one, to arrive at overall values of the lives—they just proceed as if that is the way to do it). But

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246106059042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even if we were to find, at the end of the day, that atomism is correct, it is not at all obviously the case. Lives are after all not just heaps of events, they are meaningful wholes, and if we look at the way that we judge the quality of other such wholes, like novels, it is clear that there is another possibility: we can judge wholes holistically. This is not the same thing as saying that we judge them by some mysterious form of intuition, it may in fact take quite a bit of analysis in order to get the judgment right; but it does mean that there is a gap between having analyzed the role played by the different parts constitutive of the whole and the estimate of its value, a gap that must be filled by judgment of the whole as a whole.

I am not going to argue for the holistic approach here[1] and much of what I will say is not dependent on such a framework, but it is still the background theory from which I will proceed and there are a few things that should be pointed out about it. To begin with, being a holist is compatible with theorizing about the human good. Take a list like the one presented by James Griffin as the constituents of the human good: (a) accomplishment, (b) the components of human existence (which include such things as autonomy of choice, working limbs and senses, freedom from great pain and anxiety, and political liberty), (c) understanding, (d) enjoyment, and (e) deep personal relations.[2] Griffin seems to be an atomist, but even a holist can acknowledge that one can produce some kind of list like this. There are certainly things that generally are more worthwhile objects of pursuit than others—and, indeed, if we really were unable to say anything of substance about them then we could at any rate hardly be in possession of the kind of discrimination required for judging well about the quality of lives. Compared to traditional conceptions of the human good, holism is most akin to what is sometimes called the objective-list approach. The main difference, which is also what provides the rationale for judging lives holistically, lies in the treatment of meaning; not 'meaning' in the sense of there being an overarching point to life, but in the sense that parts of any given life have a significance that depends on how they are situated within that particular and

[1] I have tried to provide some arguments in 'Good Lives: Parts and Wholes', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (April 2001): 221–31, and 'Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning', *Philosophical Papers* 32 (November 2003): 321–43.

[2] *Well-Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 67.

concrete life. This is why any list of goods is always incomplete since such lists are necessarily formulated in the abstract.

Meaning, or significance, is not just another item on a list—it is a pervasive phenomenon. Since lives are temporally extended wholes, the most obvious analogue to them is, as already hinted at, that of the novel and narrative meaning is probably the most important form of significance involved in determining how well our lives are going, although there is no reason to presume that all relevant forms of significance can be squeezed into this category. Sequencing of events and balancing of thematic threads are however among the kind of phenomena that are most clearly of relevance in this context. Now, the idea that human lives have a narrative structure is one that quite a few philosophers have found appealing,[3] but it is also an idea that one has to treat with some caution. The reason is that it is one of those ideas that can be interpreted both very weakly, in which case it is trivially true, and quite strongly, in which case it is considerably more controversial. The risk is that one will lean towards the weak interpretation when arguing for the position and shift towards the strong one when drawing out the implications. In order to safeguard against this tendency (which can certainly be found in connection with other philosophical ideas as well), it is probably a good idea to emphasize a couple of disanalogies between human lives and novels.

(i) The person leading a life is a mix of author and protagonist, which is something that has no real parallel in the case of literary fiction. We are not quite like literary protagonists in that when they reflect on their lives, they still do so within the confines of their story, whereas we do it from the perspective of someone who *really* can make a difference as to how events will turn out. But more importantly, we are not like authors in a number of respects. Above all we just have to accept a certain world as the more or less given context in which we are to lead our lives. Additionally, most of the major events that shape our lives are partly under the control of others, which

[3] Some examples are Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue, 2nd Ed.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Owen Flanagan, 'Multiple Identity, Character Transformation, and Self-Reclamation' in *Self-Expressions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), and David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time' in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

means not just that we can fail because others hinder us, but also that many of our accomplishments involve the help of others and that just how much of an accomplishment something is depends on what our share in it is. And it is not just others; blind nature can often play a crucial role in shaping our lives, not merely in determining how long our lives will be, but also in setting limits on the kind of roles that we effectively can play: we can train and reshape ourselves in a variety of ways, but in the final analysis biology has still dealt us certain cards that we can only try to make the best of.

(ii) Whereas novels are there for the readers to enjoy, lives are not there for the bystanders in any analogous way. And this means that lives cannot be evaluated simply as stories. *Madame Bovary* is a fantastic novel and it portrays a great drama, but Madame Bovary did not lead a particularly good life. Even though we evaluate lives as wholes, the goodness of good lives is still goodness *for* some particular person. This does not mean that lives are good to the extent that the people leading them find them good—we can be wrong about the quality of our own lives—but even if we are not privileged in determining how we fare, it is still we, and no-one else, that are faring more or less well. This also means that we must not confuse the admirability of certain lives with prudential goodness. As a bystander I might be in awe when faced with how some people struggle against insurmountable obstacles, but were I to wish something for their sake I might want them to lead altogether different lives.

(iii) Although there is a certain basic narrative structure of birth-aging-death in human lives, they are otherwise rarely characterized by the coherence of novels or even of collections of short stories. This does not mean that narrative categories are not relevant to the details of our lives; in fact, most of the things we do are performances in accordance or contrast with some kind of script of how situations of different kinds are normally played out. Whether courting a love interest, trying to publish a scientific article, or going to a restaurant, there are certain sequencings of events that we tend to follow and the fact that we follow them is vital in coordinating ourselves with others. In order to be interpersonally intelligible we need to play by the same rules, to know that if we make this move, then we can expect that in return. Scripts ensure this and the existence of them also provides a background of normalcy against which certain deviations acquire specific meanings that

our actions can be imbued with—which in some cases might be precisely what we want, but in others might be something that we will have to live with in spite of what we would ideally want to be the case. This fragmented narrativity is indeed one important reason why it is preferable to speak of a holism about the human good, rather than a narrative conception of it.[4] Narrative structures are of paramount importance and human lives always have at least some narrative unity; but when we judge the goodness of lives, we should judge them as wholes with strong narrative elements rather than as narratives proper.

(iv) Even though it does make sense to understand our lives narratively and even though there is a possibility of leading one's life to a lesser or greater extent as one big story, this does not mean that it is better to lead one's life as if it were some great quest or artistic challenge. And it is not just that we are not fully authors of our lives, even to the extent that we are authors our task is not obviously an aesthetic one. Of course, one might certainly have a substantive vision of the human good that is quest-like,[5] but then that is something that one must provide separate arguments for, it is not anything that simply follows from the holistic, or narrative, approach as such.

(v) Unlike novels, human lives are not even moderately self-contained. This means that the significance of particular events in any given life is something determined not just by the way that they are situated in that particular life, but also on the larger context in which that life is situated. The narrative categories we employ are cultural constructs, not only the scripts in accordance with which we play out certain events, but also the personae that we take on.[6] We inhabit certain social roles and depending on which roles we inhabit what on a surface level can look like the same action might, for instance, be either one of neglect or of courage. And it is not just roles

[4] The latter is the line taken by Timothy Chappell in *Understanding Human Goods: A Theory of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

[5] Alasdair MacIntyre, *ibid.*, p. 219, and Charles Taylor, *ibid.,* p. 48, both embrace this idea of life as a form of quest.

[6] I borrow both of these notions from Richard Nisbett & Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), pp. 32–5.

like being a parent, a teacher, and so on, that matter; we also understand each other in terms of character types and while such types are usually oversimplifications they still shape the expectations of others and through our sensitivity to these expectations and our tendency to roughly conform to them certain social niches are carved out for us and define who we are. This also means that if we accept that the meaning of the constituents of our lives bear on how well our lives are going, we can never judge the quality of a person's life without taking into account the cultural constructs that are relevant to it. So holism will tend to lead to a weak form of relativism. This does however not preclude that there are substantial things to say on a structural level, and perhaps even to some extent on the level of concrete content, that hold for the human good in general; it is just that such a picture can never give us a complete manual for evaluating lives.

2. Preferences that Matter

One of the perennial problems of theories of well-being that emphasize the role played by preferences or desires is the need to discriminate; not all preferences seem to matter for our well-being and from a philosophical point of view we would want to have a criterion that picks out those that matter and that is able to make sense of this. To begin with, it seems reasonable to say that only intrinsic preferences matter, *i.e.* preferences that do not merely concern means to something else. This much is uncontroversial, although in real life one should perhaps not expect our preferences to neatly fall into the categories of intrinsic and instrumental. Some things (*e.g.* nice-looking kitchen utensils) might be dependent on their instrumental value for us to want them, but they might still have qualities that make us prefer them for their own sake over other potential means. Many things are such that we partly value them instrumentally, partly intrinsically.

The most significant problem in this area is however that it would seem that even among clear-cut intrinsic preferences there are some the fulfillment of which do not make us better off. We might care about the well-being of others, but it does not seem obvious that increases in their well-being would automatically constitute increases in our own. Or we might care for things like saving the mountain gorilla from extinction or that the Darwinian theory of evolution is universally recognized as superior to

creationism. Again, even if they are intrinsic preferences, fulfilling them does not seem to make us better off in any direct way. So how do we distinguish between those preferences that matter for well-being and those that do not? The most obvious candidate answer is probably to say that only preferences that are in some way self-referential should count. In order to be able to affect our well-being, they should in some sense be about us, either in the sense that the object of the preference involves us[7] or that we want the thing in question for the sake of ourselves.[8] But the problem is that some selfless preferences might actually be connected to our well-being. For instance, parents want the happiness of their children and they do it not for their own sake, nor are they part of the object of this kind of preferences. But it still seem reasonable to say that if the lives of their children turn out well then that also makes their own lives go better. Or if I really work hard to save the mountain gorilla from extinction, then it does no longer seem unreasonable to say that my life would go better if I succeeded. We are dealing in both cases with successes that are appropriate sources of satisfaction with one's life and if something is such a source then it should surely be understood as a potential source of well-being.

One might perhaps think that the lesson to be learned from these examples is that striving matters. Were I only to idly hope for the preservation of the mountain gorilla then it is more doubtful whether fulfillment of my preference would constitute an improvement in my well-being. Perhaps the key is to demand that preferences that matter should involve effort. But this would be too strong. Even if some things that we want are such that whether we get them is not under our control this hardly means that it would not be good for us were they to land in our laps. For instance, I might throughout my life hope that some rare honor will be bestowed on me while knowing that there is nothing I really can do to ensure that it would happen. Were I then to receive this honor then it seems reasonable to say that it would make my life go better in a way that it would not improve the life of someone who does not care about receiving it. The conclusion to be drawn from

[7] This would be similar to Ronald Dworkin's emphasis on what he calls 'personal preferences' (as opposed to 'external preferences'), see *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Duckworth, 1978), pp. 234–37.

[8] This would be a variation on Stephen Darwall's position in *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Chapter 1, where he emphasizes the dimension concerning *the one for whom* one wants something.

considering this example is that if we are to discriminate among preferences then we will have to look not just at the structure of the preference taken by itself, but rather at the role it has in the life of the person holding it.

Given that our lives are narratively structured one way of examining preferences would be to look at the way that they are narratively embedded. There are two way to go here. One is to look at the having of the preferences, the other to look at the objects. The first alternative would mean that we discriminate among preferences by whether the having of them constitutes a narrative thread or theme in one's life. But if I were to hope for world peace throughout my life, then the realization of world peace would as such hardly make my life go better (although in a variety of indirect ways it probably would). In fact, even if I had done more than idly hope, even if I had taken an active part in the peace movement, it is not clear that the achievement of world peace would make a direct contribution to my well-being. And if we look at the life-narrative I would have in this example there seems to be a problem with regarding the achievement of world peace as directly improving my life since this achievement does not really seem to be a part of *my* life. My taking part in the peace movement is, but not world peace. And, in fact, even if we abstract from the narrative approach, this intuitively seems like a reasonable demand to make: that when considering how well one's life is going, only things that constitute parts of my life are directly relevant for that issue. This suggests that we should opt for the second alternative, to look at the objects of the preferences, or rather to look at whether the events or features that constitute the fulfillment of the preferences also constitute events or features of my life. Only when they do that are they preferences that matter for how well my life is going.

This explanation shows how striving might make a difference for whether a certain selfless preference will matter for my well-being. It is not that the striving as such imbues the preference in question with a special import; it is rather that in some cases the striving might be enough to make the event that would fulfill that preference into an event that is part of my life-narrative. In some cases, such as in the example about world peace, the distance between my striving and the accomplishment is simply too great for it to form a part of my life. In the example with the rare honor being bestowed on me, that event would be part of my life simply because it is something that happens to me rather than being a global occasion. The example with the mountain gorillas lies on an intermediate level and might perhaps go either way. Let us say that

I choose to do something about it. In one scenario I simply donate money to this end, in another I travel to Uganda and work for years in order to achieve it. I think that my desire could be equally strong in both of these scenarios (we can assume that in the first case I have some commitment preventing me from going to Uganda). In the first case success in saving the mountain gorillas would hardly make my life go substantially better, whereas in the second it might very well do so. In both cases I act on my desire, but the difference is that in the first case my doing so is too distanced from the end for the achievement of it to be counted as part of my life. I have helped in making it possible for others to achieve it, but it cannot be said to be partly my achievement. And if we modify the second scenario so that the success would come after my death, again my life would not be made better by it (or at least not in the same direct way that it otherwise would[9]).

Given that there are advantages to this narrative approach, could a strict preferentialist simply borrow the idea that only preferences the fulfillments of which would constitute parts of one's life would be relevant for one's well-being? There is one obstacle to this. It is very difficult to provide exact criteria for when something is a part of a life and when it is not. For a holist this is just what would be expected; he would say that parts and whole stand in a reciprocal relationship and that while the parts constitute the whole, we cannot identify the parts without looking at the whole. And in fact, in order to determine whether something constitutes a part of my life, it is not enough to look at my life in isolation; one must also look at how it is socially embedded. The narrative schemata that are involved in shaping our lives are cultural constructs and the meaning that our pursuits take on is constituted by these schemata, such as the scripts according to which we act and the personae that we take on in our relations with others. So to look at preferences narratively is to take a decisive step towards a position that emphasizes the meaning of constituents of well-being and this is probably a step that strict preferentialists would feel uncomfortable with taking.

[9] Since the meaning of events in my life can be affected by things lying outside my life, my strivings can to a certain extent be made more valuable by posthumous success. Such contributions to how well my life went are however probably not best understood in terms of preference fulfillment and, additionally, are only minor ones (as already Aristotle noted, albeit for quite different reasons). In this case the achievement would still not be a part of my life, but the strivings that are will acquire a different resonance.

The social embeddedness of our lives also means that as holders of preferences we are severely restricted by contingent factors having to do with when and where we happened to be born and by the concrete ways in which we gradually learned to find our way about in the world. In fact, the patchiness of this process of becoming a person raises further doubts about whether all preferences really matter equally, even among those where the events constituting their fulfillment would count as parts of our lives. Even if we can never just choose what to prefer, some preferences still seem particularly suspect in that they are just too heteronomous. Take a slave that has so internalized his master's wishes that he has no real conception of a successful life apart from making his master well off, or take an addict that subordinates everything else to the hunt for some drug—such persons have preferences that might fit the schema suggested above but which are at the same time questionable as sources of well-being for the agent in question. A theory of well-being that includes subjective sources as constituents of a good life should contain a critical potential for assessing the aptness of the subject's own judgments or preferences.

The standard way of appraising our preferences or desires is usually in terms of their structural features or deliberative underpinning. One model for doing this is what might be called the hierarchical affirmation account, which looks at whether our desires are supported by second-order desires, *i.e.* whether the goals that we pursue are also ones with which we identify wholeheartedly.[10] Another, and more popular, model is what might be called idealized preference accounts, according to which the test of our current preferences is what we would prefer if we had all the relevant information and reasoned in a fully rational way. This type of account comes in a great number of varieties and one might distinguish between weak and strong versions of it. Weak versions only offer a test with which we can rule out certain current preferences,[11] whereas strong versions allow the alternative preferences that we would have in this ideal state as bearing on our

[10] A classic piece in which this idea is formulated is Harry Frankfurt's 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[11] Richard Brandt's rational desire theory is an example of this approach, see *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

situation now.[12] This is not the place to go into the details, the arguments, and the counter-arguments concerning these accounts; I will only note one general problem with these traditional accounts, namely that they to a far too great extent valorize critical reflection. These accounts so clearly bear the mark of having been formulated by people that have critical reflection as their occupation. Not that critical reflection is a bad thing, but at least in this context we should resist the temptation of a conception of autonomy that emphasizes it, the reason being that such an account would risk being too substantive and perhaps even lead to unacceptably paternalistic conclusions. Take a somewhat simple-minded peasant, one who does not suffer from either oppression or repression, yet for whom his preferences are simply something given. His tastes are unsophisticated and were he to have full information and loose his naivete he would most likely change many of them. Yet, there seems to be no good reason for thinking that his current preferences are unable to contribute to his well-being.[13] One can be unsophisticated and still lead a life of one's own. And so there seems to be reason to articulate a notion of autonomy that is weaker than the standard accounts.

3. Narrative Autonomy

The sense of autonomy that is of interest here is not one that concerns matters of moral responsibility. Rather, what I am interested in is something like the degree to which it makes sense to say of a person that she leads a life of her own. Even though we are social creatures and even though the meaning of what we do is never fully under our control but dependent on the social setting, it would still seem that certain lives are reasonably deemed as being led more autonomously than others. Of course, this might just be

[12] Peter Railton's approach is of this kind, see 'Moral Realism' and 'Facts and Values' in *Facts, Values, and Norms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[13] Richard Arneson uses a similar line of thought as a general argument against the idea of putting an autonomy constraint on our prudentially relevant preferences, 'Autonomy and Preference-Formation' in Jules L. Coleman & Allen Buchanan (eds.), *In Harm's Way: Essays in Honor of Joel Feinberg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 65.

an illusion, but here I will at least attempt to formulate a picture of what it means to lead a life of one's own and I will use the phrase 'narrative autonomy' for it.

Now, the most obvious way in which one's freedom can be compromised is when one's choices are dictated by others, for instance by threats of violence or economic sanctions. But while this obviously compromises our freedom, the preferences that arise from such oppression are (normally) not intrinsic ones. The problem then is simply that we do not get what we want or even that we suffer things we positively do not want (and our lives are of course thereby worsened), not that what we basically want is corrupted. The freedom thus compromised is certainly something important, but it is not what is of primary interest here. Narrative autonomy is about wanting things (intrinsically) in the right way. Given a narrative understanding of human lives there are, as already noted, two senses in which we can be positioned with respect to the contents of our lives—one is as something akin to a protagonist, the other as something akin to an author. In neither case should this be understood in strict analogue to the case of literary fiction—already the fact that we are a bit of both precludes this. Yet, it does also seem reasonable that we really should be a bit of both in more than a superficial sense, so these two dimensions are accordingly plausible candidates for being used in order to understand what it means to lead a life of one's own. I will now try to delineate what this would entail.

(i) The Agent as Protagonist

It might seem that one cannot but help being the protagonist of one's life and in a very general sense that is certainly true. But as already noted, few of us lead lives that are in any substantial sense constituted by a single big storyline running from birth to death. Rather, our lives are constituted by a number of narrative threads that are of different lengths, sometimes intertwining, sometimes being resolved, sometimes being left unresolved; some of them are ones that we give much attention to and that we explicitly understand ourselves in terms of, others are simply formed by the way that we happen to act on a sequence of relevantly connected occasions. Additionally, the applicable cultural constructs, such as scripts and personae, which are involved in me playing out my life are always connected to other such cultural constructs. For me to play a certain part requires others playing their parts. And in one

sense there is reciprocity in this: we are all the protagonists of our own lives as well as supporting characters in the lives of others. But if we look at the concrete narrative threads of particular lives there are also ways in which this reciprocity might break down.

The first possibility is that we might find ourselves excluded from the very narratives that happen to be the vital ones for the kind of life stories that are central in the communities where we lead our lives. For instance, to be unloved or unemployed over long stretches of time is (at least under normal circumstances) to be standing on the side-line of life and certain preferences that are formed under such conditions thus take on a resonance that raises issues about their relevance for the well-being of the person in question.[14] A person can adapt her preferences so that they suit the circumstances and while adaptation in general is quite plainly just good sense there are clearly situations where we adapt in ways that make the resulting preferences into simply too much of a surrender to one's situation. To be the protagonist of one's life requires a certain amount of supporting circumstances in terms of a positive narrative embedding of the ways in which one leads one's life. One is always a protagonist of one's life in the abstract, but the sense of being a protagonist that is of interest here is that of being it in the concrete, and that is something which presupposes narrative structures in which we are affirmed as protagonists. But this also means that it is quite possible to have in a reasonable way a set of preferences that involves eschewing concerns like love or work, which are usually so central to the construction of meaningful lives, but where these are held in a way that is different from the hardened unemployed or the disillusioned unloved. The life of a hermit or a monk is one that clearly involves abstaining from things that we usually regard as central to a good human life, but given that these lives are chosen in ways that narratively are structured not as settling oneself in a dead end but rather as a spiritual journey then the preferences involved in such lives are perfectly fine as bases for well-being. Here there are perfectly sound scripts which can provide narrative embedding of the relevant preferences. So the lesson is that we cannot simply look at the preferences or even the way that the person has deliberated before adopting them, we must look at the concrete narrative embedding of them. And on a philosophical level we can thus only say certain quite general things

[14] I am grateful to Mozaffar Qizilbash for stressing the importance of this type of problem to me.

about what it is that we are to look for (such as whether the person in question is the protagonist of her own life or not).

The second possibility of failure is that in the concrete we might very well lead our entire lives playing the part of supporting characters in the narrative threads that make up our lives and we can do so in two ways: the first is that we might act in accordance with these scripts in bad faith—we really prefer something else but since that is not feasible we still play along; the second is that we have internalized the ideals of these scripts and made them our own and it is this latter possibility that is of interest here because it means that just getting what we want need not make us better off. If we would have a state where half of the population are servants and the other half masters, then even if their preferences would be fully harmonious and fully satisfied, there would still be something prudentially problematic about that situation. And the reason is that even if the servants got exactly what they wanted, that is something that they want as a part of leading lives that are not really their own. Or to put it differently: they would not be the protagonists of their own lives in a sufficiently substantial sense. What I would suggest here is thus that preferences that are of this kind, that are the preferences of supporting characters, are questionable as potential sources of well-being and that they are so because of the way that they are *actually* embedded rather than because of some counterfactuals that happen to be true of them (such as that we would not have had these preferences were the situation ideal in some sense). And if there are too many preferences of this kind, or a few of them that are too central, then there is room for saying that such a person is not really leading a life of her own. It is not a question of false consciousness in the sense that her true interests lie elsewhere while she believes in an illusion. What is needed for an improvement of her situation is not that she understands that some particular things *really* lie in her own best interest, but that she develops preferences for which the grounds that make sense of them will be in the form of scripts and personae that do not reduce her to the constant role of a supporting character. In fact, it might even be the case that the preferences she ends up with will be roughly the same as the ones she holds now, but since their embeddings would not be the same, they would still be different from her present ones—and unlike them they would be able to fully function as potential sources of well-being. In the here and now it is the actual embedding that matters, not what would hold in a better tomorrow or in some never-never land of ideal agency.

(ii) The Agent as Author

Even if one is the protagonist of one's own life, one can still lead it in a way that involves a rift between oneself as a person and the life that one is leading. To have narrative autonomy, one has to be the kind of person that has reached a sense of what to achieve in a way that has involved making up one's own mind. This presupposes a certain self-trust: to a reasonable extent one has to rely on one's own judgment and not just defer to the judgment of others. One of the most insidious ways in which people can be tyrannized is by being made to think that their own judgment is not good enough and that they must defer to others in order to know what to do. Indeed, this might even be the case with extremely privileged persons that have key roles in the central scripts of their societies. Someone can be a king and still be a person that simply wants what people expect of him to want. However, even if we demand that we lead lives that are not just led the way people around us expect them to be led, it should be made clear that for it to be the case that we are to be counted as authors of our lives, far-reaching originality cannot be a requirement. That would be an unrealistic demand to place on human beings—in a world of five billion people, there is precious little we can do or say that has not roughly been said or done already. What is needed is rather an account of authorship that takes as its contrast something akin to a secretary who is simply writing from dictation. What is needed to possess authorship is to create a space of individuality in the intersections of all the general cultural constructs, sometimes even clichés, that structure our lives.

The ideal here is not that of a person explicitly distancing herself from her impulses and asking questions about their grounds, which is the kind of ideal usually put forward by theorists of autonomy in the Kantian tradition. Rather it is an ideal of being a melting pot of influences, of being someone who is not compartmentalized and who does not merely follow influences on a one-by-one basis, but who lets her different influences cast light on each other. Authorship is thus not about making non-influenced choices, it is about influences from different persons and different times blending with each other. It is through that blending of influences that one's own voice and a power of judgment emerges. It involves a kind of wholeness that is similar to the one that is thought to characterize the *phronimos* in the Aristotelian tradition. One need however not be a *phronimos* to be characterized by it. It should also be noted that what we are talking about here is not simply coherence whatever form it might take—since having one's voice

comes through a blending of influences, it must be a reciprocal form of wholeness. One might think of a drug addict that is wholeheartedly an addict, but then that is because one side of him has completely subjugated his other sides. Such a person might speak in a single voice, but we are still dealing with the voice of his addiction, not a voice of his own.

Still, although such reciprocal wholeness is important, it would be unrealistic to require that complete wholeness is necessary for possessing authorship in general. We might certainly suffer local breakdowns of this aspect of autonomy without losing authorship in general. And it is quite clear that we sometimes have what might be called 'dangling' preferences, ones that we have with respect to possible events in certain circumstances simply because other people have similar preferences and they thus involve stances that appear to be the natural ones to take. These are preferences that have no real footing in our personalities and they can reasonably be regarded as heteronomous, *i.e.* they are not ours in any interesting sense of the word. Such preferences can be discounted as possible bases for improvements in our well-being. Of course, they are usually quite weak as well, but the point here is that there is something more than their weakness that makes them matter less than other preferences.

But might it not reasonably be wondered whether this demand for wholeness is not too strong; will it not too harshly discriminate against certain kinds of life, ones that are free and impulsive? It must however be remembered that there are impulses and there are impulses. One can certainly follow one's impulses, both external and internal, in a way that results in an existence that amounts to considerably more than the life of a vane. Impulses can spring to mind almost instinctively while still having been mediated by one's experiences. Indeed, if we really followed our impulses without even this kind of previous unconscious mediation, then it really is a bit difficult to see why the satisfaction of them should actually matter that much to us. And the reason is that they simply are not ours in any interesting sense of the word.

None of us is ever fully an author. Human existence is too complex for that. But although it might be difficult to say exactly where the line goes beyond which different lapses in authorship are typical rather than atypical, there is still such a line and most of us are comfortably on the safe side of it. On a general level the demand that we are authors is accordingly a very weak demand, one where failures to meet it require special circumstances like addiction, brainwashing, indoctrinating forms of upbringing, or especially

overpowering social pressure. Still, some people do have the misfortune to live under such conditions and the question then becomes how we should behave with respect to them.

4. Moral and Political Implications: Some Brief Comments

Given that there are things that can decrease our narrative autonomy, making the lives we lead not fully our own, the question is what the implications for our well-being would be. The natural conclusion would seem to be that the fulfillment of non-autonomous preferences cannot make our lives go as well as the fulfillment of autonomous ones. Yet there is something like a dilemma here. Since oppressed people are the ones whose preferences will be most distorted, they would be the most likely candidates for having their preferences judged to be not fully their own. Were one then to disregard such preferences, they would seem to be doubly damaged: first by being oppressed, then by being having their wants discounted.

However, from the fact that certain people under present circumstances really cannot have their lives go truly well (for that they would need narrative embeddings in which they are affirmed as protagonists of their lives and/or enabling conditions where they can have the kind of wholeness necessary for being authors), it does not follow that their preferences should generally be given less weight under present circumstances. The Rawlsian distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory[15] is an important one in this context. A theory of the human good is a theory concerning what should ideally be the case, but when we find ourselves in a situation where this ideal is unreachable (at least in the short run), then we should also have non-ideal theory about what to do then. So even if we ideally find it reasonable to fulfill the preferences that yield more welfare than those that yield less, we need not find this standard the relevant one under our present circumstances. Rather, a more attractive approach would be to say that if we find ourselves in a situation where the narrative autonomy of some people is compromised, the appropriate response is to generally give their current preferences the same weight as the preferences of others, while at the same time trying to change the circumstances in which

[15] *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 245–50.

these preferences have their basis.[16] Of course, these two objectives can come in conflict with each other and in that case one would have to weigh the importance of the possible gains in improving the situation of the narratively disadvantaged against losses in the fulfillment of current wants. But that is simply a trade-off and we always have to deal with those.

In addition to this, even when our narrative autonomy is compromised it seems overly harsh to embrace the position that our current preferences do not matter at all for our well-being rather than the weaker claim that the prudential value of their fulfillment is lessened. Circumstances might be far from perfect, but as human beings in this world we never lead lives that are so fully not our own that our preferences must be regarded as completely alien. So it seems reasonable to say that, on the whole, to get what we want is always at least a *pro tanto* good for us. It is just that when we are not in possession of narrative autonomy, we could have been even better off had the circumstances been different.

[16] For a similar approach, although framed in terms of identities instead, see Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age', *New Left Review,* no. 212 (July/August 1995): 68–93.