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Wealth, Disability, and Happiness

According to the *Easterlin paradox*, individuals within countries see their happiness affected by how their incomes compare to their fellow citizens', and yet both across countries and across time, vast differences in income do not make a difference to average levels of happiness. According to the *disability paradox*, people who suffer from what look like severe health problems often do not feel as unhappy as healthy people predict. In fact, some of them do not seem unhappy at all: they have adapted to their condition in ways that the healthy, who overlook adaptive processes, neglect. Apparently, large differences in what we might call people's "objective welfare" do not always make for differences in people's subjective happiness.

In this article, I set out the relevant facts, claim that there is at least some truth to the relevant findings, and then argue that they have important implications for our beliefs about welfare and happiness. In particular, I argue that the antigrowth message that people often read into the Easterlin paradox is wrong, and that we have reason to concentrate on economic growth even when it does not make us happy. The reason for this is that on reflection, many categories of welfare matter to us at least as much as happiness. It is tempting, I then point out, to take this lesson from the Easterlin paradox and use it to solve the disability paradox. But there are reasons for skepticism about this move, and I offer an alternative account that rests on the importance of particularist attachments to the things we care about.

The conclusions I draw from these two case studies are that they provide additional grounds for thinking that there is more to welfare than happiness; that there is more to what we care about than welfare; and that therefore contrary to an Aristotelian view of practical reasoning, there seems to be a great deal that we do and value, even in the strictly personal realm, that is unrelated to our happiness or welfare.

I

What is happiness? In the empirical research I will be discussing, it is clear that what is meant by “happiness” is something subjective in the sense that it concerns people’s mental states, and I will stick to that usage here. Intuitively, the idea is to capture how good or bad someone’s life looks from the inside; often the phrase “subjective well-being” is used. Of course, that is still rather vague, and there are many different ways of filling in the blanks. More fleshed-out theories of happiness in this subjective sense include simple hedonism (happiness is the preponderance of pleasure over pain), emotional state theory (happiness is possessing a preponderance of positive emotional states), and the life-satisfaction theory (happiness is just the judgment that your life is going well on the whole).¹

This entire family of theories contrasts with what I will call “welfare,” which refers to how someone’s life is actually going for them, whether they realize it or not. Intuitively, the goal here is to capture our judgments as well-informed, sympathetic observers about how someone else’s life is going for them. (Students of ancient philosophy will recognize this as related to Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, which shares many of the features of what I am calling welfare.) This notion of objective welfare is thus broader than happiness, since our own feelings about how things are going for us are often misinformed or underinformed, and thus we seem to be fallible in our judgments about our own welfare.

That there is room for such a gap is controversial, since it can seem hard to understand why we would judge someone to have low welfare when they are perfectly happy.² The standard examples used to rebut such skepticism include the cuckold, whose whole life turns out to be a lie despite a blissful ignorance, or the scientist who throws away his life

1. For a recent overview of philosophical theories of happiness, see Daniel Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), part II.

2. See, for example, Richard Feldman, *What Is This Thing Called Happiness?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 169–73. Feldman argues that welfare is exhausted by happiness as he interprets it (“attitudinal hedonism”). Unlike many others, Feldman does not seem bothered by the implication of his view that someone’s life can be going fantastically for him even when he is an abject (but resigned) slave, or when Alzheimer’s has reduced his life to a series of disconnected (but pleasant) episodes.

on a pointless research program that turns out, just after his death, to have been hopelessly wrong. (They can be pleasingly combined, perhaps, in the figure of the cheerfully cuckolded string theorist.) Another example might be the happy indentured servant who accepts his condition and never thinks of what his life could or should be free from his servitude, which prevents him from realizing his life potential, getting an education, or traveling beyond his master's farm. We can represent all this in a matrix:

Happiness	High	Scientist-cuckold	Life feels & really <i>is</i> good
	Low	Migraines	
		Low	High
		Welfare	

On this picture, happy persons whose lives are compromised in some way from the perspective of well-informed, external observers fit into the top left box, while those in agony have lives that leave them unhappy and with lives we would judge of poor quality, placing them in the bottom left. The rare, lucky individuals who feel happy and whose feelings are apt fit into the top right, while the bottom right is empty. The latter is because presumably happiness is one component of welfare: we do not think people's lives are going well for them if they themselves are miserable. Of course, we might think people are wrong to be so unhappy, but if they really are persistently miserable, it is hard to see how their lives could be judged a great success from the outside.

Since this is just by way of setup, I will omit the further details and caveats that a fuller account would require. For now, it is just worth adding that I will be supposing that it is worth taking seriously the implications of some of the empirical research on happiness. This may seem worrisome to the extent that we have doubts about measuring happiness accurately, and indeed a great deal of caution is in order. But there are four considerations to bear in mind. First, for the most part I will be using the empirical research merely to illustrate philosophically important possibilities, in something like the way one might cite certain cosmological theories to lend color to a discussion of reference in the face of

reduplication. Second, nothing turns on the relevant measurements being even remotely precise or fine-grained. The issues turn on such general findings as whether huge gains in wealth have produced significant changes in how happy people are, or whether by and large disabled people tend to adapt. Third, even if we are skeptical about simple-minded surveys asking people whether they are happy (or how satisfied they are with their lives, and so on), we might be willing to grant that these can be reasonably well *correlated* with whatever we think happiness really amounts to. It might not matter if the survey instruments are dead wrong about what happiness is, especially in view of the first two points. And finally, researchers have obviously invested substantial effort in assessing how reliable and valid their work is, and the results are not completely discouraging, though there is certainly much room for improvement. It turns out that asking people about how they feel yields *prima facie* results of the sort we would expect, for example, people generally look less happy after an economic crisis, after a divorce, and so on.³ And in the cases I am interested in, the research usually (though not always) concerns large groups. Since the relevant measurements are from hundreds or thousands of people, there is less reason to worry about random error.

II

The first half of the Easterlin paradox consists of the positive association between higher incomes and greater individual happiness within a country. The other half consists of countries getting dramatically richer without getting any happier.⁴ As one researcher describes it, “Our economic welfare is forever rising, but we are no happier as a result. The puzzle is that rising in rank on the income scale seems to improve one’s chances of happiness, but a rise in one’s income when everybody’s

3. For a recent defense of empirical happiness research addressing issues of reliability and validity by leading practitioners, see Ed Diener, Richard Lucas, Ulrich Schimmack, and John Helliwell, *Well-Being for Public Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 6. For a more skeptical view, see Feldman, *Happiness*, chap. 12.

4. The original paper was William Easterlin, “Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?” in *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*, ed. Paul A. David and Melvin W. Reder (New York: Academic Press, 1974). For a more recent overview, see William Easterlin, “Will Raising the Incomes of All Increase the Happiness of All?” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 27 (1995): 35–48.

income is rising does not.”⁵ This part of the paradox is supposed to be revealed in either studies that compare levels of happiness in a particular country across time, or else cross-sectional studies that compare countries at varying levels of development. For example, it is often claimed that while Japan underwent spectacular economic development in the postwar period, it made no significant gains in happiness, as revealed in surveys conducted over the years. Something similar, if less stark, is said to have occurred in the United States. Real GDP per capita in the 1920s was under \$8,000; in 2009 it was over \$40,000, an astonishing fivefold increase.⁶ But none of this seems to have been accompanied by any dramatic rise in happiness as measured by the surveys, and those measurements seem to conform to most people’s intuitive sense of how happy they are compared to their parents and grandparents. Few middle-class people think they are dramatically happier than their middle-class parents or grandparents were just because they are so much richer. Moreover, a little reflection makes it easy to understand why that should be. Among other factors, happiness may be a function of how one fares relative to one’s (ever-rising) expectations; one may become habituated to rising standards of living; we may walk along a hedonic treadmill that is difficult to escape for long; after a certain point our happiness may be dominated not by wealth but relationships and other social factors like status, relative success, and so on.⁷

But these pessimistic views are contested. Recent work has claimed that there is no paradox and that in fact higher levels of income have almost always been associated with greater happiness. The star witness of Japan, for instance, may fall apart when the relevant survey questions are retranslated, revealing that the Japanese questions changed over time, influencing the results; and a more careful look at the cross-country comparisons, it is claimed, also shows a tendency for happiness

5. Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 135.

6. From the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, online national income and product accounts table, <<http://www.bea.gov/national/nipaweb/SelectTable.asp?Popular=Y>>. Accessed August 24, 2010.

7. See Scitovsky, *Joyless Economy*, pp. 135–45, and the discussion of the hedonic treadmill later. Often, diminishing marginal utility is added to the list. But we can just restate the puzzle: how come the utility of money diminishes across countries (or across time) but not, or not as much, across income brackets within countries? Or again, how come America’s going from the salary of today’s day laborer to today’s average desk worker did not have the same effect as an individual getting a raise of the same amount?

to align with income. The skeptics even deny that there is clear evidence refuting the claim that more money is always good for happiness, even after we are rich. (That is, they “find no evidence of a satiation point beyond which wealthier countries have no further increases in subjective well-being.”)⁸ These counterclaims have in turn been contested, and thus no social-scientific consensus has been reached.

I want to insist, however, that there is a sense in which, despite the technical disagreement, some version of the Easterlin paradox must eventually be real. Barring catastrophe, it is inevitable that we will reach a point at which countries continue to get wealthier and wealthier in absolute terms without getting happier and happier. Assuming that our individual happiness continues to be affected by how our incomes (cars, homes, yachts, and so on) compare to those of our colleagues and neighbors (and the rest of our countrymen), the paradox will hold. The question, in other words, cannot be whether the paradox holds, but only *when* it holds—now or later. This is because our capacity for subjective well-being is rather limited, while our capacity for economic development is vast. That is, there is a sharply delimited upper bound on how happy we can be, given mundane facts about human nature and the kinds of societies one can readily envision. I take it, in fact, that many individuals living in the best-off, most favorable circumstances in the developed nations are at or near that upper bound. Making such people substantially happier just by increasing their prosperity simply is not possible, both because of natural limits to how much happiness one can

8. The quotation is from p. 1 of what is perhaps the most impressive work on behalf of the skeptics: Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, “Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox,” NBER Working Papers 14282. Easterlin replies in his and Laura Angelescu’s “Happiness and Growth the World Over,” IZA Discussion Paper 4060. For a more detailed review of the economic literature, see Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer, *Happiness & Economics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), chap. 4. Briefly, they come to an intermediate position, reading the literature as supporting the view that across countries money matters for happiness, at least up to a point, that across time it may not, and that within income brackets at a given time and place it almost certainly does. Notice that the marginal utility of money may diminish—perhaps sharply—even if most countries have not reached a zero point yet. On the other hand, Harry Frankfurt has shown that we should be very cautious even about claiming that the marginal utility of money constantly decreases. This is false for the person saving for a \$400,000 house getting the 400,000th dollar, and for several other commonplace cases as well. See his “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” reprinted in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

get, and because of ineliminable social facts like envy, failures in love, natural misfortune, and so on. By contrast, we are nowhere near an upper bound on economic development. Since such development is largely driven by increases in efficiency of consumption and production, there is no necessity of our reaching that upper bound any time soon. (The ultimate limits on efficiency are probably tied to the energy output and computational capacity of the universe.) So the idea behind the Easterlin paradox cannot be fundamentally wrong, though it might be too early for Easterlin to declare victory.

Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that something like the Easterlin paradox could hold true in particular cases, and the evidence suggests that it probably does. By this I mean that regardless of the general point about the relationship between development and happiness, particular countries might experience joyless growth (or cheerful stagnation), and comparisons between particular countries might reveal a similar disconnect, with impoverished nations seemingly quite content with their lot. (I assume, once again, the other half of the paradox, concerning individual happiness relative to intranational income.) Think again about the case of the United States over the past few decades, which has, if anything, *declined* in measured average happiness, despite gains in income.⁹ Japan is also a suspicious case, though there are problems with the survey data. Or, from a cross-country perspective, consider the following chart, which plots GDP per capita against a normalized measure of life satisfaction.¹⁰

Measuring how satisfied people are with their lives as a whole is, on one view, a way of getting at how happy they are. Even if this is philosophically wrong, it might capture a part of the truth, or be statistically correlated with the right view of happiness. And almost any theory will yield a similar chart, on the assumption that some large groups of people just are more subjectively happy than others. Suppose, then, that Figure 1 accurately captures an important component, at least, of how

9. Leading skeptics such as Stevenson and Wolfers struggle to explain the United States, conceding that it seems to be an exception to their rule, before trying to show that income gains may not, in the relevant sense, have been as great as they seem. See their "Economic Growth," pp. 56–60.

10. After Stevenson and Wolfers, p. 31, from data from the World Values Survey 1999–2004. The chart should be viewed schematically, since the cardinal values for the x-axis are estimated by eye from the source, but the values are roughly accurate.

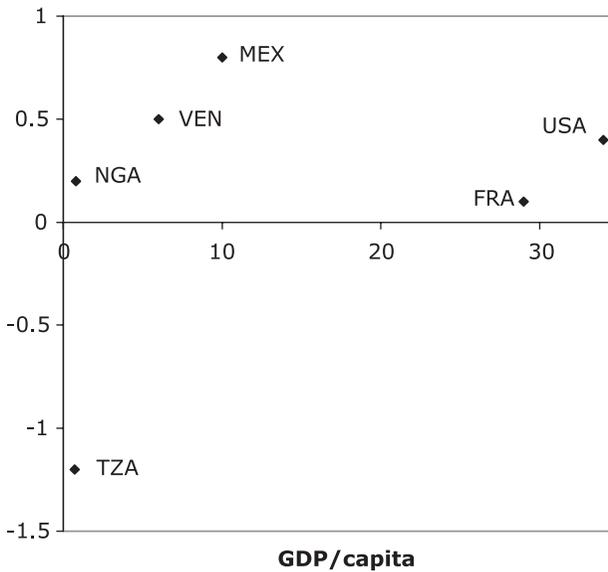


FIGURE 1.

happy people are in the countries plotted. We can then reinstate a localized, more modest version of the Easterlin paradox: vast differences in prosperity *often* do not make any difference to happiness. In the case of Figure 1, American prosperity does not appear to have moved its citizens' happiness (or at least life satisfaction) much beyond that of Nigeria or Venezuela, let alone moving them to attain the vertiginous heights of Mexico. And Nigeria and Tanzania, despite their comparatively similar levels of poverty, seem to differ dramatically in their happiness.

This suggestion may sound silly. How do we know the United States is *not* happier as far wealth goes, and is only bested by Mexico for unrelated reasons of climate (or religiosity or temperament)? Once we are reduced to making pairwise comparisons, it might be said, we cannot really infer much about the role of wealth in particular in making countries happy since we cannot exclude masking effects introduced by other factors. But although this is strictly true, there are reasons to be skeptical. In the specific case of Americans, it is hard to believe that the staggering difference in wealth as compared to Nigerians, Venezuelans, and Mexicans makes a deeply significant difference to happiness that nonetheless is not manifested because, in each case, different non-wealth-related

factors conspire to hide that difference over and over. My point is not that this is impossible, of course, but only that the interest of the Easterlin paradox survives, in muted form, if wealth *ever* fails to affect happiness.

I do not want to take a stand on whether the full-blown Easterlin paradox is real. Since it inevitably will be sometime soon, and since there is a case for thinking that it holds in particular cases already, the key philosophical questions do not really depend on taking such a stand. So let us turn now to those questions. The central issue is this: if economic development turns out not to make us happier, why should we care about economic development as much as we do? Correlatively, if economic development comes at the expense of other things that might contribute more to our happiness, why don't we attempt to shift our priorities toward those other things? In fact, if we are living under the Easterlin paradox, why do we work so hard and expend so many resources both to promote the economic development of poorer countries like Nigeria, and to avoid slipping back ourselves to a lower level of development like Venezuela's or Mexico's? (To avoid irrelevant contrast effects, imagine this change occurring over several generations: over one hundred or two hundred years, we gradually regress to the development level of Nigeria. As expectations slowly shift, investments shift toward foreign markets, preventing a disastrous stock market collapse.)

The view I have in mind here could take the form of calling for an abandonment or at least a significant abridgment of the quest for economic growth, or at least a rebalancing that places much more weight on "gross national happiness."¹¹ Of course, in some forms such a shift is innocuous and easy to endorse. Sometimes it amounts merely to a call for more attention to quality of life issues, such as pollution and work-family balance, that have been neglected traditionally by governments and mainstream economists. If economic development leaves us with oil-slicked beaches and shattered relationships, it would be foolish not to factor such things in as negative side effects of growth. The questions I have been raising, however, suggest a much more

11. Bhutan has seriously pursued the notion of measuring gross national happiness, with the aid of international professionals, novel survey instruments, and government working groups.

radical position—that we should simply abandon efforts to raise the standard of living in poor countries that are already happy, and that we should cease worrying about stagnant growth in the United States if it should turn out that in the long run such outcomes would make little difference to our happiness.

I raise this proposal mainly as a philosophical challenge, but it is worth noting that policy experts have actually mooted suggestions along these lines. The economist Richard Layard, for instance, claims that on a traditional economist's view,

little harm is done by an occasional bust bringing “creative destruction” in its wake, because the long-run gain outweighs a small immediate cost. . . . But modern psychology leads to a different emphasis. The short-run psychological cost of fluctuations in employment is great, while the long-run gain from growth is relatively small because the value of each dollar becomes smaller and smaller as people become ever richer.¹²

This kind of reasoning leads him to advocate (or at least emphasize the advantages of) high taxes which might lead to lower growth rates, but which would deter the negative effects of emphasizing individual performance (the envy and dissatisfaction of the losers), as well as the habituating effects of ever increasing pay.¹³ And many other dissident economists have at least urged that we pay less attention to national income and focus more on measures of happiness.¹⁴

I want now to point out that there is actually a simple answer to the questions raised earlier, an answer that endorses the grubby status quo of striving for high growth rates and bemoaning the low growth rates of the cheerful poor. This is just the contrast drawn earlier between happiness and welfare. On this view, prosperity makes us better off, even if it does not make us happier. Earlier, we noted that the stock examples used to motivate the possibility of a gap between happiness and welfare exploited values many of us have that we can be wrong about, in

12. Richard Layard, *Happiness* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 171. Layard's point would still hold even if we reject his idea that the reason we are no happier than our parents has to do with diminishing marginal utility.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 152–56.

14. Among the more interesting is Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy*. See also Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Knopf, 2006), pp. 217–20.

particular something along the lines of *being connected to reality*. Because we care about not being deluded, cuckolds and scientists can suffer welfare losses in the face of great happiness. Similarly, in the case of economic development there are values at stake that allow for happy people to be suffering a low level of welfare in ways that make it rational to prefer higher welfare. Here are some examples of such values:

Life expectancy—Simple longevity need not be reflected in happiness studies. If people do not reflect on and feel unhappy about their life expectancy, a population can be happy without living long. But life expectancy would be at the top of any list of welfare indicators. (The life expectancy in Nigeria is forty-eight.)

Health—It is implausible that chronic pain would not affect happiness. But many other forms of sickness need not if such conditions are taken for granted (especially according to the life-satisfaction view), even though they make a difference to welfare. Examples include cognition-impairing malnutrition, developmental disorders, stunted growth, and, generally speaking, moderate forms of illness that incapacitate without being agonizing.

Welfare of loved ones—If our children suffer malnutrition or die in infancy, most of us think that means *our* lives are worse, but in places where that is deemed the normal course of things, it may not affect one's happiness.

Perfectionist goods—Economic development enables such goods as acquiring an education, the advancement of science, and attaining knowledge of (for example) the nature of the universe, the origin of species, and the history of the world. It also enables travel to see other peoples and places, and the creation of art. If it is taken for granted that these things are unavailable, their absence may not affect one's happiness, but many would consider them important components of welfare. We pity happy people living in utter ignorance of their world or of great art.

Realized potential—Someone's life goes badly for them if they are prevented from accomplishing worthwhile things they otherwise might have. But if few people around us realize their potential, we are unlikely to register this subjectively.

The claim, thus, is that there are goods we would lose were we to decline economically, even if we did not experience losses in happiness, and that poorer countries suffer these losses now, no matter how contented with their lot they may be. And by simple extension, we should strive for economic development in the future even if we do not anticipate being made much happier thereby. Doing so will enable us to live longer, live more healthily, see our children better off, and learn about the nature of reality. (To be sure, the benefits of such welfare gains must be balanced against negative side effects such as pollution and lost leisure time, which likewise affect welfare.)

Comparing currently underdeveloped nations and our own future development can be illuminating here. We have a natural tendency to see our current level of development as normal, as perhaps not much worth improving on, especially if doing so comes at some hedonic cost in the form of, say, more work-related stress. But this looks a lot like status quo bias. Future generations will presumably look at our primitive state of knowledge, of our healthcare, and so on, in just the way we look with horror on countries at the level of development we shared a few decades or centuries ago. Since we have reason to expect the welfare gains from future prosperity to be at least as great as those made since the time we were at the level of countries like Nigeria (at least a hundred years ago), our reasons to press for growth seem to be great indeed. Economic prosperity may not bring with it happiness, but we have very powerful reasons to pursue it anyway, though of course not at just any cost.¹⁵

To sum up, (a) the Easterlin paradox is controversial as a claim about current averages, but appears to be inescapable in the long term and perhaps as applied in particular cases; (b) this raises questions about the rationale of economic development; (c) there is a familiar distinction between how it feels our lives are going on the inside and how a well-informed observer would judge they are going; (d) we can utilize that distinction to answer the questions about economic development, since (e) there seem to be objective features of economic development—goods

15. An editor points out that we might prefer greater prosperity because that would be more conducive to an egalitarian society, and egalitarian outcomes tend to diminish the unhappiness we have seen to be associated with lower relative incomes. This would of course depend on whether greater prosperity in fact leads to greater equality (it has not in recent American history), and whether competition in egalitarian societies (for status, for mating opportunities, and so on) simply shifts from income to other domains.

thereby enabled—that we have reason to pursue apart from their hedonic effects; and (f) looking at examples like Nigeria, our grounds for pressing for economic growth seem to be quite significant even on pure welfarist grounds.

III

I now want to compare the Easterlin paradox to the disability paradox, the finding that the disabled are often less affected by their condition than the healthy suppose. The suggestion to be explored is that the lives of the disabled are in certain respects analogous to the lives of those living in poor countries, and that there is a puzzle about why we wish to avoid disability, given that the disabled are often about as happy as healthy people are.

We can understand the concept of disability very broadly to include any serious and long-lasting health impairment. In this sense, deafness, kidney disease, and a colostomy are all disabilities, and we should bear in mind that disabilities can be either congenital or acquired. A recent research summary of the paradox says, “The preponderance of evidence suggests that many patients with chronic illness and disability are able to emotionally adapt to their circumstances and experience relatively high levels of mood and [quality of life],” though the authors go on to note that such adaptation is not always complete.¹⁶ The relevant evidence includes findings such as the following:

- The disabled assign higher health utilities to their conditions than do the healthy, as established by multiple independent instruments.¹⁷
- Those *currently* disabled assign higher health utilities to their condition than do those who *were* disabled in the past in just the same way.¹⁸
- In studies examining what kinds of trade-offs the disabled would be willing to make in exchange for full health (for example, would

16. Peter Ubel, George Loewenstein, Norbert Schwarz, and Dylan Smith, “Misimagining the Unimaginable: The Disability Paradox and Health Care Decision Making,” supplement, *Health Psychology* 24 (2005): S57–S62, at p. S60.

17. Dylan Smith, Ryan L. Sherriff, Laura Damschroder, George Loewenstein, and Peter A. Ubel, “Misremembering Colostomies?” *Health Psychology* 25 (2006): 688–95.

18. *Ibid.*

they trade a life shorter by X months for full health), many disabled are unwilling to make any trade-off whatever.¹⁹

- In general, there is evidence of a hedonic-treadmill effect, whereby major life events affect us less than we would predict, and we tend to settle back into a set point level of happiness. Spinal cord injuries are less terrible for us than we imagine; winning the lottery is less wonderful.²⁰

On reflection it should not be all that surprising the disabled or those suffering from medical problems are not as devastated as we might casually predict. The standard explanations here include that we overlook habituation and adaptation processes whereby we get used to or adapt to our new circumstances so that the status quo comes to seem normal and not some disastrous downward change;²¹ or, reflecting on what it would be like to suffer a disability, *ex ante* we are by construction *focused* on the bad change, whereas *ex post* we are not—most of our days will be spent attending to everyday life events not involving our disability; or, finally, many of the health conditions at issue are just less bad than we imagine. We attach stigma to medical conditions, even when, as experienced, they are not so terrible.

Moreover, these mistakes on the part of the healthy are incredibly hard to eradicate, even when subjects are explicitly told about them. Researchers working on the focusing illusion just described write, “across more than a dozen studies and more than 1,000 participants, people’s predictions of what it would be like to experience these

19. Erik Nord, Norman Daniels, and Mark Hamlet, “QALYs: Some Challenges,” supplement 1, *Value in Health* 12 (2009): S10–S15, at p. S10; Michael Drummond, Diana Brixner, Marthe Gold, Paul Kind, Alistair McGuire, and Erik Nord, “Toward a Consensus on the QALY,” supplement 1, *Value in Health* 12 (2009): S31–S35, at p. S32.

20. The set-point theory is well supported by the evidence, but of course one must be cautious: spinal cord injuries *do* leave people worse off, just not as much as we would imagine. And some individuals simply do not adapt. But the literature continues to support an appropriately modest version of the set-point theory. For recent reviews, see Richard Lucas, “Adaptation and the Set-Point Model of Subjective Well-Being,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16 (2007): 75–79; and Ed Diener’s somewhat misleadingly titled “Beyond the Hedonic Treadmill,” *American Psychologist* 61 (2006): 305–14.

21. For an accessible overview of this point, see Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, chap. 9. On the next point, see Daniel Kahneman and David Schkade, “Does Living in California Make People Happy? A Focusing Illusion in Judgments of Life Satisfaction,” *Psychological Science* 9 (1998): 340–46.

disabilities were either unchanged by the defocusing task or went in the opposite direction we expected, with people thinking these disabilities would make them even more miserable.”²²

And even all this evidence probably still understates the paradox considerably. This is likely because the evidence for the happiness of the disabled is usually collected by asking respondents about their life satisfaction, or by other survey techniques that inevitably introduce focusing illusions. Suppose you ask someone with a serious disability how their life is going overall. This is likely to focus their attention on major medical problems, which in turn inevitably means they will feel worse about things. Even if they had completely forgotten their worries and spent most of their time absorbed in a fascinating career, by putting the question, we direct their attention toward what is wrong with their lives. As Mill put it in his autobiography, “Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be.”

An alternative approach is to try to assess happiness in real time. This is what the emotional state theory of happiness would tell us to do in the first place, but even if we regarded such an approach as merely evidential, it would seem to be better evidence since it would avoid focusing effects (as well as other problems, such as any possible recall bias). One study design along these lines is to supply patients with PDAs that randomly activate and request input on how the patient is feeling or what kinds of experiences he or she is having just then. This is still imperfect, but it avoids some of the problems just outlined. Using this type of methodology, studies of even fairly extreme disabilities, such as being required to undergo hemodialysis, have sometimes found *no* decrease in patients’ happiness:

Replicating earlier findings using different methods, we failed to find evidence that patients experienced lower moods than healthy controls did. Both patients and controls, however, predicted that the difference in mood experienced under health versus illness would be large.²³

22. Ubel, Loewenstein, Schwarz, and Smith, “Misimagining,” p. S61.

23. Jason Riis, George Loewenstein, Jonathan Baron, Christopher Jepson, Angela Fagerlin, and Peter A. Ubel, “Ignorance of Hedonic Adaptation to Hemodialysis,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 134 (2005): 3–9.

We should reserve judgment on the exact size of the disability paradox, but this kind of evidence suggests it may be large indeed once we focus on how people actually feel moment to moment, and discount judgments that have been shaped by a misleading focus of attention. (It is worth noting this is not just true of disability but of other life misfortunes that seem catastrophic to outsiders. For instance, on a scale of 1 [low] to 7 [high], with 5 set as neutral, American college students in one study described their overall well-being as 4.9. Slum-dwellers in Calcutta offered a disturbingly close 4.4.)²⁴

IV

The disability paradox raises a problem similar to the Easterlin paradox. In the economic case, we intuitively want to treat regressing to the economic position of Nigeria as a catastrophe, even if doing so would not have much effect on our happiness; our policies seem geared toward growth quite independent of our subjective well-being. On reflection, though, I suggested that this set of attitudes makes sense in light of the distinction between welfare and happiness. In the case of disability, we want to treat becoming disabled as a catastrophe even if we would not lose much or perhaps even any happiness. This attitude requires explanation: it is not *prima facie* reasonable both to acknowledge that the disabled are quite often content with their lives, while insisting we would do anything to avoid occupying their position.

One way of underscoring the point is to note the debate in medical ethics about whether to discount the value of years lived under disability. On one view, we should assess the effectiveness of medical interventions in terms of quality-adjusted life years (QALYs), meaning that we discount the benefit of an operation, say, if that operation would leave patients disabled.²⁵ This could mean that the state would pay to save a life that would leave a patient healthy, but allow patients to die who would, were they saved, be left disabled. It would have this implication if an intervention were expensive and were judged not cost-effective in the latter case.

24. Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Question* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 153.

25. For an introduction to the theory and measurement of QALYs and similar measurements, see John Brazier, Julie Ratcliffe, Aki Tsuchiya, and Joshua Salomon, *Measuring and Valuing Health Benefits for Economic Evaluation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

QALYs could also mean failing to pay for life-sustaining interventions for the disabled, since their continued survival would be discounted by their disabilities. And the architects of the QALY apparatus seem to endorse some of these implications; that is, they are not the philosopher's far-fetched logical extreme. Speaking generally, people often seem comfortable with the first sort of discounting (discounting for disability when some intervention would leave otherwise healthy people disabled) and much less comfortable with the second (discounting the ordinary survival of, say, congenitally disabled people).

Critics complain that the discount rates are often established by asking the *healthy* how they assess life under a disability, even when the disabled view their experience with disability very differently. (In the hemodialysis case, people would discount life lived under those circumstances even though the sick do not seem to experience a lower subjective quality of life.) Critics also complain that QALY-style discounting seems to subject the disabled to a kind of double jeopardy: first they suffer the misfortune of being disabled, then the added burden of having their priorities downgraded by the medical system (when, if anything, they deserve *upgrading* to compensate for their misfortune).²⁶ Proponents counter that it is crazy to pretend we do not view becoming disabled as a misfortune, and that as long as we do we should build that fact into our medical economics.

The QALY debate brings out precisely the consistency problem: we seem hard-pressed to reconcile our conflicting attitudes toward the significance of disability, treating it as disastrous in some contexts, but, at least for critics of QALYs and double jeopardy, treating it in line with the subjective well-being of those actually disabled in others. The obvious solution is to make the parallel move with the economic case: to claim that the conflict is resolved by distinguishing between happiness and welfare. But before we do that, we should briefly address two more straightforward approaches that I view as inadequate. The first suggestion is simply to reject the judgments of the disabled. We might, for instance, insist that they are in some irrational state like denial or else are

26. See Nord, Daniels, and Hamlet, "QALYs"; John Harris, "QALYing the Value of Human Life," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 12 (1987): 117–23; and Peter Singer, John McKie, Helga Kuhse, and Jeff Richardson, "Double Jeopardy and the Use of QALYs in Health Care Allocation," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 21 (1995): 144–50.

succumbing to adaptive preference formation.²⁷ This may seem especially tempting in cases where the disabled not only claim high life satisfaction, but also resist treatment to become healthy, as when the deaf sometimes decline cochlear implants that could restore hearing. (The controversy surrounding parents foregoing implants for their *children*, however, raises quite distinct issues.) The models here are groups like women in traditional societies who insist they *want* to occupy a subservient position in their community, after having been raised in a culture promoting norms of subservience. We might reject such women's perspectives on the grounds that the women are responding to their sharply limited opportunities by making the best of it and pretending they do not see anything attractive about driving cars or owning a business ("those grapes I cannot reach must be sour"). The fact that disabled people do, after all, want to be cured if given the chance belies their avowals of living with a disability, just as would be the case if Saudi women were to leap at the opportunity of driving or unaccompanied travel if given the chance, as one suspects many would.

As others have pointed out, though, rejecting the carefully considered judgments of others about their own well-being is troubling; the epistemic advantages of the agent himself, though not insuperable, are certainly considerable ("judging the lives of others is epistemologically hazardous").²⁸ Comparing disabled people who insist that their lives are quite worthwhile to women in oppressive cultures is dubious, as is the emphasis on opting for a cure if one is available. Although adaptive preference formation and other irrational syndromes are always potential candidates to explain the relevant attitudes, clearly there are other models. The most obvious are cases where we are just wrong about how bad something is. Getting rejected by Harvard may seem terrible to a neurotic youth, but we do not need some exotic psychology to explain the rapid recovery that he would have denied *ex ante*: he just is not focused on Harvard after a while, he becomes habituated to being denied, and so on. And if he tells us he would still opt for Harvard given

27. My discussion here draws on Elizabeth Barnes, "Disability and Adaptive Preference," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 1–22. See also Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

28. From Ron Armundsen's spirited discussion of these issues in his "Disability, Ideology and Quality of Life," in *Quality of Life and Human Difference*, ed. David Wasserman, Jerome Bickenbach, and Robert Wachbroit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 112.

the chance, that would not show his rapid recovery was a put-on, but only that we can adapt to circumstances quite well without pretending that no other state of affairs might tempt us from the status quo.

On the other hand, we may be tempted to dismiss the judgments of the healthy on the basis that we are succumbing to stereotypes of disability, are suffering from focusing illusions, or are just plain unable to take in what it actually would be like to be disabled. While this, too, will always remain a possibility in particular cases, I want to proceed on the assumption that even thoughtful, fully informed people who grasp the condition of the disabled completely may nonetheless strongly value not being disabled. I propose to follow Dan Brock, who suggests that when it comes to the disabled and healthy points of view, “these are two irreducibly different evaluative standpoints, neither of which is correct for all evaluations of the quality of life with a given disability.” If we become disabled, it is not that we see that we were just wrong about how to evaluate being disabled, “[t]he correct conclusion is only that we have changed, not that we have corrected our earlier mistaken aims and values. The disabled person is in an epistemically privileged position with regard to facts about the experience of having his disability, but not with regard to how that condition should be evaluated.”²⁹

The question, though, is *why* we should have these divergent perspectives, and what grounds we could have for holding on to both. Once we adapt to our disability, the question is, why isn’t the correct conclusion simply this: “I was wrong—although I might prefer a cure and regret my misfortune, it’s nowhere near so bad as I thought, and so I and others shouldn’t have reasoned on the basis of that mistaken valuation of this state.”

Notice that the issue here is not fundamentally a moral one. Often it is said that the problem with QALYs is that they neglect the moral or social value of the disabled.³⁰ The healthy may value disabled years at

29. Dan Brock, “Justice and the ADA,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 12 (1995): 159–85, at p. 183.

30. Thus, writers like Frances Kamm argue that there are *moral* reasons not to use QALYs so as to disfavor those already disabled in making medical decisions, such as the allocation of transplant organs. The reasons adduced include, for example, that the life of the disabled person is as valuable to *himself* as the life of the healthy person is to himself, and that disabled people get *enough* of what is of value in living a life. My point is not that these are not weighty considerations, but that they do not address our conflicted attitudes about disability even from within the first person. See Frances Kamm, “Aggregation, Allocating Scarce Resources, and the Disabled,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 26 (2009): 148–97.

some fraction of healthy years, but even granting that such valuations would survive being accurately informed about the lives of the disabled, they should be set aside as immoral. But such views do not address the real issue, and are in that respect misleading. The basic problem arises from an inconsistency evident in the first person; the fundamental issue is that we are of two minds about disability, not that we are clear about our values but cannot decide about how to reconcile prudential and moral judgments.

To make this perfectly clear, consider how the two attitudes might feature in judgments about one's own life. Suppose that if I do nothing I face the gradual loss of my legs, perhaps because of a tropical disease that affects my nervous system. On the one hand, I might be willing to pay large amounts of money or incur significant risk of death for an operation that might save my legs, an attitude that may well fail to be extinguished by my doctor informing me that people with this condition eventually adapt quite well. These attitudes are at least consistent with the discounting embodied by QALYs. But on the other hand, I am also likely to exhibit a panoply of attitudes suggesting a full valuation of my disabled years, particularly if I come to believe that I will be pretty successful at adapting. Thus, I may well oppose medical policies that would disadvantage me in my future disabled state for the sake of benefiting me more while I am still in good health, as a QALY-based system could. For instance, I might push for the development of drugs that would sustain my disabled life even at the cost of losing out on other drugs that would benefit me before losing my legs, even if doing so would not make sense if the years added were discounted at the rate implied by what I would do to avoid becoming disabled in the first place. Or again, I am likely to reject even small increases in the risk of death after my disability for the sake of gains now; if I were fully persuaded of discounting, I should be willing to drink more, eat worse, and save less if doing so would make me better off now at a risk of dying later, since those future years would be discounted (just as we might do all those things if our life expectancy suddenly dropped precipitously).

The point is not that everyone actually has these two sets of attitudes, but that it seems perfectly comprehensible, *prima facie*, that they should. We would think nothing unusual about someone telling us that they were spending a fortune to avoid losing use of their legs, while also refusing to write off their future for the sake of greater present benefits.

So the deep reason to resist QALYs and other forms of discounting the lives of the disabled is not morality; it is that we—for reasons as yet unclear—seem able to take up a point of view from which a disabled life is worthwhile, even from our own healthy point of view, despite trying very hard to avoid such a life.

v

Suppose, then, that we grant that there is a real conflict in our attitudes toward disability, similar to the economic case, and that we resist the temptation simply to dismiss the judgments of either the healthy or the disabled, or to categorize the issue as one of morality versus prudence. A natural suggestion is to draw on the contrast between happiness and welfare: our aversion toward becoming disabled is related to the loss of welfare, not of happiness, just as we can justify pursuing growth-oriented policies on the basis of considerations of welfare. We might, for instance, say that we do not want to lose mobility because there is something objectively valuable about being able to walk on our own, participate in sports, and access remote mountain views. Accessing those goods is valuable in itself, not because of how it makes us feel. We could then explain the attitudes of the disabled by conceding that they were not much or any less happy than the healthy, and also leverage that point to explain why we seem to have conflicting attitudes toward discounting: when we focus on the objective goods lost, we are for discounting; when we focus on what the felt experience of disabled life is like, we are not.

However, this approach can at best be part of the solution. It just is not plausible that all of the goods that disabled people lose are objective welfare goods that are detachable from the happiness they bring. Recall the paradigm cases of such detachment, such as the value we place on connecting with reality, or having a long life, or attaining knowledge, or seeing our children succeed. What makes these cases persuasive is that two conditions are met: (a) it is fairly easy to see how one's happiness might not be affected by the loss of such goods; yet (b) we really do value such goods independent of the quality of our experiences, or of our judgments about how our life is going, or of our positive/negative emotional states. But now focus on disability. In extreme cases in which people are, say, in constant pain or unable to leave a hospital room, (b)

will be satisfied, but (a) will not be. So focus on more moderate cases, say people with reduced mobility who have to use a cane or are confined to a wheelchair, and who have adapted fairly well and are about as happy as their healthy peers. Here, (a) will be satisfied, but what about (b)? The crucial question is whether someone with reduced mobility is losing out on goods in a way that makes their lives less worthwhile just in virtue of the intrinsic value of those goods (independent of their effect on people's subjective well-being). A life of vast unrealized potential lived amid ignorance and illusion is less successful than the reverse, even when happiness is held constant; but is the same true of a life (or many years) lived without running, or walking, or playing basketball, or enjoying attendant goods like seeing the views from remote mountain trails?

In my view, there are not any compelling reasons to think that these goods matter or matter much apart from their hedonic effects. (I am also skeptical that our conflicted attitudes toward discounting can be explained by whether we focus our attention on welfare or happiness, but set that aside.) Take the perfectly contented disabled person who just does not care all that much that he cannot walk or play certain sports or access remote mountain views. "But would you not prefer a cure if one were available?" we might ask him. "Sure," he may shrug, "but in my everyday life I am just not hung up on it, and in the meantime I have a great family and rewarding work." (I am not claiming that all disabled people adapt this well, but many do.) It is just very hard to see what reasons we could give this person for thinking that he was *missing out*. There does not seem to be any reason to think that jogging or playing basketball or achieving certain mountain views are important in themselves, given that the subject is content to go without. Why would they be?

In more positive terms, these kinds of goods seem to be subject to norms of satisficing, not maximizing. We care about them (in nonhedonic terms) only insofar as we care about attaining *enough* of the goods in some broader category. Some areas of knowledge are like this. We may care a great deal that our children have the experience of learning an instrument or delving deeply into literature. But it would not be a tragedy if someone remained cheerfully ignorant of the clarinet or Faulkner because they spent their time mastering the piano and Kafka instead. (Nor would we think someone had failed to reach his potential just because he had not read Kafka.) What matters here is getting enough of

something in a certain category of good, not achieving the very narrow specific goods. (We can imagine a clarinetist insisting that her child absolutely *must* learn clarinet in particular, no matter that the child couldn't care less and already knows piano and violin. But what would we make of such a parent?) The same seems true of the disabled person. Maybe it is valuable to have experiences of moving one's body, getting about, seeing the world, experiencing the beauty of planet earth, but those broad goods can be realized in a wheelchair perfectly well, albeit only by trading remote mountain trail views for wheelchair-accessible views, basketball for murderball, and so on. But if someone insists that the welfare of the disabled will be impugned by failing to walk and play basketball *in particular*, this looks like a puzzling obsession with particulars (like the attitude of the pathological clarinetist).

So far I have been focusing on mobility, and pointing out that it is unconvincing to explain our aversion to adapted loss of mobility in terms of objective welfare. But what about other forms of disability that are more apt to cut off fundamental human goods, goods that are not just members of a broader class of which we can still get plenty? Think of the deaf. The experience of music is widely considered one of the greatest goods ("without music, life would be a mistake," says Nietzsche, not idiosyncratically). Now if deaf people were somehow cut off from discerning only the lower registers, we might employ the above strategy, and insist that while it is moderately limiting not to hear the bass, the cello, the timpani, and so on, there is still plenty left over to get as much out of music as the rest of us. But being incapable of engaging with music at all is different. As things stand, to run the earlier line we would need to say that music is valuable only as a member of some broader class, like experiencing art. ("As long as the deaf can experience sculpture and painting, there's no impact on their welfare.") But here we might have serious doubts; perhaps we really should say of someone unable to experience music (for some significant period, whether a whole life or many years) that their life went worse for them, whether they realized it or not. Since I have a different strategy to present, I do not need or want to settle this issue. I am happy to agree that in some instances there may be an important parallel between the income case and the disability case, namely, in those instances where the disability deprives us of goods that, on reflection, we think are objective losses even when they are hedonically inert. But,

as I argue later, this is not the whole story, and in very many cases of disability, such as limited mobility, it still looks as if we are often averse to conditions that do not implicate welfare.³¹

VI

To see the alternative approach, focus on how exactly the argument is supposed to go for thinking that we do not have much of a reason to prefer a life of full health to a life with a disability (which in turn calls into question discounting in the context of QALYs and trying hard to avoid being disabled). So far, that argument has been left vague. What's obvious is the conclusion and one premise:³²

P2. Life with a disability does not differ significantly from life with full health in respect to either our happiness or welfare.

C. We do not have significant reason to prefer a life with full health to a life with a disability.

As we noted earlier, most people have focused their energies on challenging P2, either by claiming that there is something objectively bad about disability, or else claiming that the happiness of the disabled is (always? inevitably?) irrational or otherwise defective. But another tack is to note that the major premise is clearly missing. The only obvious way to supply that premise is P1:

P1: If states of affairs *X* and *Y* do not differ significantly in respect to our happiness or welfare in them, then we do not have significant reason to prefer *X* over *Y*.

P2: Life with a disability does not differ significantly from life with full health in respect to either our happiness or welfare.

C: We do not have significant reason to prefer a life with full health to a life with a disability.

31. Even when we *do* face welfare losses, we may treat our disabled lives as just as worthwhile as our healthy lives, which is a puzzle in its own right. One explanation might be that we tend to underestimate the importance of objective, welfare-related considerations; another is supplied by the kind of considerations Kamm notes (note 30).

32. Disability advocates like Armundsen, "Disability," often present views containing something like this enthymeme.

On the approach I want to explore, we grant that P2 may be true, at least in a broad range of cases, but we go on to reject P1.

The basic problem with P1 is that it assumes a false picture of what matters to us, and thus what we have reason to do, according to which the only thing we care about when assessing states of affairs as they relate to us is how happy or how well off we will be.³³ On this picture, the particulars of *how* we come to reach a given level of happiness or welfare is entirely immaterial. The reason this picture can be tempting, of course, is that it seems obvious that what we really want, in the end, is to be happy/well off, in line with the Aristotelian tradition that everything we do (rationally) we do to promote our flourishing. Given this *summum bonum*, we then leap to the conclusion that different ways of realizing that aim are fungible; P1 seems to follow from thinking about our own lives in something like the way utilitarians think about the lives of others. But this is a mistake: different ways of attaining happiness are not all alike to us—not even when we are discussing our own welfare so that morality is off the table—for there are particular attachments to people and activities, *inter alia*, that are all-important to us.

The obvious cases involve love. I might be equally happy and equally well off married to various other women besides my wife, or raising children other than Kate and Brian, or accepting another country and culture as my own, but of course I am not indifferent as between those states of affairs and the status quo. On the contrary, I would do almost anything to avoid some of these changes, even if they would happen gradually and involve no unhappiness or lost welfare to myself or others, and even if there were no moral duty to resist such a change. Couples work to foster and perpetuate relationships that might otherwise run their course and be replaced with equally satisfying new relationships. I do not care merely about the part of the good life that stems from rearing children; I care about that satisfaction being associated with Kate and Brian in particular.³⁴ Many relationships are such that even if we knew we would be happier—even if we knew *everyone* would be happier—we would prefer to continue on with our particular attachments,

33. I am not here assuming that we only have reason to do things that matter to us; I am rather assuming that at least under some circumstances something mattering to us can generate reasons.

34. See Harry Frankfurt on the particularity of love in his “On Caring,” in *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. p. 166 and p. 169.

suboptimal though they may be from the point of view of happiness and welfare. As Jeff McMahan puts it, “There are . . . cases in which a person can *rationally* be glad that his life has gone the way it has, even when he recognizes that it would have been better for him if it had gone differently,” for instance, cases in which a wife comes to see that she would have been happier had she married someone else years ago, while nonetheless being fully in love with her husband.³⁵

The same goes for the goods lost with a disability, I want to suggest. I enjoy playing basketball and being able to hike up to the Hanakapia Falls. My life would not be less successful if I substituted other goods of the same type: their meaning to me at that level is not token-specific. But I have attachments to those particular activities in virtue of having engaged in them enthusiastically over the years, and having thus embedded them in my life in the form of interconnected memories, emotions, friendships, and so on. The proposal, then, is that we resist even adaptive disability because adaptation is no guard against particular losses. In effect, adaptation is no more an argument for assigning full value to life with a disability than it is to a life without my wife or children. Basketball and hiking are valuable to me in a way that resists substitution in the same way, if to a lesser degree, that other things and people we love cannot be substituted without loss with other members of the relevant class. We have reason to avoid changes that would destroy the things we care most about.

This account explains our conflicted attitudes. We are averse to disability for the reasons just described, but once we take up the point of view of ourselves postadaptation, we do not value *that* life any less. That point of view is analogous to contemplating remarrying and having new children after our first family’s death in a car crash. Again, we would do anything to avoid such a change, even quite apart from the agonies preceding adaptation, but once we got there we would not value that life any less. This yields the result that, for reasons that are evident even within the first-person, nonmoral point of view, we feel we have reason

35. Jeff McMahan, “Preventing the Existence of People with Disabilities,” in *Quality of Life*, ed. Wasserman, Bickenbach, and Wachbroit, esp. pp. 159–61. McMahan’s discussion is in several ways cognate with mine, though his target concerns parents bringing disabled children into existence. I follow McMahan and before him communitarian writers in using the language of “particular attachments.”

to avoid disability, without discounting our lives after we are injured (let alone discounting the lives of those already disabled).³⁶

There remains the question of whether we might not just announce that particular attachments are themselves welfare goods. Perhaps we should just say that losing your spouse makes your life go much worse, even if you adapt fairly quickly, and that losing your mobility similarly amounts to a welfare loss despite adaptation and the absence of any great loss in happiness. If so, we could lump together the stories about wealth and about disability, and let the moral of it all be that we must not neglect the role of welfare as opposed to happiness in our decision making. But recall that the intuitive idea behind welfare is that sometimes we assess lives (usually other people's lives, but sometimes our own) from a detached, third-person point of view, and ask ourselves such questions as "How well is his life going for him?" quite apart from how things may look to the agent from the inside. And if we take adaptation seriously, it is unclear how particular losses could be welfare losses. Someone who has suffered such a loss but recovered and now sees himself as flourishing does not seem to have a life that is going particularly badly, assuming the other kinds of goods we flagged earlier are to be had. It is true that some of his strongest preferences have been thwarted, but this too is of dubious significance. Ordinarily, we would count thwarted preferences toward an assessment of welfare when the agent later *regrets* those preferences not having been satisfied; the person who desperately wants to avoid moving to Oregon (the rain, the fog), but then comes to adore the place (the hills, the forests) once he is forced to, does not look like a candidate for downgraded welfare.³⁷ And our cases of adaptation are by construction cases where the result is not

36. But some questions remain, like why we should avoid prenatal injuries that leave people disabled in a way they adapt to. My account does not answer this question, but my goal is not, of course, to answer any and all questions related to disability.

37. For more on this point, see Elijah Milgram, "What Is the Use of Utility," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29 (2000): 113–36, at p. 116. Milgram attacks utilitarianism on the grounds closely related to those raised in this article, claiming that treadmill-type effects mean that we cannot do all that much to raise people's utility on a hedonistic reading. But, he continues, even on a preference-satisfaction reading, utilitarianism falters since we do not care much about our preferences once they are fulfilled, but rather see them replaced with still other preferences. These points are congenial in themselves, but it is unclear whether they will apply to modern versions of consequentialism. A contemporary consequentialist could easily appropriate the claims I have made about welfare.

one that realizes the sort of fears that were built into (or presupposed by) our *ex ante* preferences. So for these reasons, it does not seem to me plausible to gloss the preceding account of resistance to adaptive disability as a welfarist account.

Against this, we might wonder about the perspective of a benefactor who has our best interests at heart. This is another way of trying to get at welfare, and we might not think much of a benefactor who rejected an appeal for money for an operation to stave off a serious disability. I cannot go into the complex issues this objection raises, but notice that it is not clear either that benefactors ought to be focused exclusively on welfare rather than what the beneficiary himself cares about, or that, in the unusual case where the benefactor has overwhelming evidence that his beneficiary is completely mistaken about how disability will affect his welfare, he *should not* withhold aid. To the first point, for the objection to work, we would need to say that a benefactor should not aid a child desperate to learn piano, if the benefactor sees that mastering piano will eventually involve enough difficulties and disappointments that the child will not be any better off than if he had remained ignorant of music. It is obscure, I think, whether this is true, or whether a benefactor should not rather take up the child's point of view and his concerns.³⁸ On the second point, if we make it elaborately clear that someone really will not be any worse off at all by, say, his loss of mobility, it is also obscure whether a benefactor facing a choice between contributing to a college fund that would be vital to the beneficiary's life prospects and paying for an operation should choose the latter, even if that is what the beneficiary himself wants.

In sum, part of what is interesting here, I submit, is that we can apparently have very powerful reasons to act despite our actions making no difference to our welfare. This is at least as striking as the earlier, more familiar conclusion that we have reasons to act beyond our happiness. And together they yield the claim that contrary to a great deal of our everyday thinking about these matters, large tracts of our decision making should not be governed by considerations of either our happiness or our well-being more generally, even when we have only our own lives in view. That result is possible because welfare and happiness can

38. For more, see Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 134–35.

both come apart from the things we care about. There is sometimes a superficial reflex to cram what we care about back into either what makes us happy or welfare more generally, but I have argued that we should reject that impulse.

VII

Cases similar to that of disability have sometimes been thought to support part of a broadly Aristotelian picture of ethics, but I wish to conclude by urging the opposite. Joseph Raz, for instance, argues against a distinctive moral domain whose considerations are different in kind and in normative authority from self-interested considerations (which might leave us with a kind of standoff, as encapsulated in Sidgwick's "dualism of practical reason"). Instead, he suggests what he takes to be a more classical approach, according to which there are simply *reasons*, whose force is not related to any particular difference in domain or general provenance. The fact that we do not view substitutions within a given domain with indifference—Raz considers a dancer who resists becoming a director when that would leave him just as well off—is evidence that it is the particular reasons that matter, not the domain. And others have even claimed that our welfare is largely irrelevant to grounding decisions we make, since what we care about are the particular goods and bads at stake, not the fact that something will promote our welfare as such. Or again, it is said that we can make sense of *self-sacrifice* in self-directed terms, for example, when we give up leisure and fun for the sake of research projects that make our lives seem more worthwhile or interesting.³⁹ In all of these views, there is the thought that we should focus on particular reasons and the considerations that ground them rather than the categories they fall into, and that in turn is said (by some, not all) to support the Aristotelian picture which deemphasizes the sharp divide and possible conflict between the moral and nonmoral.

But the Aristotelian flipside of the blurring of moral and nonmoral is supposed to be that practical reasoning is fundamentally concerned

39. See, respectively, Joseph Raz, "The Central Conflict: Morality and Self-Interest," in *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 315–20; Scanlon, *What We Owe*, chap. 3; and (contesting Raz's view in part) R. Jay Wallace, "The Rightness of Acts and the Goodness of Lives," in *Reason and Value*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

with precisely welfare, or “human flourishing.” (This is the classical, monist alternative to Sidgwick’s dualism, though it is not a feature defended by Raz or the other writers cited.) And our reflections on wealth and disability, as well as the very claims just described, seem to show that this view is mistaken; a great deal of practical reasoning is directed toward things that have nothing at all to do with our flourishing. It is not just that the categorization does not matter much to us; it is that the range of our concerns is vastly broader than our welfare. And of course, other familiar cases buttress these claims. Causes and movements provide one set of additional examples, again connected to what we care about: religious people perpetuate their faith even in the face of evidence that a gradual fading away of their beliefs would result in an equally satisfying life. And then there is morality. Although many aspects of our moral lives can perhaps be subsumed under some eudaimonist heading, there lingers the suspicion that this agglomeration is at best incomplete. Perhaps making nice with my friends and neighbors is part of a broad strategy to lead a life I find worthwhile and fulfilling, but every now and then there is the sharp, dividing case—the grenade to be jumped on, local practices to denounce at the cost of exile. Aristotelians have their thoughts about such cases,⁴⁰ but as the number and variety of non-welfare-promoting activities proliferate—perpetuating love, retaining fundamental abilities, keeping faith, acts of pure altruism—one’s suspicions only grow. Thus, far from suggesting that we return to a broadly classical outlook on practical reasoning, reflection on wealth, disability, and structurally similar cases seems rather to point toward a fundamental defect in the classical picture, for it is not true that happiness, or our welfare, or human flourishing lies at the root of our practical reasoning.

Moralists have been scolded by Aristotelians and their friends for quite a while now for failing to see that there is more to life than morality, as a narrowly construed other-regarding practice; perhaps it is time that moralists and their friends take up scolding Aristotelians for ignoring that there is more to life than the broad concern for human flourishing.

40. For example, Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 223–329.