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SIX MYTHS
ABOUT THE
GOOD LIFE

Thinking about What Has Value

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
Indianapolis/Cambridge

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Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07

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For further information, please address

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

P.O. Box 44937

Indianapolis, IN 46244-0937

www.hackettpublishing.com

Cover design by Abigail Coyle

Text design by Elizabeth Wilson

Composition by Brighid Willson

Printed at Edwards Brothers, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kupperman, Joel.

Six myths about the good life: thinking about what has value / Joel J. Kupperman.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-87220-783-8 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-87220-782-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Happiness. 2. Success. 3. Quality of life. 4. Conduct of life. I. Title.

BJ1481.K87 2006

17—dc22

2005020868

ISBN-13: 978-0-87220-783-7 (cloth)

ISBN-13: 978-0-87220-782-0 (pbk.)

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.



Myth One

PURSUING COMFORT AND PLEASURE WILL LEAD TO THE BEST POSSIBLE LIFE

Most of us in our unreflective moods think of the good life—the one that would feel like a reward—as being extremely comfortable and pleasant. Not everyone who we think deserves such a life gets it. Some do good for others and achieve important goals, while scoring low in comfort or pleasure. This is bad luck, and we feel sorry for them. What we all seem to want is more comfort and more pleasure.

That is a simple view, and may represent a tendency that is wired into normal human nature. Can the judgment that the best life is one of great comfort and great pleasure survive reflection? In order to sort this out, we need to think more about what are comfort and pleasure, and about the varieties of comforts and pleasures. Then we can ask to what the pursuit of increased comfort and pleasure leads, and also whether it is a general truth that a very pleasant and comfortable life is the most rewarding.

A First Look at Pleasure and Its Values

The word “value” here stands in for how rewarding or unrewarding something is. One way of getting at the nature of pleasure (and then at its value) is to contrast it with happiness. Some people (including some philosophers and psychologists) think of “pleasure” and “happiness” as virtually interchangeable words, but they refer to different kinds of things.

Pleasures typically last a fairly short time, whereas there is a sense in which someone can be happy for a summer, a year, or a lifetime. Pleasures

also have an object; that is, you are pleased by such and such—some particular thing or experience—and this often is the cause of the pleasure and in what you take pleasure. Happiness, in the sense in which you can be happy for years, is about nothing in particular; you will be happy about life in general. It would sound odd to say that you are pleased, but not by anything in particular. That would not be pleasure. It would be a good mood.

Our pleasure in something is an agreeable feeling, and typically someone who is experiencing pleasure is aware of a positive affect. Is pleasure merely an agreeable feeling? There is reason to think that there is more to pleasure than that. It sounds odd to say, “It was pleasant, but I would never want to experience that again.” This combination at the least would require explanation. It looks like pleasure is not only an agreeable feeling, but also typically must have a role in our desires for the future.

Pleasure and wanting to have more normally go together. Occasionally one occurs without the other, and initially this seems hard to understand. There can be, however, explanations of what otherwise would seem hardly intelligible. Perhaps there is some moral or prudential reason not to want the pleasure repeated?

Indeed, one of the criteria for thinking that something was pleasant for a person (if there is any doubt) is that, all things being equal, that person would like more of it. Typically what satisfies the most obvious criterion for pleasure—that someone feels good in an activity or about something—will also satisfy the requirement that, other things being equal, that person would like more of the same.

If something satisfies one of the criteria and not the other one, we may find it difficult to know what to say. Wanting more of what did not feel good can seem more a matter of a compulsive need than of pleasure. But in some cases we may wonder whether it really did not feel good. Masochists, for example, may enjoy certain kinds of moderate pain.

Enjoying the feeling but (even with other things being equal) wanting never again to experience whatever gave it, or what it was about, presents an even more problematic combination. However, this combination can be made plausible. Perhaps the pleasure was not all that great, and you simply prefer variety in your pleasurable experiences?

The word “happy” sometimes does parallel “pleased” in taking a specific object. You can be happy about something, though being happy in this sense often lasts only a short time. However there is a global sense of

happiness in which someone can be happy, period. As already noted, this is a basic feeling about life that can last for a long time. When people say that they want happiness, they are talking about this global sense.

A neat-minded person might say that this (global) happiness is the sum of pleasures minus pains. But lived experience is not neat. As we will see in the next chapter, someone can have many pleasures but a basic feeling about life that is not positive, and not be happy. There are cases also when someone is happy with not very many pleasures.

Given this, many reflective people come to think that the good life can be equated with one of happiness. The next chapter will show that this too is a mistake. Happiness, nevertheless, often is very important in a good life. Are pleasures important? This has been a subject of philosophical worry for more than two thousand years.

Plato, in his dialogue *Philebus*, argues that the correct answer to “How valuable are pleasures?” is “It depends.” This is more complicated than the most common view. Pleasure generally is nice. Because of this, a response to Plato’s question that many people find immediately plausible is that pleasure is always worth having. It is then tempting to say that the most rewarding life will be the one with the most pleasure (minus pain). This view is known as hedonism.¹ Maybe there is an element of hedonism in almost everyone, in that almost everyone has moments in which what seems most important is to have more pleasure or to avoid pain. Most of us can feel the appeal of hedonism. But it is far too simple a view, and Plato was one of the first to argue against it.

If pleasure really determines how rewarding one’s life is, then one should consider any life that is filled with pleasure (and without pain) as enviable. Plato asks whether you would be willing to trade your life for that of a clam that is in a continuous state of great pleasure. (Imagine that that grain of sand is in just the right place, so that the clam’s whole life is

1. Hedonism is especially associated with the views of two famous thinkers: the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus and the nineteenth-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill. However, Epicurus placed much more emphasis on avoiding suffering than on gaining and augmenting pleasure. A similar emphasis on avoiding suffering emerges in Mill’s account in Chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism* of what a happy life would be like. This accords with what psychologists have called “negativity bias”: our tendency to regret losses more than we value gains. See Paul Rozin and Ed Royzman, “Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5 (1999), 296–320.

a crescendo of pleasure.) If something is holding you back from the idea of trading lives, then perhaps there are other things besides pleasure that are important? Also, maybe some pleasures—however nice they may feel—do not really amount to much?

A natural thought also is this. If pleasure is generally pleasure *in* something particular, then the value of the pleasure might depend on in what pleasure was taken. Alice feels pleasure in making an important scientific discovery, and Mabel feels an equal degree of pleasure in completing her collection of bottle caps; are the two pleasures of equal value? What of the keen pleasure experienced by a sadist after a good day at the torture chamber? That the sadist can feel great pleasure is undeniable. That the pleasure—because, taken by itself it is an occurrence of pleasure—has great value can be debated.

This presents an issue important to ethical philosophy, and to life. Is the standard for the value of an experience or in a life simply how much the person (whose experience or life it is) likes it? Or can we legitimately second-guess that person, and say, “He (or she) thinks it is wonderful, but really it is not”?

These are thorny questions. The view that people can be wrong about what they think are values in their lives might seem antidemocratic and elitist.² On the other hand—as we will see in the next chapter—there are cases in which someone is happy with a life that no one would envy. Would you trade lives with an idiot, if the idiot’s pleasures were greater?

Pleasures and Subjective Well-Being

Even apart from the issue of whether quality of life can be judged, as it were, from the outside, there are reasons for thinking that not all pleasures are alike in value. These are found in the psychological research on subjective well-being. Subjective well-being means how people estimate their own satisfactions. One well-known study is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s

2. There are other reasons why many are suspicious of the view that people can be wrong about what they think are values in their lives. These are taken up and discussed in the Appendix, Number 1.

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. Csikszentmihalyi's data show that people most value experiences in which they have carried on a sequence of skilled activities and have been caught up in them, as the book's title suggests.³ The activities could be musical, athletic, artistic, intellectual, involve furniture-making, etc.

These are active pleasures, generally requiring alertness; and they have some interesting connections with a person's sense of self. Genuine skills need to be acquired, a process that often involves effort, so that they represent achievements. There then has to be a background element of pride in being absorbed in skilled activity. The pride contributes to self-esteem. There is a long tradition in Western culture of being suspicious of pride, but this surely refers to excessive pride. Someone who has nothing to be proud of is in real trouble. One way of gaining pride is to attempt difficult things, which might involve acquiring skills, and to succeed.

You can lose yourself in skilled activity. One of the paradoxes of the classic literature of self-fulfillment, both Asian and Western, is that this kind of loss of self can also represent something extremely positive about one's self: something that is all the more powerful for not being the primary object of attention. Loss of self can be an ego trip. This is one reason why it is claimed that many saints and mystics experience joy.

Even apart from that, some philosophers (for example, the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer) have pointed out ways in which self-concern can be like an uncomfortable background noise in experience. At the least it is a mild irritant. The irritant disappears when you lose yourself in an activity or a line of thought; Schopenhauer was particularly struck by the loss of self-concern in aesthetic experience. Being taken out of oneself in this way is gratifying. All of these ideas come together in books like the ancient Indian *Bhagavad Gita*, which centers on the claim that loss of self in activity is both liberating and a source of joy. To borrow current sports slang: the best life, the *Gita* suggests, is spent as much as possible in "the zone."

Csikszentmihalyi contrasts the highly rated satisfactions of sequenced skillful activity with some common passive pleasures, such as watching television. His data show that over an extended period this passive pleasure cumulatively is a mild depressive. At best, the pleasure of this kind of

3. There is a possible objection at this point, which is plausible but I think not convincing. It will be discussed in the Appendix, Number 2.

activity is only slightly good, whereas people report the pleasure of sequenced skillful activity as very good. This provides contemporary psychological evidence to support Plato's view of the value of pleasures: namely, that it depends on the type of pleasure.⁴

Csikszentmihalyi's data also give reason to reject another of the attractively over-simple views that have found their way into philosophy: that what we want (or, in some loose sense, desire) is how we know what is valuable for us. People who watch a lot of television must want to do it. The passivity of watching, with its minimal demandingness, represents a seductive relaxation and extreme initial mental comfort. The fact that it is mildly pleasant but over a period of time cumulatively depressive suggests that there can be a large class of cases in which what we desire is not in our best interests. Other examples can be found among alcoholics and drug addicts.

Ethical philosophers sometimes have been tempted by the thought that there must be a sense of value, something that tells us what is desirable in life much as our five senses tell us what is real in the world. John Stuart Mill nominated desire as the sense of value. His argument for pleasure as the fundamental good was that pleasure is involved when we desire anything.⁵

In fact, there is no perfect candidate to be the sense of value; just as our senses sometimes deceive us, any indicator of value that we might rely on could be highly misleading. But desire looks like an especially weak candidate. The motivational tug that typically is an element of emotions is especially prominent in desire, and can conflict with a person's reflective evaluative judgment of what is desired.⁶ Also, desire is an emotion that looks forward in time; we often think that we are in a better position to evaluate something when we are experiencing it than when we are merely looking forward to it. For these reasons there might be better can-

4. The suggestion here in effect takes sides in a long-running philosophical debate about the relation between the "is" (in this instance, psychological data) and the "ought," or facts and values. This will be discussed, with some justification of the position that this chapter presupposes, in the Appendix, Number 3.

5. A case for holding that Mill was right in finding a deep connection between desire and pleasure will be developed in the Appendix, Number 4.

6. The nature of emotions is relevant to much of this book. One theme that will emerge is that good lives typically require emotional adjustments. Another is that awareness of what is good or not so good typically takes shape in emotional states. Think of what delight, admiration, boredom, disgust, and contempt sometimes tell us. A view of what emotions are will be presented in the Appendix, Number 5.

didates to count as senses of value. An especially plausible (but hardly perfect) candidate is delight.

Pleasure, Pain, and Hedonic Treadmills

There is a separate reason to think that the key to a good life is not the quantity of pleasure minus pain. Human psychology may entail built-in constraints on how favorable the balance (of pleasures minus pains) can be, and hence drastic improvement in quality of life must take another form. There are two arguments that point in this direction. One is found in the teachings of Buddha (c. 500 BCE), a philosopher who founded a movement to transform people's lives that has taken on many different forms over the centuries. The other is found in recent psychological literature.

Pleasure, Buddha contends, presupposes desire. You want something, and then you get it or keep it, which gives pleasure. However, the role of desire in his view carries some persistent disadvantages. First, the state of desiring something and not having it is not pleasant. Normally it is frustrating. But this frustration is intimately connected with the pleasure. Indeed it could be argued that the pleasure depends on frustration.

Consider these two examples. First, imagine whatever it is that you think would be the keenest possible pleasure. Imagine a world in which, whenever you wanted something, you would have it within two seconds. It is easy to see that in this world of extreme instant gratification, whatever might have been exciting and memorable would become boring and humdrum.

Secondly, even a humble pleasure could become intense given the right level of frustration. Take that of drinking a simple glass of water. You could turn this into something really intense. Simply don't have anything to drink for the next few days, and then have a glass of water.

If it is agreed that pleasure requires and depends on frustration, then what had looked positive (pleasures) now looks like part of a zero-sum game. But it may be worse than that. Pleasure makes up for the antecedent frustration. But sometimes we want something very much (with all of the frustration) and then don't get it. This happens to people especially when they are sick, or old, or dying. In light of this, the zero-sum game begins

to look as if it is headed toward a negative. Desire entails suffering, and the sources of suffering can multiply.⁷

In classic Buddhist texts this argument is given a disturbing twist. The problem of desire is not merely its link with frustration and suffering. The suggestion also is that desire (much like some drugs) is addictive. In the abstract, you might think that you desire such-and-such, and that when you get it the process will be finished. But no—the Buddhist philosopher suggests—by now you are hooked on desire, and even if you have got what you wanted, you will go on to want something more. You will become a desire junkie. This will lead to a life of suffering. It is extremely difficult to kick the habit of desiring “cold turkey”; one reason why Buddhism developed into a movement was to provide institutional structures that would make it more possible.

One feature of the desire and suffering problem deserves comment. Part of the story is that desiring (and then suffering) is part of normal human nature, which we all start out with. Most of us think of what is natural to all or almost all of us human beings as having a special claim to consideration, in relation to many practical questions. We sometimes say “That’s human nature,” as if this settles any question.

At the least, what is natural will be taken as a default position. But it can be argued that what is natural represents an evolutionary process, and that the results of this process might have worked well at the early stages or in primitive states of civilization—and maybe not so well now. The Australian philosopher J. J. C. Smart once, half-jokingly, nominated the sinus as evidence of evolution. As he pointed out, its drainage functions would have worked quite well originally if one posits human forebearers who moved on all fours. But now we walk upright, and the sinus is no longer an ideal device. Perhaps the desire-pleasure nexus is no longer entirely ideal?

7. It is instructive that the Buddhist warning against desire is put in terms of its vulnerability to what is translated as suffering, rather than to pain. The promise is that the disciplined Buddhist adept can have a life without suffering. It would be impossible to promise a life without pain because, for one thing, virtually everyone has pain nerves in the body. If something impacts on these nerves in the right way, pain will result. Suffering, on the other hand, is largely a matter of how pain is processed. Buddha’s view was that someone who is disciplined and has control over her or his mind would not experience suffering even if there is pain. Pain and suffering will be discussed in the Appendix, Number 6.

Much of classical Indian philosophy, both Buddhist and that associated with Hinduism, claims that for us, as we are now, normal human nature is a trap. We are born with intense desires, crying about what we want to avoid and grabbing what we want. No doubt these personality settings have their uses, but they can become damaging at the point at which we are mature, reflective, and autonomous. They lead to pleasure seeking, suffering, and a loss of focus on what really matters. Their inadequacy is manifested in a scarcity of joy in most of our lives.

The Indian texts, in various ways, urge us to give up pleasures and to adapt ourselves for a life of joy. The kind of joy they have in mind is objectless, and distinct from pleasure in a number of ways. Unlike pleasure, it is not *in* something; it is a global exhilaration. Unlike pleasure also, it does not have predictable occasions.⁸ Despite this, its likelihood can be increased hugely, it is claimed, by an emptying out of concerns and distractions, and the practice of a quiet contemplation.

All of this adds up to one argument that pleasure cannot be an important element in a really good life. It costs too much. And anyway, it is less thoroughly satisfactory than joy. If we want to improve our lives drastically, then it might be smarter to go for joy than for a much better balance of pleasure over pain (which the argument suggests is in the long run unattainable).

8. Translations normally are not exact, and word choice can vary among translators. "Joy" is a favored term in translations of Indian philosophy for what an enlightened person can expect to experience. In some translations of Buddhist texts the word "bliss" is chosen.

"Joy" and "bliss" are not synonyms, although both words, like words for emotional states in general, cover a range of cases, and cases of what might be called "joy" can overlap with ones of what could be termed "bliss." Generally, "joy" is more likely to be used for an exhilarating rush of positive affect that is about nothing in particular. The poet Wordsworth's "surprised by joy" is a good example, and there is a long tradition of people whose joy is connected with immersion in nature. "Bliss" is more likely to be used when the positive affect is steady state and oceanic. Neither joy nor bliss is as generally well understood as pleasure, in part because so many pleasures are either biologically based or embedded in the circumstances of ordinary life. Joy and bliss in contrast are often said to be made possible by a kind of spiritual cleansing, or emptying out of concerns and prejudgments. This is nicely put by the poem in the Chinese Daoist Daodejing that says (in the Blakney translation) that "The way (the Daoist path that will yield joy) is gained by daily loss." Whatever the reason, it seems widely agreed that busy, efficient people (however satisfactory their lives will be in many respects) are unlikely to experience much joy.

It is worth pointing out that there is at least one loophole in this argument. Even if we accept the Buddhist view of desires—that they are addictive, and introduce something into life that verges on mental illness—the firmness of the link between pleasure and desire can be questioned. Perhaps some pleasures do not require or generate desires?

The largest class of exceptions would consist of what might be termed pleasures of spontaneity. These pleasures typically are not sought in any way that involves a sense of hunger or need. They simply happen, in a way that may not be the result of directed activity. And then, after they happen, we simply move on.

Here are two simple examples. You are talking with friends, and suddenly someone hands you a bit of food that turns out to be perfectly delicious. It is pleasant, even though there was no frustration or arousal before the experience. When you have eaten it, you resume your conversation. A second example is what happens when you encounter friends, whose conversation you enjoy, on the street, or when you suddenly hear some music that you really like. Again, frustration or arousal, or post-pleasure longing, need not be part of this picture.

To be clear: it may be that nothing in the last two paragraphs is an argument against the actual views of Buddha or of other Indian philosophers who decried what is translated as “pleasure.” The translations from Pali or Sanskrit can be inexact. It may be that what is translated as “pleasure” in fact refers to a subset of what we think of as pleasures, namely those that involve longing and attachment.

The word “desire” also deserves comment. In recent years it has been used loosely, especially by certain philosophers, to refer to any preference that motivates us. The traditional meaning of “desire” was limited to rather strongly felt preferences, in which the element of psychological attachment (to what was desired) was such that losing or not getting it would be strongly felt.

Desire, in this stronger and more specific sense, is somewhat akin to craving. Certainly your mild preferences would not count as desires. If someone gives you a choice between vanilla and chocolate ice cream, and you say, “If it’s all the same to you, I guess I’ll take chocolate” (while not really minding if you then are given vanilla), this preference for chocolate does not qualify as desire given the traditional meaning.

This traditional meaning of desire makes intelligible the tight connection that Buddha assumes between desire and suffering. “Desire” in the

broad and looser sense of preference that motivates you, on the other hand, makes no sense as a translation of what Buddha urges us to lose and claimed to have lost himself. He clearly preferred to teach his message of liberation rather than lead a private life. Further, it would be impossible for anyone to function even in the most low-key way if she or he had no preferences whatsoever.

The second argument that suggests caution regarding a more favorable balance of pleasures over pains as the key to the good life stems from recent psychological investigations. Almost everyone assumes that levels of pleasure can be drastically increased, transforming the quality of life, if only one plays one's cards right (or gets lucky). But psychological evidence suggests that, by and large, people "adapt" to new circumstances of life, however more favorable they are. This involves changes in the baseline of what is taken as normal, above which something will seem pleasant. In other words, once people get used to having more, it will take more to please them. Once they get used to having less, it will take less to please them.

When adaptation has taken place, a person's level of subjective well-being (roughly, how pleased the person is) tends to go back to about what it had been. Psychologists have spoken of a "hedonic treadmill," comparing many kinds of human pleasure-seeking with the activity of a hamster or gerbil on its wheel, running hard but getting nowhere.

The classic example presents someone who likes wine, and suddenly is able to afford really fine wine. At first this would be extremely pleasant. But the evidence is that after a while (when really fine wine has become the norm), the increase in the level of wine-drinking pleasure will not be so great.

The most convenient single source for getting a sense of this, and of related recent psychological research, is a collection edited by Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwartz: *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*. The phenomena of adaptation, and the attendant adjustments in subjective well-being levels, have led to attempts to place the data in a theoretical framework. In addition, Kahneman and others have provided an interesting account of distortions in remembered and in anticipated levels of subjective well-being.

Studies document the tendency of subjective well-being levels, after a while, to go back to roughly what had been normal for the individuals concerned. The most dramatic are of lottery winners, and, on the

negative side, people who early in life had been rendered paraplegic.⁹ There are some exceptions to this tendency, and we shortly will examine what they might point to. The data however suggest that at least some of the most obvious strategies for drastically improving the balance of pleasures over pains, such as getting a lot of money, are highly unlikely to work as well in the longer run as people usually suppose.

This is linked to the distortions, already mentioned, in remembered and anticipated levels of subjective well-being. The data suggest that, say, in remembering how bad a painful experience over a period of time was, people tend to be influenced chiefly by two factors: how bad it was at its peak, and how bad it was at its end. Duration does not seem to be a major factor. One odd result shows that prolonging a painful experience by adding a period of only slight additional pain at the end causes the experience to be remembered as less painful than otherwise would be the case.

Kahneman suggests that the levels of subjective well-being that people anticipate tend to be heavily influenced by a view of the transition (e.g., how it will feel in the weeks after you have won the lottery), and not of the longer run.¹⁰ In the longer run, the levels will not be so different from what you have now. Focusing on the transition period aids the well-known tendency of hope to triumph over experience, in many areas of life.

Much of this goes against what most of us want to believe. It makes the pursuit of greater pleasure, and perhaps of greater happiness, look as if often it contains a delusive element. As Diener and Lucas remark, "It appears that pleasant emotions, the experience of unpleasant emotions and life satisfaction often depend more on temperament than on one's life circumstances or on momentary factors."¹¹

Here, as with the Buddhist arguments against strategies of pleasure enhancement, we might wonder whether there are loopholes. Even if

9. See P. Brickman, D. Coates, and R. Janoff-Bulman, "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?," in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (1978), 917-27.

10. Daniel Kahneman, "Objective Happiness," in Kahneman et al., eds., *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 16.

11. See Diener and Lucas, "Personality and Subjective Well-Being," in *Well-Being*, p. 314. There is a complication here in interpreting the psychological evidence, which will be discussed in the Appendix, Number 7.

some of the most obvious strategies for drastically improving the balance of pleasure over pain work only for a short time, might there be anything that works and continues to work? Common sense suggests that changes in the circumstances of life that involve such things as more interesting and challenging activities, or different kinds of human relationships, are candidates. Acquiring and then using the skills that lead to Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" experiences is a strong candidate.

A more general idea might be useful. Barbara Frederickson, in commenting on the data that show that subjective well-being at the peak and at the end dominate one's remembered impression of an experience, suggests that peaks and ends "earn their privileged status because they carry more personal meaning than other moments."¹² Increased pleasures related to sense of self above all carry personal meanings. Perhaps they are not subject to the hedonic treadmill in the same way as pleasures that are not related to sense of self?

This might help to account for the fact that the felt satisfaction (including pleasure in the results) of people who have had plastic surgery tends to remain higher than previously, and in this is exempt from the hedonic treadmill.¹³ Some readers may be surprised by this, because they associate plastic surgery with trivial changes of appearance. This popular perspective seems unfair in cases in which the changes are not trivial. But, apart from that, if it does make people feel better about themselves, it has a stronger connection with sense of self than is true for most ordinary pleasures.

The "flow" experiences (of being caught up in exercise of skills) reported by Csikszentmihalyi's subjects also can be related to sense of self, especially when there is room to be proud of the skills involved. Might the quality of close personal relations also give rise to pleasures closely related to sense of self? Certainly many people's lives give that impression. It could be argued that social networks play a major role in our sense of who we are, but that in the West an individualist ideology blinds many people to that fact.¹⁴ It also should be emphasized that many pleasures are augmented if they are shared with people we like.

12. Barbara Frederickson, "Extracting Meaning from Past Affective Experiences: The Importance of Peaks, Ends, and Specific Emotions," *Cognition and Emotion* 14 (2000), 589.

13. Frederick and Loewenstein, "Hedonic Adaptation," in *Well-Being*, 313.

14. There are two separate but closely related problems about the self here, which will be discussed in the Appendix, Number 8.

Let me sum up where our discussion of pleasures has left us. Pleasure scores high as a factor in the good life, in terms of our typical motivations, and much less high in terms of people's judgments of how good their lives are at various moments. Human life is full of ambivalence; one root is that two principal sources of our views of what is worth having in life (our desires, and our experience of what it is like to have or to lack something) often point in different directions.

Our motivations often are associated with a feeling that, with luck, we could drastically increase the pleasantness of our lives. The evidence is that the most common ideas of how this might happen are largely based on an illusion, and create a pattern in life of desire and frustration. Actual experience over a period of time can teach us this. But it is a problem that, by the time we have had the necessary experience, habits of desire and pleasure-seeking will be deeply entrenched.

Plato's arguments that some pleasures are worth a lot more than others look strong. Trivial pleasures can be quite nice, but it is not easy to defend parity for them with the pleasures associated with highly meaningful achievements. It remains debatable whether sadistic pleasures, taken in themselves (apart from the pains of victims), can be assigned any positive value.

The pleasures that most arguably have significant value are those associated with the exercise of skills or with forms of personal relations, and these also look less likely than most to exemplify the hedonic treadmill. Hence the idea that levels of pleasure in life can be enhanced for more than a brief period, and introduce greater value into life, is not a complete mistake. But it turns out not to be as easy, and perhaps not as subject to luck, as many people want to believe. Further, it looks as if the values of such a pleasure-enhanced life would have a great deal to do, not merely with the pleasure, but also with the values of the activities that give the pleasure.

To sum up: there is no suggestion in the discussion thus far that pleasures are generally valueless. Nor is there a denial that some of them sometimes are very nice. But there is an argument against any view that the most rewarding kind of life involves the maximum of pleasure, and that this is what we should seek.

The argument is two-pronged. The first suggests that the normal strategies for attempting to maximize pleasure turn out not to be workable, and hence even if maximizing pleasure would be good, it cannot be achieved in the way in which most people think. The second prong is

that, in any case, the rewarding life cannot be equated with one that has the maximum of pleasure. This is because the values of pleasures vary enormously, and it is possible to seek pleasures whose value is slight. This argument can be summarized as follows.

- A. 1. (The Buddhist Argument) Pleasures are most enjoyed when they are not always easy and immediate. Therefore a high degree of pleasure requires that sometimes there is waiting and difficulty. These involve frustration. Hence a high degree of pleasure entails a high degree of pain (either in frustration beforehand or in boredom afterwards before new desires form). Further, the circumstances of human life are such that over time pain can come to predominate in the life of the avid pleasure-seeker. Hence the normal strategies for attempting to maximize pleasure generally do not work.
2. (The Argument from Recent Psychological Research) Often changes in life that would seem likely to increase drastically the level of pleasure in a life (e.g., winning a lottery) turn out to have this effect only for a limited period of time. After a while it simply takes more to please the newly fortunate person, and levels of satisfaction return to pretty much what they had been. Hence normal strategies for attempting to maximize pleasure generally do not work.
- B. Apart from this, there is an argument that not all pleasures are alike in value, and that there can be wide variation. A philosophical form of the argument is found in Plato's *Philebus*, especially in his thought experiment in which you imagine having a choice between the not entirely pleasant human life you presently have and that of a clam in a continuing state of ecstasy. Most people would not make this trade. There is also evidence in Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* that the pleasures most valued are those of losing oneself in skilled activities, and that much more passive pleasures (such as watching television) cumulatively are not experienced as entirely positive. It has been suggested that pleasures that we continue to value are those related to sense of self, which would include those of skilled activities and also those of deep interpersonal relations.

The second prong of this argument leads beyond pleasure in the search for factors that can determine the value found within a life. Of course pleasure matters, but it seems to matter most when what the pleasure is in turns out to be important and deeply connected with your sense of your own life. If we find pleasure in meaningful activities, it seems arbitrary and doctrinaire to assign all of the value to the pleasure and none of it to the activities.

This last point should be spelled out. Csikszentmihalyi's research shows that the experiences that are valued most highly (a valuation that most people on reflection would agree is correct) involve a complex connection among a number of elements. There are the skilled activities, which are the cause and object of pleasure. There also is the losing oneself in these activities, which makes the satisfaction seem both deep and personal. Then of course there is the pleasure.

An obvious point is that if there were no pleasure, the experience would seem very different, and its value would be diminished. This makes it tempting to hold (as John Stuart Mill does seem to) that pleasure is *the* crucial element in value. However, we could equally well say that if no skilled activities were involved, and the pleasure was in something else (say, random sadistic acts), the value would seem negligible. Because of this, it seems arbitrary and doctrinaire to pick out the pleasure element in the complex Csikszentmihalyi describes and to assign all of the value to it.

It also would be counterproductive to focus on the pleasure in what we seek and (if we are fortunate) experience. People lose themselves in activities that they care about. To focus on the element of pleasure is to pull ourselves away from caring about the activities, or the people or things that they connect us with.

Comfort

Some of the discussion of pleasure should have prepared us for comfort. We have seen that the very strong built-in motivation for enhanced pleasure typically far outweighs its actual role in experiences of subjective well-being. Further, it is clear that most of the pleasures that people ordinarily crave have very slight relation to sense of self, and that one typically adapts to an increased level of such pleasures (so that the level of felt well-being tends to go back to roughly what it had been). Comforts also have typically a minimal relation to sense of self, and are very subject to the process of adaptation.

What is comfort? It is something that can be felt (especially when you are not used to it). But most fundamentally, it is the absence or elimination of something: of bother, minor unpleasant feelings, or of the

need to adjust to something. Great comfort is associated with a life made easy.

Once we are thoroughly used to comfort, it is not much felt. When the comfort is new to us, it can provide satisfaction by way of contrast with alternative experiences. Context and the strength of contrast will have a role in whether this occurs. Thus, say, comfortable shoes and clothing, if they are new to us, can feel wonderful. When they are almost always worn, they are not likely to provide felt satisfaction. Rather they will become a baseline for what is viewed as normal, opening the door to feelings of discomfort when less comfortable shoes and clothing are put on. If, on the other hand, comfortable shoes or clothing are worn only infrequently (and much less comfortable shoes or clothing are worn often), their being comfortable will be directly experienced as a kind of pleasure.

There are many comforts that tend to be steady-state, such as those provided by air conditioning in summer and warm rooms in winter. Such comforts, once they have been adjusted to and can be expected, are unlikely to give much in the way of pleasure. They do however create a vulnerability (when systems fail) to discomfort that amounts to noticeable displeasure.

If we ask how much value or importance in a life sensuous comfort of the sort under discussion holds, it is difficult to find a basis for any general answer. It is implausible to suppose that mild discomfort, as represented by rooms that are a bit too warm in summer and a bit too cold in winter, or by shoes that more or less fit but occasionally pinch, will significantly mar anyone's life; in many cases it would be implausible to speak of negative on-line (i.e., able to be felt) affect. Very great discomfort—especially for someone who is not used to it—is much more likely to be marked by negative on-line affect. Also it often can be distracting enough to qualify or preempt any positive experiences one might have. One could imagine a life of ongoing discomfort in which a period of sensuous comfort might seem a real bright spot, one to be remembered for some time afterwards, which would contribute something to the life. For someone whose level of sensuous comfort is steadily high, on the other hand, the comfort would be like emotional wallpaper and arguably would contribute nothing.

Psychic comfort is somewhat like sensuous comfort in offering dwindling satisfaction if it is steady. Some political leaders, it has been claimed, insist on the comfort of being surrounded by advisors whose mindsets

and opinions are very like their own. There are analogues to this in academic and everyday life. Clearly there are risks in all of these cases of lack of stimulation and habitual closed-mindedness. On the other hand, some sets of ideas are not likely to be developed in a rich and complex way except through exchanges with people who share some of their starting points, so that in this way a lack of psychic comfort that is both severe and steady also can have its costs.

This said, occasional or low-level psychic discomfort can be highly conducive both to alertness and to openness of mind. Perhaps even extreme psychic discomfort can play a positive role in some kinds of creative work. The discomfort of the unsolved problem can move the investigation forward. It should be admitted that philosophy has an special affinity with discomfort. Good philosophy should make its readers uncomfortable.

What the positive or negative value of comfort or discomfort is in a life depends heavily, it should be said again, on context and elements of contrast. There is much to indicate that a continuous high level of psychic comfort is highly likely to detract from the quality of a life, in part by diminishing the chances for interesting and satisfying creative activity. But a continuous high level of psychic discomfort also can subtract from the quality of life. Here, and in the territory between great comfort and great discomfort, much depends on the circumstances and peculiarities of the individual case.

A third kind of comfort fits under the heading of convenience. Emblematic are the comforts represented by the garage door opener and the television remote control. Both save time, and simplify life slightly by reducing the motion required to get certain things done. Neither would normally provide sensuous satisfaction. There might be pleasure for someone who is not used to them, or for someone who continued to be fascinated by the operation of the device or gladdened by the thought of possessing it. One presumes that for most people this pleasure would wear off very quickly, so that they (like other steady comforts) would take on a wallpaper-like status.

When people talk about "the comforts of home," much of what they typically have in mind must be conveniences; although in some cases warm rooms, comfortable chairs, and showers that work may play a part. Why is home so comfortable for so many? There is the convenience of knowing where everything—well, almost everything—is located, of being able in the morning to reach appropriately for a light switch without having to think.

Much of the trivial business of life can be transacted on, as it were, autopilot. Familiarity here has much of the effect (of saving time and effort) that the electronic processing of the garage door opener or TV remote has.

Not only can such comforts save time, but they quicken the subjective pace of felt time. Someone returning from a week of highly eventful travel can feel as if weeks had elapsed, whereas an uneventful week in entirely familiar surroundings can feel as if it had been only a few days. One hypothesis is that events, especially those that require conscious mental orientation, are markers of the passage of time. To have fewer such events means that subjective time speeds up.

Ellen Langer's research in nursing homes suggests also that there may be a correlation between some kinds of comfort (including perhaps the kind under discussion) and the progress of mental debility among the elderly.¹⁵ She was able to increase psychic acuity in her subjects by getting them out of grooves and entrenched patterns of thought, asking them, for example, to provide a story to fit "The early worm gets the bird." Perhaps having to think in the morning about where the light switch is might have a tiny effect of this sort? It is striking also that some of Langer's materials so much resemble Zen puzzles (koans), in that they are crafted so as to require improvisation or rethinking rather than some rote familiar answer.

The tendency of our discussion thus far is to suggest that a steady high level of comfort may be hazardous (at least to psychic acuity), and is not likely to be experientially satisfying. At best it becomes like emotional wallpaper. At worst, it creates a vulnerability to negative experiences when systems fail, a vulnerability made worse by the fact that steady comfort sometimes can weaken people's ability to improvise in difficult situations.

Conclusion

How important then are pleasure and comfort to the good life? The arguments of this chapter indicate that there is no simple answer. The fact that the great majority of people want more pleasure and more

15. For a comprehensive summary of the research, see Ellen Langer, *Mindfulness* (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1989).

comfort has to be balanced against the roles that pleasure and comfort actually play in our lives, once we get them. Both the Buddhist argument against pleasure, and the psychological evidence of the hedonic treadmill, show that what we want in the way of providing pleasure very often will not—if we get it—make the positive difference in our lives that we assume it would. Similarly, greater levels of comfort will be satisfying at first, but rapidly will become zero points on our scale of gratifications. In both cases there also are risks: the risk of suffering as we become addicted to desire for pleasure, and the risk of closed-mindedness and dwindling mental acuity that especially attends great psychological comfort.

On the other hand, values of pleasure and comfort cannot be dismissed across the board. Pleasure typically encourages us to continue, or to repeat, whatever gives us pleasure. If the source of pleasure is something worthwhile, then this is a positive role in the direction of our lives. More generally, there is a sense in which (as Aristotle and others have pointed out) pleasure completes the experience of a pleasant activity. If pleasure is absent, this strongly indicates a kind of defect in our involvement in the activity. If we try to imagine a life almost entirely devoid of pleasure, it will look like a life in which activities are consistently flawed or in which we cannot be wholehearted about what we do.

Similarly, an almost entire absence of comfort looks likely to have strongly negative qualities. It can engross a person's awareness, and distract her or him from what would be more meaningful activities. Certainly it generally helps, if someone is about to do something that is important and worth doing, that she or he is reasonably comfortable.

All of this leaves us with a moderate view of the values of pleasure and comfort. It also leaves us with a divided picture of the processes of human nature. Perhaps it is human nature to want more pleasure and more comfort. But it is also part of human nature to develop the capacity for reflective judgment of what one wants. This reflective judgment should yield a mixed picture, highly dependent on the circumstances, of the desirability of more pleasure or of more comfort.

Is there a positive message here, that can aid in the direction of a life? Certainly even a moderate number of small pleasures can enhance a life. This is especially true of pleasures of spontaneity, which can have a special charm.

There is also this. Pleasures of skilled activity, or in general pleasures that are linked to your sense of self (which include those grounded in personal relations), make a more substantial contribution to life than do casual pleasures linked to money and consumption. They are worth working for, although the best strategy is to focus more on activities that are deeply satisfying than on the pleasure they provide.