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Well-Being as Value Fulfilment: how we can help each other to live well

By VALERIE TIBERIUS

Oxford University Press, 2018. xii + 214 pp.

Valerie Tiberius' *Well-Being as Value Fulfilment: how we can help each other to live well*, makes a thoughtful, realistic and persuasive contribution to the philosophy of well-being. Tiberius seeks to say something about how we can help our friends and loved ones to have better lives and resolve conflicts between their deeply held commitments. But underlying this is a theory of well-being that presents a credible alternative to the views that predominate the literature.

The book proceeds in two halves. The first half sets out the *value fulfilment theory of well-being*. The second half explores how the theory can help us to help our friends to improve their well-being.

The bare bones of the value fulfilment theory are as follows: our lives go well to the extent that we pursue, realise and fulfil our appropriate values. Values are ends—projects, activities, relationships and ideals—that we value. And valuing something involves having a stable pattern of emotions and desires towards it over time. That is, you like it, you want it, and you continue to feel this way on reflection. Having these attitudes towards a given end gives you reasons for action—reasons to promote it, pursue it, or protect it when it comes under threat, for instance. Valuing thus has affective, conative and cognitive dimensions. For this reason, values are more or less appropriate for us to the extent that they are aligned with our emotions, desires and judgements. So a pursuit that I desire and judge to be good for me, but do not enjoy, is less appropriate for me than a pursuit that I also take pleasure in.

The philosophy of well-being has, over the last few decades, largely engaged in defending, critiquing and modifying three theories of well-being: hedonism, desire satisfaction theories, and objective theories. Tiberius seeks to cleave a path through this debate with a hybrid theory of well-being that draws on aspects of all three of the prevailing orthodoxies. But her solution is ingenious as well as conciliatory: her attempt to solve the three-way conflict has at its heart the resolution of conflict between our emotions, desires and judgements.

For Tiberius, overall well-being consists in *total value fulfilment*, or 'a life as rich in value fulfilment as it could be' (48). Achieving this involves fulfilling the values that we have, resolving conflicts between our values, and adopting new values, where compatible with our existing commitments. Different values carry with them different standards of fulfilment. Some of these are subjective, wholly determined by the valuer themselves. But most values have standards of fulfilment that are in part non-subjective—fixed, for example, by social convention. Sometimes our values will be mutually supporting, but sometimes they will conflict with one another because they make demands on our time and resources, or because they are otherwise incompatible. For Tiberius the fact that our values come into conflict does not mean that we ought to drop one of them or change our standards of value fulfilment if doing so would make our lives worse overall. However, if changing our values or standards of value fulfilment or adopting new values would increase the amount of overall value fulfilment in our lives, then we have reason to do so.

The discussion of how we can help our friends to improve their well-being chiefly considers the resolution of conflict between values. When our friends' lives are going badly, we can help them to see how they can change their set of values by offering an alternative perspective that is grounded in personal knowledge of their interests and values, but also detached enough to see things that they cannot. Of course, changing one's values is easier said than done. Many of our values are central to our sense of self and our membership of a community. It is often not an option to cease to hold them as values or to change the standards for value fulfilment at will. Tiberius recognises all of this, but argues that sometimes our friends' values will be so bad for them that dropping or changing their attitude towards one or more of them is the only way to improve their well-being. And our role, as friends, is to help them navigate this difficult task.

Tiberius does not claim to provide an exhaustive, universal theory of well-being. Rather, she seeks to say something about how to think about well-being when our aim is to help our friends and loved ones. This is not to say that the scope of the theory is restricted to such cases only. The view also has much to say about how to think about our own well-being and the well-being of strangers, for instance. Moreover, while this theory and its focus represents just one way of thinking about well-being, Tiberius takes it to be a significant one. Helping our friends to have lives that are full of value and well-being is important because it is part of what is required by friendship, which is itself a core value for most of us.

Tiberius' writing is refreshingly unpretentious and straightforward, without compromising intellectual rigour. One of the principal merits of the book is its realistic and pragmatic characterisation of the subject-matter. Her account makes space for uncertainty, fallibility, the limits to knowledge about ourselves and other people, and the complexities of our personal and social lives. Consequently, her ambition to say something about some of the practical ethical questions that confront us is, I think, unusually successful. It is regrettably rare that philosophical writing about well-being provokes serious contemplation about how to live a better life, and that her account elicits such reflection seems to me to be a clear sign that an awful lot of what Tiberius says is on the mark.

In the remainder of this review, I will briefly explore one aspect of the value fulfilment theory that I found more difficult to swallow. Total value fulfilment, the goal of a life as rich in value fulfilment as it could be, gives us reason not only to pursue well-being via the pursuit of value fulfilment, but to maximise our overall well-being via the pursuit of a life that contains as much value fulfilment as possible. I will put some pressure on the existence and interpretation of this goal, and show that it is central to the plausibility of the theory. I suggest that calling total value fulfilment into question raises questions about the normative adequacy of the theory.

The status of total value fulfilment is somewhat unclear. We might conceive of it as a goal that all of us *in fact* value. Or it might be something which we *necessarily* value. So, perhaps, in virtue of having other values we also value total value fulfilment. Or alternatively it might be something which we *ought* to value: even if we don't in fact want to maximise our total value fulfilment, it would be good for us to value this goal. I will set aside the first, empirical interpretation, as I don't have the tools to assess its validity. However, it seems plausible to me that there are some, perhaps many, people who do not seek to maximise value fulfilment.

The second, modal interpretation is unconvincing. Tiberius' account of valuing implies that we have reason to pursue and value those things that we already value, and it tells us that some values are more or less appropriate for us. However, it doesn't give us reason to value things other than those things that we already value, and it doesn't give us reason to have any second order values—to value having values, for instance. The suggestion that some values are less appropriate for us—on the grounds that our affective, conative and cognitive attitudes towards them are not aligned—might be thought to motivate the goal of total value fulfilment, by motivating us to pursue a set values that are more appropriate for us. But this gets things the wrong way around. A commitment to total value fulfilment is needed in order to motivate the pursuit of a set of values which overcomes attitudinal conflicts. Without a drive to increase our well-being, we don't have a reason to change our inappropriate values for more appropriate ones. This reveals how crucial the goal of total value fulfilment is to the theory of value fulfilment. Without it, it's difficult to see how the central conceit of conflict resolution, and the pursuit of a more appropriate set of values, gets off the ground. And without this, the theory looks much less appealing—our well-being would be largely determined by the appropriateness of the values that we each happen to end up with.

Perhaps, then, the goal of total value fulfilment is something we *ought* to have: it is good for us to pursue well-being via the pursuit of a life that is rich in value-fulfilment. However, this raises questions about the normative adequacy of the theory. Tiberius argues that theories of well-being should be normatively adequate: that is, they should tell us what's good about well-being and why we should value it. But a normative interpretation of total value fulfilment merely *asserts* rather than *explains* the

value of overall well-being. Whatever kind of explanation is required for a normatively adequate theory of well-being, it must amount to more than a mere assertion of the value of well-being.

Part of the difficulty for theory of value fulfilment in securing normative adequacy lies, I think, in Tiberius' aspiration to divorce well-being from morality more broadly. The value fulfilment theory allows that someone can have a life that is rich in values that are appropriate for them, despite them being morally reprehensible—Tiberius gives the example of a Mafioso with morally questionable values that are nonetheless suited to his own personality. While the tripartite definition of values in terms of emotions, desires and judgements can explain why we *in fact* pursue the fulfilment of our values, it is less clear that it tells us why we *ought to* pursue them. Indeed, the price to pay for a theory of well-being that is as morally ecumenical as the theory of value fulfilment may just be its ability to secure normative adequacy.

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