

Education And Well-Being: Beyond Desire-Satisfaction

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My aim is to cast serious doubt on those accounts of well-being which understand it in terms of desire-satisfaction. I take issue, in particular, with John White's account in both his *Aims of Education Restated* ¹ and his *Education and the Good Life: Beyond the National Curriculum* ² and try to provide a more objective foundation for personal well-being by seeking to undermine White's belief in the logical priority of desire over value. I will also challenge the inadequate conception of human-nature on which accounts such as White's seem to rely.

In the earlier book White interprets well-being in terms of what he calls "post-reflective-desire-satisfaction" (PRDS), while his latest account is in terms of the more familiar "informed desires" (ID). I shall assume a familiarity with both texts and shall concentrate on the difficulties associated with the subjectivism underlying them both.

In spite of a change of emphasis in the later book, White's thesis remains premised on the belief that values are chosen rather than discovered. He remains oblivious to the distinction between satisfaction of *desire* and satisfaction of *self*, which results in conclusions and recommendations that are both counterintuitive and educationally suspect. Apart from serious questions relating to both the conception of rationality employed, and its associated neutrality with respect to possible ends of rational choice, White's explanation of "reflection" in PRDS is as flawed as his reliance on the polarization of "ethical experts" on the one hand and individual choice on the other, is unwarranted.

Once it is acknowledged that we are not mere bundles of desires confronted with the task of getting them into some sort of order of priority, we are forced to acknowledge that desires have a certain rationale; we come to desire *x* rather than *y* for reasons to do with the aspect under which we see them. It is in virtue of so-called desirability-characteristics possessed by *x*, and absent in *y*, that we acknowledge the value of the former and admit the possibility that my satisfied *desire* may leave *me* thoroughly unsatisfied; I may end up feeling ashamed, or guilty, or simply indifferent. I may not actually mind, in retrospect, if my desire had been frustrated altogether. A rational person reflects upon the extent to which a satisfied desire is likely to satisfy him and does not stop short, in the way suggested by White, to the effect that "reflectiveness...subverts desire-satisfaction."³ Although White appears not to recognize the distinction between desire-satisfaction and self-satisfaction, its force becomes apparent in his example of a pupil who is asked to reflect upon the merits, or otherwise, of a career in the civil service. White wants him to ask questions like, "Will the secure life of a civil servant prove satisfying to me in the long term?" and would caution him to think this through in the full knowledge of *what he is*.⁴ But looked at within the context of well-being as PRDS, it is impossible to grant that there is any more to all this than making a choice of career in the light of those desires he would like satisfied, or which desires left unsatisfied, will cause him most frustration (which is, more or less, the same thing). Well-being, on this view, is little more than a species of contentedness. But there is more to *being* satisfied with something than merely enjoying a state of quiescence whereby one is not dissatisfied with something or other; to think otherwise would beg the question of what it is to be dissatisfied *with* something.

The importance of reflection in determining the value of things has long been recognized by White. In his earlier book, *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum*, he argues that intrinsic value is identifiable with what a person would, on reflection, want for its own sake,⁵ and it is reflection which enables a

person to determine which, of all possible options he prefers, and which is essential in the weighing of relative importance of various ways of life.⁶ The problem, of course, is one of adjudicating between those considerations which are relevant to the formulation of priorities, and those which are hindrances to such decision making. White, however, is adamant: "The individual himself must make the ultimate decisions,"⁷ but the basis on which decisions are made are the result of a very special kind of reflection: "He has to dig beneath his surface inclinations, steel himself against unthinking acceptance of ideals of life which he has picked up from others, *penetrate to more fundamental levels of his being, to his "deepest needs."*⁸ The italicized phrase fits uneasily with mere desire-satisfaction. After all, the satisfaction of desires and acting in accordance with my needs are frequently impossible to reconcile, and in what follows, White seems altogether too vague about the nature of the reflection in question. "Suppose," he says, "there is nothing at the bottom of the barrel. Can we *discover* our deepest selves? Or is *self-creation* ... a more appropriate description? It is nonsense to say that we create ourselves *ex nihilo*... But ours are still the ultimate choices."⁹

As it stands, this is both confusing and misleading. The confusion arises from the juxtaposition of the language of desire-satisfaction with that of needs. Do I reflect in order to find out what I *want* or what I *need*? To see how widely different these notions are, one has only to point to the fact that one can be mistaken about the latter in ways which do not make sense in cases of what is merely wanted. I may not always be *certain* about what I want, but when I am, the question of error does not arise. White's insistence (which is, at least, consistent with his overall thesis) that "we should do the things we most want to: that is what life-planning is all about"¹⁰ is simply unacceptable. Until more has been said about *what* it is that one discovers through reflection, it is difficult to indicate in what respects the statement misleads. In reflecting, I am concerned with not merely *believing* that I am flourishing, but with actual flourishing. White gives up too soon. His supposition that "one cannot, finally, say what one's well-being *is* as distinct from what one *thinks* it is"¹¹ would, if it were true, mean that there would be no reason why I should care about being misled over the issues involved. I should have no reason to care about my life being worthless as long as I had a worked-out hierarchy of desires, all of which were consistent combined with the assurance of seeing at least some of them satisfied. On White's account, the only room for *mistaken* evaluation is an evaluation that is unreflectively arrived at. Given the subjectivist premise with which he begins, there is no distinction in reality. It is this premise which needs refuting if we are to provide for the possibility of genuine human flourishing.

If we were to ask White what he thought the point of all this reflection amounted to, he would say that it is to enable pupils to make choices with respect to possible ways of life. And there is more to this than mere plumping. "One chooses against a background of wants which one already has.... Choosing is weighing relative importances."¹² The importance of this in White's account cannot be overestimated. Having gone through a period of compulsory schooling, the ideal pupil to emerge is the autonomous reflective chooser, and it is an ideal which, in my view, is in need of considerable modification before it is acceptable as an aim of education. It assumes a model of man which is deficient in many respects, a model which fits uneasily with something White also says. In all this reflecting about the life I am to choose, "I can only think this through in the full knowledge of what kind of creature I am."¹³ Now this is either chosen, or it is not. If it is, then "what I am" is hardly a constraint upon my reflective choices; if it is not, there are limits to choice of which the free and autonomous person needs to be aware. The picture that emerges from White's book is not of a person constrained in this way. Nature and human culture only assist in helping pupils to establish their priorities; in the end, "*the individual must make the ultimate decisions.*"¹⁴ There is a tension here which is troublesome, the significance of which seems to go unrecognized by White; yet an exploration of this tension will prove not only illuminating as far as a proper understanding of the limits to individual choice is concerned, but will also be helpful in providing a basis from which to construct an alternative picture of human well-being.

Practical knowledge may well be possible, but only where there is a measure of self-knowledge whereby particular courses of action are imbued with significance within a particular scheme of

things. The truth of this becomes apparent when we consider what it would be like to commit oneself to values on the basis of desire-satisfaction alone, ignoring one's fundamental evaluations. The satisfied desire is (trivially) my desire, but for that desire to be part of me in the sense that it is *me* that is satisfied and not merely the desire, a view of the self is required which is not in endless pursuit of desire-satisfaction, however reflectively arrived at.¹⁵ As Iris Murdoch reminds us, the reduction of individuality to an abstract and lonely will "makes no sense of (a person) as continually active, as making progress, or of her inner acts as belonging to her or forming part of a continuous fabric of being."¹⁶ Decisions made by reference to desire-satisfaction alone, without reference to what matters to one, militates against an appreciation of the full significance of what one might be doing. In short, for there to be any possibility of practical knowledge, the scope for individual choice must, of necessity, be restricted.¹⁷ This claim, together with its implications for individual well-being, merits careful examination.

From his earliest days, the child chooses within the context of a particular culture with concepts and traditions of its own. These are inherited and are as much part of his self-identity as any desire he might have, or choices he might make. Indeed, it is impossible to see how he could come to want anything at all without reference to this shared and common framework. Not only does it determine his whole conception of himself, it provides him with the wherewithal for the adoption of those ideals in accordance with which he is able to conclude that it is better to do one thing rather than another. To appreciate this is to begin to appreciate what is involved in the social nature of man.

The significance of this has been carefully spelled out by John Kekes who draws our attention to the fact that a setting or tradition is required in order to provide human actions with any intelligibility.¹⁸ A composer is able to write down any note he decides, but for these notes to add up to anything remotely meaningful, he is restricted by the tradition of which he is but a small part, such as that involved in the creation of a string quartet. Intelligibility is not a function of his will, but something that depends on a familiarity with the language of music. If he is fortunate, there will be a certain inevitability in his notation. But it is not only within the confines of art that reference to choice is misleading. Within the bounds of logical and physical possibility I can do almost anything I choose, and yet the significance of what is done is outside my control, for this is something requiring a shared conceptual framework. This is especially true, according to Kekes, in morality.

Choosing an action is rarely, and only exceptionally, a conscious active process of deliberation. An agent acts as a matter of course given the past, his ideals, his perception of the situation, and the practical exigencies. This is why concentration on choice obscures the real texture of moral life. To appreciate that texture one must start with how a person sees the situation in which he is to act. *Sensitive perception is the crux of the matter.*¹⁹

According to Kekes, one's sensitivity to a moral situation depends on the availability of, what he calls "moral idioms." These are provided by language, tradition and culture, and they include such descriptive appraisals as considerate, honest, courageous, conscientious, cruel, and such like. Their significance is only partly culturally dependent; significance is also a function of the breadth and depth of understanding a moral agent brings with him to a situation. Thus, Kekes believes that one's sensitivity to a moral situation is dependent on the significance one attaches to the moral idioms at one's disposal. Where one is able to employ moral idioms successfully in the characterization of a situation, the requisite course of action is, generally, straightforward. This is why the choice of action is far less problematic than the selection of idioms and where reflection is particularly important. Its function is to give breadth and depth to the employment of moral idioms "to see both that our moral idioms are the conventional products of the social context we happen to live in, and that underlying the various conventions there is an abiding concern with benefit and harm and with living a good life."²⁰ Reflection enables one to make important discoveries; it is necessary if we are to develop a greater moral sensitivity whereby we are able to recognize that what we had hitherto taken to be a correct understanding of a situation was superficial and incomplete. The deeper comprehension, which is the outcome of reflection, is not itself a matter for individual choice. Discoveries of this kind, Kekes maintains, are not like those of a tone-deaf man suddenly acquiring

musical appreciation, but more akin to a musical person coming to appreciate a particularly difficult work.

Expressed in this way it may look as though I am advocating an excessively deterministic account of the way in which values come to be assigned. If one were entirely passive with respect to discoveries of this kind, the characterization of a situation in terms of one moral idiom rather than another would rest on a purely causal relation between the experiences to which one was subject, and the language in which one's evaluations were formulated. The result would be an individual who was no more than a passive register of competing desirability-characteristics and, as such, totally bereft of that requisite degree of personal autonomy for any life-plan to count as authentically his own. And yet, a system of values, whatever else it is, is not something which is simply adopted at will.²¹ Moral idioms are selected not on the basis of a some Kantian-like will, but on the basis of deeper and more fundamental evaluations which are bound up with my entire self-identity.

The relationship between the notions of "choice" and "discovery" is exceedingly complex as Alan Montefiore clearly demonstrates in emphasizing the fact that one's own reality, while dependent, in part, on one's choices and present and future decisions, requires us "to accept as our own at each particular moment of our lives a reality which for all that it may not be wholly determinate, is nevertheless at that moment given to us." Invoking Charles Taylor's notion of strong evaluation, he insists that

our choices and evaluations remain...superficial if they are not rooted in the inner -- and -- outer reality out of which we are choosing. And this must include the recognition that there must always be more to these roots than whatever we may believe ourselves to have discovered so far.²²

All this is profoundly relevant to the teacher's task, for children clearly *learn* how to want. As our familiarity with moral idioms grows, our ability to accurately characterize and evaluate the plethora of possibilities before us is deepened. In the very young there will inevitably be an element of hit and miss in all of this. It is a mark of maturity, however, that a person is able to take on a greater measure of responsibility for what kind of person he shall be henceforward. But the reasons underpinning commitment to a set of values are not, themselves, self-chosen. They are, in part, due to choices made in the past by reference to reasons which are public and non-arbitrary. Opportunities should, therefore, be granted to children, within certain prudential and moral boundaries, to make their own decisions about what to believe and what to do; without such opportunities it would be absurd to expect them to later make important discoveries relating to their well-being. If personal education is to amount to anything at all, it must address itself to exactly this. Pupils must be provided with the opportunity to discuss their most deeply held convictions and expose them to critical assessment. They need to do this if they are to be helped in the difficult process of re-evaluating those things which really matter to them, and which appear to provide point and purpose to their lives. In so doing their autonomy is strengthened, and within the security of the classroom, they are engaged in that all-important process of self-discovery and self-affirmation.

In *Education and the Good Life*, White construes well-being as the satisfaction of informed-desires or those desires one would have were one in possession of information enabling one to appreciate the implications of satisfying a particular desire.²³ Recognizing that desires have a hierarchical structure does not, White quite rightly maintains, imply a neat and tidy desire structure.²⁴ We are all too familiar with desires which we are intent upon satisfying, but for a variety of reasons, largely to do with the brevity of life, we are unable to fulfill. Unfortunately, White moves too speedily from his rejection of a PRDS account of well-being to what appears to him as the only alternative.

In contrast to an actual-desire account of well-being, the *prima facie* attraction of the ID account is obvious. Assuming that one is aware of the implications of satisfying certain desires whereby one has a clear understanding of the objects of one's desire, one is less likely to be confronted with unresolved conflict, and certainly less likely to fall victim to one's desires. The ID account would also appear to accord very nicely with the view that there is no universally applicable *summum*

bonum to which we should all aspire. People vary in their interests and enthusiasms, their characters and dispositions, tastes and convictions; personal well-being varies accordingly. Recognition of individual differences would, thus, appear to sit quite comfortably with an account of well-being in terms of informed-desires and preferences. In reality, however, the whole idea of ID is more problematic than people like White and Griffin would have us believe.

First of all, as Brandt has demonstrated, there is the problem of rendering the account of well-being in terms of ID intelligible.²⁵ How, for example, are we supposed to decide, when confronted with two incompatible courses of action, which one would lead to most desire-satisfaction? Our desires are far from constant whether they be for careers, partners, or specific pleasures.

Second, there are numerous occasions where the satisfaction of one's ID (for example, for something like tobacco) is manifestly incompatible with well-being. The ID theorist cannot escape by pretending to restrict ID to only those desires a person *would* have were he properly appreciating the information, unless he can provide us with an account of what it is to "appreciate" such information that is not circular.²⁶

The recognition that people have *interests* as well as desires, makes it easier to formulate a more objective account of well-being than those wedded to desire-satisfaction accounts would have us believe, and the charge of authoritarianism against such an account may be rebutted in a number of ways.

First, the fact that something is seen in a certain light (for example possessing desirability-characteristics of various kinds) is, in itself, insufficient to enable one to decide what to do on a particular occasion. Actions are, at least in part, justified by reference to their significance within the context of the unity of one's life as subjectively conceived and evaluated, and one may well have good reasons for not doing that, which from a certain point of view, one might readily acknowledge to be worthwhile. Second, although my interests are subjective in so far as they are my interests and not (at least not necessarily) yours, they are not, (and could not be), subjective to the point of being entirely idiosyncratic; there are features of human-nature which entail that, whatever form of life we adopt, we will be harmed (which is another way of saying that we cannot flourish) unless we find room for certain fundamental requirements which may be subsumed under the heading of "real-interests." There is nothing incompatible in this with a respect for individuality and the acceptance of a plurality of values. The form of objectivism I wish to sustain is that there are objectively determined limits to what may legitimately count as human well-being and, by parity of reasoning, to what may count as harm or serious damage to persons and their development. In spite of the difficulties associated with specifying an uncontested account of human flourishing, we can, I believe, demonstrate that certain things are fundamental prerequisites of normal functioning, given our physical, psychological and social make-up, by reference to which a particular life enjoys dignity.

We are able to envisage alternatives to the status quo and to adopt standpoints in accordance with which alternatives are evaluated. We have opinions concerning what is right, bad, to be avoided or pursued. We can formulate ambitions by reference to which our actions cohere. We take delight in art, relationships, exploration, work; and we find some things uninteresting, dull and boring. Our natural curiosity prompts us to seek an understanding of the world and our place within it. We can laugh and cry and experience events as comical, tragic or absurd. We form conceptions of ourselves in terms of which we develop our self-respect and self-esteem. Such conceptions are, in large measure, the result of social intercourse which provide opportunities for conviviality, friendship and love. Our lives are governed by a whole catalogue of emotions, forcing us to adopt strategies in order to avoid their domination and, instead, acknowledge their rightful place within our rational orderings.

All of this requires systematic analysis for a proper understanding of human-nature, but it also serves to remind us that human characteristics of this kind explain the value we attach to things like

truth, meaningful work, and autonomy. Acceptance of what would appear to be indisputable about human-nature commits one to the conclusion that there are features common to any minimally worthwhile life. If desirability is, indeed, ultimately reducible to preference, then the possibility of *discovery* of what is of value is impossible. However, we can admit to wanting things in virtue of a recognition of who and what we are, on the one hand, combined with an appropriate employment of the language of contrastive evaluation, on the other. This provides a strategy of accounting for well-being by reference to more objective criteria than desire-satisfaction theories would admit.

Well-being might be explained in terms of the "fit" between the direction in which our individual lives are given shape and purpose, and the presence of those values which are not merely self-chosen, but which are objective in being determined by our common humanity, and which we have a genuine stake in nurturing.

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1. John White, *Aims of Education Restated* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
 2. John White, *Education and the Good Life: Beyond the National Curriculum* (London: Kegan Paul, 1992).
 3. White, *Aims of Education Restated*, 57. An account of rational choice which ignores the relationship between it and a person's *good* (or real-interest), concentrating exclusively on his chosen goals is, in my view, radically misconceived.
 4. *Ibid.*, 52 (my emphasis).
 5. John White, *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).
 6. White, *Aims of Education Restated*, 52.
 7. *Ibid.*, 54.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. *Ibid.*, 54-55.
 10. *Ibid.*, 57.
 11. *Ibid.*, 55.
 12. *Ibid.*, 52.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. *Ibid.*, (my emphasis) Compare John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 416.
 15. The idea is not easy to spell out, but it receives elegant articulation in Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 55.
 16. Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 39.
 17. For reasons why this is so, see Roger Scruton, "The Significance of a Common Culture" *Philosophy* 54 (1981): 66.
 18. See John Kekes, "Moral Sensitivity" *Philosophy* 59 (1984): 3-19.
 19. *Ibid.*, 7 (my emphasis).
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. In his article "On Seeing Things Differently" *Radical Philosophy* I, (1971): 6-14, Richard Norman ably demonstrates that, although the figure in Leeper's Ambiguous Lady Illusion can be seen as a picture of a young woman or an old woman, it does not follow that this is entirely subjective. What is there imposes limitations on what is seen. As Norman says: "What is possible for us to see depends upon how it is possible for us to conceptualize our experience." And he draws a parallel between ways of seeing such pictures and *Weltanschauungen*: "the possible ways of seeing man's nature and his place in the

universe are made available by the moral and intellectual traditions within one's culture...The available traditions do not confine us once and for all; new ways of seeing can be developed and extended -- *but not arbitrarily.*" (p 11, my emphasis).

22. Alan Montefiore, "Self-Reality, Self-Respect and Respect for Others," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978): 200.

23. The notion of ID is to be found in Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* and John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Its most recent defence is in James Griffin's *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) sections i-iv.

24. Griffin does, wrongly I believe, think that informed desires are simply those which can be ordered hierarchically.

25. See Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 250.

26. As Garrett Thomson puts it: "It is circular to define "appreciation" in terms of our informed preferences matching what is valuable, e.g., a person appreciates what he prefers if and only if he prefers *Y* to *X* only when *Y* is more valuable than *X*...Without an independent grip on the...notion of appreciation in the phrase 'what a person would prefer if he appreciated what it is like to have what he prefers,' it advances us no further to define prudential value in terms of this phrase."

(Taken from Thomson, G., *Needs* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1990), 46-47). Griffin concedes as much in his appeal to "our rough notion of well being in deciding which informed-desires to exclude from (his) account of well-being" (*Well-Being*, 22), but I confess to finding his account of how such circular reasoning might be avoided, both unclear and unconvincing. If something is in accordance with my well-being it is in virtue of something other than the fact that I have an informed preference for it. It is precisely because we see things in a certain light -- as something *worth* obtaining or avoiding (Griffin's own example is that of "accomplishment") -- that we end up having some informed preferences rather than others. While Griffin parts company with Hume in seeing understanding (cognition) and desire (appetite) as distinct existences, he denies that "one can explain our fixing on desirability features purely in terms of understandings" (27-29); he is insistent that there is still a strong case for saying that the order of explanation is from *desire* to value. Suffice it to say, the issues are complex, but for an alternative position see, for example, Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) which lends support to the view that desire, *as an independent element* in the explanation of actions, is redundant.

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