Value, Interest, and Well-Being

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In this article we consider and cast doubt on two doctrines given prominence and prestige by the utilitarian tradition in ethics. According to the interest theory of value, value is realized only in the advancement of people's interests. According to the well-being theory of interests, people's interests are advanced only in the augmentation of their well-being. We argue that it is possible to resist these doctrines without abandoning the value-humanist doctrine that the value of anything has to be explained in terms of its potential to contribute to human lives and their quality.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF HUMANISM

We have the classical utilitarians to thank for much genuine progress, or maybe we should say renewal, in moral philosophy. So often are they pilloried for their errors of overexuberance that we tend to forget that it was they who did most to restore the intellectual and cultural fortunes of value-humanism. According to value-humanism, the value of anything has to be explained in terms of its potential to contribute to human lives and their quality. Of course some say, as Bentham himself said, that even this doctrine is still too sectarian, and that in place of human lives we should put the lives of sentient beings, or some such broader category.[1] The apparent radicalism of this idea tends to blind us to the fact that value-humanism is already a radical doctrine, inconsistent with a great deal of the mysticism and superstition that passed for moral philosophy in the pre-utilitarian age. Value-humanism already makes a huge move by telling us that lives and their quality are ultimately all that matter. The question of whether the relevant class of lives extends beyond human lives is, philosophically speaking, relatively small beer (even though it is a matter of considerable moral importance). In this essay we will bracket the latter question. We will continue to speak of value-humanism, and focus on human lives, even

[1] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London, 1970), pp. 282–3n.

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though we might elsewhere prefer to follow Bentham in extending much the same ideas across a wider constituency of beings.

The utilitarians gave a certain shape to the value-humanist doctrine, and this is the shape in which it has had the greatest cultural influence. According to the utilitarians:

> Value is realized only in the advancement of people's interests (*the interest theory of value*);
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> people's interests are advanced only in the augmentation of their well-being (*the well-being theory of interests*); and
>
> people's well-being is augmented only by increasing their 'happiness', understood either in terms of positive experiences or in terms of satisfied desires (*the happiness theory of well-being*).

Much criticism of utilitarian ethics has been directed at the inadequacies of the final theory, the happiness theory of well-being.[2] Many critics have thought they were doing enough to overcome utilitarianism's vices by abandoning passive (experiential) accounts of well-being in favour of active accounts, and/or by abandoning subjective (desire-satisfaction) accounts in favour of objective accounts, and/or by abandoning monism about the constituents of well-being (either experiential or desire-satisfaction) in favour of pluralism. We do not doubt that the passivism, subjectivism and monism associated with the happiness theory of well-being are all of them major errors. But should we be satisfied with correcting these errors and thereby escaping from the happiness theory of well-being? Or are there also errors in the interest theory of value and the well-being theory of interests? If so, can either or both be abandoned without simultaneously abandoning value-humanism?

We think, and will argue here, that the value-humanist doctrine can be preserved while abandoning both the interest theory of value and the well-being theory of interests, and that both of these theories should indeed be abandoned. While (we will assume) everything is valuable only in virtue of its potential contribution to human lives and their quality (as value-humanism would have it), it does not follow that everything that brings value into the world does so by serving someone's interests (as the interest theory of value would have it), or that whatever serves someone's interests does so by improving their well-being (as the well-being theory of interests would have it).

[2] Although sometimes such criticisms are mistakenly thought to threaten the interest theory of value as well: see e.g. James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 37–8.

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THE INTEREST THEORY OF VALUE: CHALLENGE, DEFENCE, REFUTATION

The challenge

One can readily see two points at which a logical wedge might be driven between value-humanism and the interest theory of value, allowing the former to survive the abandonment of the latter. First, it might be thought that having a good life is not the same as having one's interests well served. Is it possible that what contributes to human lives and their quality need not do so by advancing the interests of those who lead the lives in question? Second, it might be thought that something turns on the word 'potential' in our formulation of value-humanism ('the value of anything has to be explained in terms of its *potential* to contribute to human lives and their quality'). Is it possible that, even if what contributes to human lives and their quality depends on what would advance the interests of those who lead those lives, some things of value do not actually make such a contribution but remain things of value because they have the potential to do so? This second possibility is the one that we will start by exploring and endorsing, and through it we will also come to embrace a version of the first.

One curiosity of identifying a contribution to value with a contribution to someone's interests we can put aside at the outset. It may be thought that whereas value is an essentially agent-neutral category interests are essentially agent-relative.[3] By the nature of value, in other words, everybody should be concerned with all value wherever that value may be found, whereas the concern we should have for interests must depend, by the very nature of interests, on exactly whose interests they are. The classical utilitarians famously denied the latter view of interests, and at the deepest level we think they were right to do so. Of course interests are always somebody's interests. But it does not follow that a given person's interests are only, or especially, that person's concern. This argument will therefore proceed on the footing that both value-humanism and the interest theory of value should be given agent-neutral readings.[4] Our thesis will be that even agent-neutrally the gap between them remains.

Where does this gap lie? Consider a real-life case that seems to pose problems for the interest theory of value. James Joyce wrote a famously obscure novel entitled *Finnegans Wake*. Instead of doing that he might

[3] The terminology is from Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), p. 143, renaming a distinction first drawn systematically by Thomas Nagel in *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 90–1.

[4] In other words our arguments here will not echo the 'separateness of persons' critique of utilitarianism made famous by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 19–24.

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have written a follow-up to his previous success, and called it *A Portrait of the Artist as an Older Man*. No doubt *Finnegans Wake* has been a continuing source of curiosity to scholars and members of a literary elite. Perhaps it also served Joyce's own interests as a novelist. But all of this service to interests might still seem to add up to much less than the interests of the very many serious but non-specialist readers who would have taken pleasure in seeing the young man grow older in *Portrait 2*. Could Joyce conceivably have been justified in devoting his energies to *Finnegans Wake*? In keeping with our agent-neutralist conceptualization of the issue, we will assume that the answer can be yes only if writing *Finnegans Wake* brought no less value into the world than the writing of *Portrait 2* would have done.[5] Is there a way of explaining how this could be so consistently with the interest theory of value?

The defences

Here are four attempts at defending Joyce's writing of *Finnegans Wake* consistently with the interest theory of value.

1. It is consistent with the interest theory of value to switch attention from the interests actually served by the two books to the interests that were, at the time of writing, reasonably expected to be served. When Joyce contemplated the writing of *Finnegans Wake* there was a real possibility that writing of this kind would constitute the future of the novel and so would serve the interests of future writers and readers more or at any rate no less than *Portrait 2*. As it happens, that turned out not to be the case. So perhaps Joyce made a mistake, from the *ex post* perspective, in not writing *Portrait 2*, for to have done so would have better served human interests as things turned out. He was not vindicated, some might say, in writing *Finnegans Wake*. Yet he was still justified in writing *Finnegans Wake*. Justification, on this view, requires assessment from the *ex ante* perspective, and from the *ex ante* perspective the experimental novel had a more rosy future than it turned out to have. Still the value of what Joyce did depends entirely on interests, as the interest theory of value says. *Ex ante* value (=justification) depends on reasonably expected service to interests; *ex post* value (=vindication) depends on actual service to interests.

[5] For our (qualified) defence of this agent-neutralist view of the relationship between justification and value, see Gardner and Macklem, 'Reasons', *The Oxford Handbook of Jurisprudence and Philosophy of Law*, ed. Jules Coleman and Scott Shapiro (Oxford, 2002).

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2. Even though *Finnegans Wake*, taken on its own, serves few interests, a wide variety of writings is needed for a vibrant literary scene, so that taken in conjunction with other like works *Finnegans Wake* pulls its weight as a contribution to interests. This is just another way of saying that appearances were deceptive in the way that we set up the difficulty. We neglected the fact that people have interests jointly as well as severally. Everyone, whether a reader of novels or not, has an interest in the flourishing of public culture. *Finnegans Wake* does more for this public interest even as it does less for the interests of novel readers as such. Because this public interest in a flourishing public culture is diffuse its importance is apt to be underestimated. Hence it seems at first sight that *Finnegans Wake* serves fewer or lesser interests than it really serves. With this illusion cleared out of the way its service to interest does explain its value. The interest theory of value stands unchallenged.
3. Perhaps what serves interests is not exactly *Finnegans Wake* itself, but rather some rule of thumb for writers which authorized Joyce to write *Finnegans Wake*. The rule in question says something like 'follow your artistic instincts' or 'always push at the boundaries of the medium'. Actually it doesn't much matter what the rule says, so far as we are concerned. What matters is that if it is a sound rule then the following of it by writers yields more valuable writing rather than less. Naturally there will be exceptions. Books will sometimes be written that, apart from the rule, should not have been written. But all sound rules of thumb are like this. They exist and should be followed because they improve the success rate, not because they guarantee success. In this you may hear echoes of both proposal 1 and proposal 2 above. Like proposal 1 this one focuses our attention on the *ex ante* likelihood of success. Like proposal 2 it focuses attention on the writing of books more generally, not just the writing of *Finnegans Wake*. But this proposal differs from 1 in holding that the justifying value of what we do is the actual, not the expected, value. It is merely that the following of a rule increases the *ex ante* likelihood of such actual value being created. And this proposal differs from 2 in conceding that *Finnegans Wake* itself may *not* pull its weight as a contribution to value. Rather it is the rule under which *Finnegans Wake* was written that pulls its weight as a contribution to value. All of this is, however, perfectly consistent with the thesis that the only value that bears on the writing of *Finnegans Wake* is the value that is already recognized by the interest theory of value. Writing by the sound rules of writing is what, on the whole, serves people's interests.

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4. According to some believers in the interest theory of value, there is a lexical ranking of types of interests, which requires that the more highbrow interests be satisfied first, or count for more. Thus in spite of the appearance that *Finnegans Wake* serves fewer interests than *Portrait 2* and serves them to a lesser extent, those interests are of a more weighty or otherwise prioritized type. The scales of value are pre-configured in their favour. A closely related proposal, to which we will not give separate attention, is that the two types of interests are not lexically ranked but incommensurable. If the interests involved are incommensurable, Joyce served value optimally whether he wrote *Finnegans Wake* or *Portrait 2*. Neither option is better than the other because neither type of interest is more weighty. If the types of interests involved are lexically ranked, on the other hand, Joyce served value optimally only if he wrote the book that did maximal service to interests, taking account not only of the number of interests served and the extent to which they are served, but also of the fact that some of those interests are highbrow interests and hence enjoy an extra weighting or priority. Either way, the value of what Joyce did is still to be understood purely in terms of interests served. Incommensurability of value as between the two books means incommensurability of interests served; lexical ranking of value, likewise, means lexical ranking of interests.

The refutations

The first two of these explanations fail. Proposals 3 and 4 succeed. But proposal 3 jettisons an appealing thought that is preserved in 4. And 4 turns out, on closer inspection, to undermine rather than to sustain the interest theory of value.

1. The first proposal underestimates what is required for justification.[6] When the value of some pursuit falls short of its reasonably expected value, such that the pursuit was not after all optimal, the effect is to excuse it, not justify it. Would we be satisfied to learn that Joyce was merely excused in writing *Finnegans Wake*? Perhaps. But even if we bracket that element of doubt, proposal 1 clearly cuts the wrong way in Joyce's case. The existence of expected interests does not strengthen the case for writing *Finnegans Wake*, because in so far as expectations varied between the two books they surely varied in favour

[6] See John Gardner 'Justifications and Reasons', *Harm and Culpability*, ed. A. P. Simester and A. T. H. Smith (Oxford, 1996).

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of *Portrait 2*. The *Portrait* idiom was a tried and tested one, so that *ex ante Portrait 2* was more likely to serve interests than *Finnegans Wake*. So moving to the *ex ante* framework gets defenders of the interest theory nowhere. If the disparity between the interests served by *Finnegans Wake* and those that would have been served by *Portrait 2* is great, the disparity of reasonable expectations concerning the interests they would serve is surely even greater.

2. The second explanation, that the greater value of *Finnegans Wake* is reflected in its service of the wider public interest, fails to take account of the fact that the writing of *Portrait 2* would also have served the wider public interest. Assume that *Finnegans Wake*, by reason of its avant-garde character, served the public interest in a vibrant literary scene, that the repercussions of its creation were felt by later generations of writers and reflected in their work. These are niche interests, as much so as the several, private interests of the novel's immediate readers. *Portrait 2* would also have served the public interest, the public interest in a literate population, for it would have attracted a relatively broad readership, on a par with that enjoyed by its predecessor. That interest is not a highbrow or special interest, like the interest served by *Finnegans Wake*, but it is an interest of great amplitude, and so simply emphasizes the gap between the limited interests served by *Finnegans Wake* and the book's value.
3. The third explanation, it seems to us, does rise to the challenge. It shows how Joyce could have been justified in writing *Finnegans Wake*. But it does so at the price of placing the value that Joyce served somewhere other than in *Finnegans Wake* itself. *Finnegans Wake* as an object might as well be as deficient in value as, according to the interest theory of value, it seems; what was valuable was Joyce's confoming to a sound rule in writing it. We do not deny that this is a possible conclusion. What we wonder is whether it is an appealing one. It suggests that those who invest great energy in understanding and interpreting *Finnegans Wake* are unjustified, even though Joyce was not unjustified in writing it. Why? Because the book does not deserve this investment. It lacks the value (does not serve the interests) that its small band of enthusiastic readers and students take it to have (serve). One may be willing to concede that they are unjustified, just as one might have been willing to concede that Joyce was unjustified in writing the book had one not found the rule that justified his doing so. Alternatively one may conclude that the book's small band of enthusiastic readers and students themselves conform to a further rule that justifies them in

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investing time and energy in a book of little value. Again the question is not: Could this rule-based argument succeed as a way of justifying engagement with *Finnegans Wake*? Clearly it could. The question is: How credible does this rule-based argument seem as a way of justifying anyone's engagement with *Finnegans Wake*? For all it can justify is engaging with the work on the footing that it has a value (serves interests) which, *ex hypothesi*, it lacks (does not serve).

4. The fourth proposal makes a case for *Finnegans Wake* that avoids the pitfall of the previous one. It restores the link between the justification for writing or reading *Finnegans Wake* and the value of *Finnegans Wake* as a novel. But the exact case that it makes is opaque as it stands. Leave aside the incommensurability variant for a moment, and think about the lexical priority variant. What would it mean for an interest to count for more because of its highbrow quality? It must mean that there is some measure of quality in interests that is independent of the mere fact that they are interests. Although superficially an implementation of the interest theory of value,[7] at a deeper level this explanation poses a threat to it. The threat is that there must be non-interest values in terms of which interests are ranked. There must be something beyond interests that counts in the assessment of value.[8] Could this extra something reside in further interests? Could one overcome the threat to the interest theory by arguing that interests are ranked only by their contribution to further interests? Could it be that highbrow interests count for more because behind the scenes they contribute more or in a more prolonged way to other interests? The effect of this would be to collapse this fourth proposal into the second one that we already rejected. But the fourth proposal is very different from the second. It relies on some interests being qualitatively different from others, and counted for more, without that being attributable to some further quantum of interests for which they stand as proxy. It is genuinely a matter of quality not quantity. So there is no avoiding the thesis that this final proposal conceals a further kind of value other than the value of serving interests.

[7] J. S. Mill made the most famous attempt to reconcile the fourth explanation with the interest theory of value as well as the happiness theory of well-being: see his *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford, 1998), pp. 55–9.

[8] Here we echo G. E. Moore's famous critique of Mill in *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1903), pp. 77–9. But Moore used the line of argument only against Mill's version of the happiness theory of well-being, and apparently failed to see that the same line of argument also undermines the interest theory of value (which he may have endorsed: see his remarks on utilitarianism at p. 106).

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> If it is a good proposal, then far from supporting the interest theory of value it helps to refute the interest theory. The same can be said for the incommensurability variant of the proposal. What would explain an incommensurability of interests except an incommensurability of the things that they are interests *in*? *Portrait 2* would have been more vivid or more absorbing, say, while *Finnegans Wake* is more fecund or more intriguing. Inasmuch as these qualities serve different interests, this is because they are different qualities, i.e. evaluatively different quite apart from the interests that they serve. So once again there is no avoiding the thesis that proposal 4 conceals a further kind of value other than the value of serving interests.

RECONCILING THE REFUTATIONS WITH HUMANISM

The above discussion is not fatal to the interest theory of value. All we can conclude is this: if Joyce was justified in writing *Finnegans Wake*, and if the value of *Finnegans Wake* itself is central to that justification, then not all value is the value of serving interests. This is indeed the thesis we embrace. Can this thesis be embraced without abandoning the humanist doctrine, according to which the value of anything has to be explained in terms of its potential to contribute to human lives and their quality? The word 'potential' makes one think of probabilities. It makes one think of Joyce mulling over the likely impact of what he writes. It thus returns one's thoughts to the second explanation that we outlined and rejected above. But there is also another and more promising way to read the word 'potential'. It may be read to mean 'ability in principle'. Something has the ability in principle to contribute to human life or its quality if it is conceivable (albeit not necessarily probable) that people would be better off for having it, that it would serve their interests. The reason why people's interests are not necessarily served by what could conceivably serve their interests as people is that their interests are capped according to their personal capacities.

A person has an interest in some object or pursuit if and only if (i) the object or pursuit is valuable, and (ii) she has the capacity to participate in that value. If Joyce were to have approached the question of what to write entirely in terms of the interest theory of value his decision would have been at the mercy of other people's limitations, thanks to condition (ii). However the value of what he did is not at the mercy of people's limitations. The value of what he did is the very thing that people's limitations limit their participation in. Naturally this value can in turn be affected by the interests of actual people. To participate in the value of charity, for example, is to participate in a value that is shaped by

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the interests of others, in the sense that there is nothing charitable in giving people valuable things the value of which they lack the capacity to participate in.[9] But ultimately the category of value mentioned in (i) is not comprehensively at the mercy of people's personal incapacities in this way. Some of this value is value that transcends incapacity and hence is not shaped by anyone's interests. Or rather it is not shaped by anyone's actual interests. It is a corollary of its being valuable that one can conceive of someone having an interest in it. One could conceive of somebody with the capacity to participate in it even if there is, as things stand, no such somebody.

The value of *Finnegans Wake*, in so far as it exceeds the sum of actual interests that *Finnegans Wake* serves, lies in its potential to serve people's interests, if only their personal limitations (illiteracy, philistinism, parochialism, conventionality, timidity) were overcome. Possibly *Finnegans Wake* has some realistic prospect of helping to overcome some of those limitations. Possibly some of those whose attention will likely be drawn to it have the further, second-order capacity to overcome their temporarily limited capacity to understand and appreciate it. That too forms part of the value of *Finnegans Wake*. But that, as far as it goes, remains an interest-based value. It is the value reflecting people's interest in acquiring greater sophistication, and in the process expanding their horizons and their (other) interests. The value that we have in mind goes beyond this. It is the value that makes it intelligible for people to regard the expansion of their interests as a worthwhile objective. It is the kind of (i) – the kind of valuable pursuit – the existence of which would make it rational to regret the inhibitions imposed on one's progress by (ii) – by the limits of one's capacities.

The classical utilitarians are often thought of as optimists who regarded everything as malleable or plastic in the name of human progress. Old ideas of sanctity and unthinkability were to be brushed aside. Everything was to be open to reconsideration in the cold light of value. But in one dimension the utilitarians failed to see how cold the light of value really is. By focusing all evaluative attention on the service of interests they neglected the extent to which value calls upon us to *change* those interests. Built into this idea is still the humanist doctrine that value speaks to us as people. And naturally value speaks to us as the people we are, complete with our limitations (including our second-order limitations that obstruct us in the overcoming of our first-order limitations). But value also speaks to us as the people we

[9] The prevalence of this error among do-gooders has helped to give charity an undeservedly bad reputation. We explore one major cause of the do-gooders' error in our 'Reasons', p. 458.

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could be, meaning the people we could be *in principle* rather than the people we could be in practice. So on some occasions we have cause not only to regret the obstacles that the world puts in our way, given the interests we have, but also to regret that those and only those are our interests. It gives us cause to regret even our second-order limitations. What a pity that none of us, or so few of us, can ever really get to the bottom of *Finnegans Wake*.

None of this implies that everyone should devote their lives to the cultivation of sophisticated tastes, to stretching themselves to the limits of conceivable human endeavour, or to any other kind of self-perfection. The pursuit of such things is invariably subject to two kinds of rational restrictions. In the first place, purely expressive endeavour aside, one has no reason to try to do that which one will not succeed in doing, even where one has every reason to succeed in doing it.[10] Thus those of us who lack the capacity to improve our capacity to appreciate *Finnegans Wake* are not serving value but wasting it if we spend our lives struggling with the book to no avail. Likewise those who set out vainly to write a work of similar quality. Our pulling off the endeavour would be of considerable value. But the endeavour itself has no value derived from the value our pulling it off would have, because in fact we will not pull it off.

In the second place, even those of us who might come to be able to engage successfully with *Finnegans Wake* (or similarly demanding objects and pursuits) are not rationally condemned to spending our lives so engaged. Such engagement has its costs in other dimensions of life. Some of these are contingent, for example, that work improving oneself is not highly paid. Others are constitutive, for example, that one cannot come to appreciate literary genius without becoming all too aware of the deficiencies of what falls short of that. Other rather good books inevitably lose their lustre for someone who knows how much better still they might have been. These losses should not be underestimated. They cannot be dismissed as irrational attachments to what one has been and what one has now left behind in favour of a greater excellence. It is always better to participate in a greater excellence, but in doing so one loses access to a lesser excellence, and that is the loss of something valuable. Even choices involving commensurable values can involve real loss. Of course, pursuit of a lesser excellence cannot justify refusal of a greater. But loss of access to a lesser excellence also entails loss of access to all the other aspects of life that the lesser excellence makes possible, and by that route many incommensurably good things are

[10] Discussed further in John Gardner, 'Obligations and Outcomes in the Law of Torts', *Relating to Responsibility,* ed. Peter Cane and John Gardner (Oxford, 2002), and in T. Macklem, *Beyond Comparison* (Cambridge, 2003).

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also lost. Taking account of all the further incommensurable values that lower-brow interests leave on the table it may be that one should hesitate to become highbrow, and so pause before picking up *Finnegans Wake*.

THE WELL-BEING THEORY OF INTERESTS

On the picture that we have just presented what is valuable is valuable because of the way in which it figures in our lives as something in which we could in principle have an interest. Whatever is valuable can in principle make human lives go better. *Finnegans Wake* is valuable because there is a possible human being who can live up to its demands. By the same token, however, there are many of us who cannot but fail to live up to its demands. It would be in our interests to read such demanding works if we had the capacity to participate in their value, but since we lack that capacity it is not in our interests.

Here we are explaining what counts as an interest in the broadest sense. Serving our interests is what brings value to our lives, given our limitations, and in that sense and to that extent it makes our lives go better. But serving our interests doesn't necessarily make our lives into better ones *to live*. Many people who talk about people's 'interests' (and likewise their 'quality of life', 'advantages', what makes them 'well off', etc.) are concerned with a narrower class of interests that contribute specifically to the liveability of a life.[11] These are our *well-being* interests. A person has a well-being interest in an object or pursuit if and only if (i) the object or pursuit is valuable; (ii) she has the capacity to participate in that value; and (iii) her personal goals are advanced by that participation. Condition (iii) makes this category narrower than the category of interests we have been discussing up to now. A common mistake – the one that yields 'subjective' (desire-satisfaction) versions of utilitarianism – is to focus so hard on condition (iii) that one overlooks conditions (i) and (ii), or treats them as tautologically satisfied whenever condition (iii) is satisfied.[12] So long as someone's personal goals (her so-called 'desires') are satisfied, on such a view, her well-being is automatically improved whether or not the satisfaction involves any participation with (other) value on her part. But this view

[11] This narrower idea of an interest is the one implicated, for example, in the 'interest theory of rights' discussed by D. N. MacCormick in 'Rights in Legislation', *Law, Morality, and Society: Essays in Honour of H. L. A. Hart*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and J. Raz (Oxford, 1977).

[12] Consider e.g. L. W. Sumner, 'Welfare, Preference and Rationality', *Value, Welfare and Morality*, ed. R. G. Frey and Christopher Morris (Cambridge, 1993). An opponent of desire-satisfaction utilitarianism, Sumner nevertheless falls into the same trap as his enemies by reading authors who embrace (i)+(ii)+(iii) accounts of well-being as embracing (iii)-only accounts.

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neglects what it is that makes personal goals important to begin with, namely the pursuit of value.

The importance of personal goals comes from the necessary constraints of a single life as a vehicle for pursuing value. Life is a progress of finite duration, necessarily conducted in a particular spatio-temporal location. We have only one life to live, and we are bound to live it at a particular time, and in particular places. That being the case, we can only pursue and realize as much value as we have time and space to pursue and realize. Even where we have a highly developed capacity to pursue a certain value it does not follow that we have space in our lives to exercise this capacity, given all the other values that compete for our attention and the pursuit of which lies more or less within our powers. Gauguin had, by any standards, a highly developed capacity to pursue the art of painting. But he discovered that he could not pursue both that and his family life without the sacrifice of one or the other. What is more, for all we know he may have had many other capacities to pursue and realize value, capacities that he was bound to neglect if he was to be an artist at all, capacities for law, or philosophy, or golf. For all we know, Gauguin could have been a championship golfer instead of a great painter; for all we know Tiger Woods could have been a great painter instead of a championship golfer. But neither could have excelled, in one life, both to the extent of Gauguin's excellence in painting and Tiger Woods' excellence in golf. So manufacturing a beautiful set of golf clubs for the fourteen-year-old Gauguin would surely have brought value into the world (they were, after all, beautiful golf clubs) but would not have been in Gauguin's interests unless Gauguin had the capacity to excel at golf, and further, would not have served Gauguin's well-being interests unless he not only had the capacity to excel at golf but was also to make the development of that capacity one of his personal goals. If the development of his extraordinary talent as a painter was already his goal, so that there was to be little time left in his life for serious golf, then the manufacture of the golf clubs would have been in his interests in the broad sense, but would not have served his well-being.

The operative idea here is the idea of 'little time left in his life'. The fact that our lives are finite means that we have to select among the many valuable things that we have the capacity to pursue. Sometimes this selection involves confronting alternatives as options, and choosing from among them. Sometimes, by contrast, we are compelled. In between lie the cases in which we drift into one set of pursuits, or are eased into them by circumstance (maybe by the implications of our choices in respect of other things), and then go on to think of those pursuits as our own. Sometimes, like Gauguin, we will have a capacity to excel in one pursuit, such that if we excel as we are capable of excelling there will be no room for anything else in our lives. More

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often, there will be space in our lives for a mixture of pursuits, but rarely for all the pursuits that we are capable of. Only those with rather limited capacities are fortunate enough (if we can call it being fortunate) to be able to exercise them all, and even they need to allocate some value to some phases of their lives, or parts of their day. Even they, in other words, need to organize the value in their life into goals, however modest and short-term those goals may be.

The finitude of life not only makes it necessary to have goals but to shape those goals to fit a life. The pull of each value being infinite, some people are brought up against the limits of their capacities, beyond which point they have no more service to that value to give. Further pursuit by such people of the value in question would be at least wasteful, possibly counter-productive. Other people are brought up against the limits of their lives, in the sense that a life can only be lived in finite places and times. Gauguin was bound to live in France, Tahiti or the Marquesas, but not all at once; he was bound to live one life, not more, with all that implies, namely a life of days or nights, not both, a life beginning in the nineteenth century and ending in the twentieth century, not elsewhere. These limits shape the goals that even the most talented can make their own. Regarding some goals incomplete success will be no success at all, so that such goals will be ruled out if they take more than a life to complete. Even with goals the partial completion of which would still count as some success we have to think of the risk of exhaustion, burn-out and the other consequences of over-ambition relative to the frame of a life. It is entirely possible to consume oneself with one's talent, perhaps not as often as some romantics would have us believe, but still often enough. Notice that in speaking of consuming oneself we do not mean that one sacrifices one's own well-being, though as we shall see in a moment that may also be true. Rather the point is that in consuming oneself one does not optimally serve the value in whose service one has been consumed. So the case for having a life that is shaped around goals that are realistic relative to the finitude of a life is a case that is based on the demands of value itself. The pull of value itself is infinite, but by endeavouring to pursue it infinitely one may well serve it less.

THE ADDITIONAL VALUE OF WELL-BEING

The finitude of life denies us the possibility of pursuing all our interests, let alone all value. A life devoted to the pursuit of all value, or even all the value that we are capable of pursuing, is doomed to failure. This is what lends positive value to our having goals, and hence, through our goals, to the pursuit of whatever range of value is embraced within our goals. This means that goals have the function of narrowing our

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horizons. When one notices this, it may lead one to overlook another, related function that goals have. This is the function of *giving* us horizons. It is in the nature of a goal that there should in principle be a point at which it is fulfilled or satisfied. Goals are satiable. However, the values that structure the goals are all by their nature insatiable. There is in principle no limit to the amount of great literature still to be written or read. And yet there must in principle be a point at which any one writer or reader fulfils her objectives in respect of literature and sets herself a new or revised goal. Some goals are, of course, extremely ambitious, and people reach the end of their lives disappointed that those goals remain unfulfilled. But even in this disappointment we can see that built into the idea of a goal is the idea of there being a point at which it is indeed fulfilled.[13]

This contrast between the insatiability of value and the satiability of the goals that structure our well-being helps us to pinpoint one source of the familiar experience of conflict between value and well-being. It begins to explain how value can pull us towards doing more than would serve our well-being, and hence how value, even in our own lives, can pose a threat to our well-being. The most familiar examples of this are those discussed by philosophers under the heading of 'the demandingness of morality'.[14] Under this heading we are presented with the special problem of values that are not only insatiable but categorical. The force that they exert over us *qua* categorical is unaffected by the extent to which they figure or do not figure in our goals. Thus it is no answer to the rational pressure exerted by these values to say: you're not the value for me. Combined with insatiability this feature can make moral demands seem oppressive for those who have conflicting goals. This can lead us to forget that these same moral demands also pose problems for those who have consonant goals, or even for those who make it their goal to do the morally right thing. Even for these people the demanding consequences of the insatiability of values remain, though the distracting consequences of their categorical force are obviated (since the categorical force of categorical values imposes no extra demands on those whose goals are consonant with those values anyway).[15]

[13] Hence Joseph Raz's bold claim in *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, 1986), p. 241, that '[t]he ideals at the foundation of morality and politics are all satiable'. At this point Raz is thinking of ideals for living, or well-being ideals.

[14] The best discussion is in Samuel Scheffler's *Human Morality* (Oxford, 1992).

[15] The case of morality is complicated so far as the relationship between value and well-being is concerned because moral value depends on service to the well-being of others. This means that the pursuit of moral value is in one respect satiable and in another respect insatiable. It is satiable in that, regarding each person whose well-being one might serve, there comes a point at which the further addition of value to that person's

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The problem of the tension between insatiable values and satiable goals is not restricted to the moral domain, as one might sometimes suppose from the narrow focus of the debates about the demandingness of morality. Aesthetic and intellectual values, for example, are no less insatiable, and so expect of us more than our lives can in principle give. Even a life that contains no disappointments relative to the horizons that it has set itself – a life in which all goals are successfully realized – cannot but yield a taste of disappointment that it could not have transcended those goals, and hence continued to feed the insatiable appetite of value. This gives rise to the enduring appeal of the quest for immortality, an immortality which provides the opportunity to keep on with the pursuit of value indefinitely. That appeal is, of course, in one respect chimerical, for a life without mortality is not recognizable as a life in the same sense that those who long for it have in mind. They forget that a life as they live it is structured by goals, and that the principal case for having goals is the finitude of life. An infinite life lacks the principal case for being organized around goals. It is thus not an eternal continuation of life as we know it, but something different altogether. That it has appeal as a vehicle for value is undeniable. What it lacks is appeal as a life because it is not a life. Nobody is living it. The category of well-being does not apply to it.[16]

No doubt this view of value – according to which it outstrips its contribution to well-being and may even detract from well-being – strikes many as counter-intuitive. It seems to alienate us from value, make value somehow less human, like an unyielding God.[17] Much distrust of the idea that values are objective rests ultimately on a fear of such alienation. But this fear is misguided. True, by value-humanism, the value of anything lies in its actual or potential contribution to human interests. But the way that value serves human interests, and in particular human well-being, is by giving us something to live for – things to have as our goals – and something to live up to – standards by which even our capacities can be judged. As far as can be imagined there is always more value that could be pursued, more goals to acquire, more

life no longer improves his or her well-being. He or she does not have the capacity to participate in the value or it does not help her reach her goals. The pursuit of moral value is insatiable, on the other hand, in that there is an unlimited number of people (including potential people) whose well-being one might be improving. Of the two features the latter is the more important for our purposes, because it is the feature that moral value inherits from the very nature of value. Thanks to this feature there is always more that one could, in principle, be doing as a moral agent, in the same way that as a participant in literature there is always more that one could be writing or reading.

[16] For a closely related (but not identical) point about finitude, see T. Macklem, 'Faith as a Secular Value', *McGill Law Journal* 45 (2000), p. 34.

[17] The theme of Peter Railton's 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984).

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capacities to develop. It does not follow that a worthwhile life is always one of striving, competing, or rising to fresh challenges. If one plays the piano beautifully it is no bad reflection on the quality of one's life that one could conceivably play it still better. The pity is only that one cannot do more of it, and further that one cannot do the other good things with which one's beautiful piano-playing conflicts, given the finitude of life. One may make it one's goal always to aim higher where piano-playing is concerned, and that is *ceteris paribus* rational, assuming that one has the talent, because there is indeed always more value out there to pursue. And it can even be rational to aim higher than one's talent, if one might thereby bring one's talent to a higher level. But barring the exceptional moral case in which absolutely top-flight piano-playing is a categorical demand (e.g. because one's orchestra is relying on one's exceptional talent to save it from oblivion) one is entitled to set one's sights lower, by which we mean at any level of proficiency whereby one will have access to any of the goods of piano-playing. After all, one may have other valuable fish to fry: a hillside to explore, nine holes of golf to play, Pacific Islands to visit, *A Portrait of the Artist* to finish reading.

HUMANITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

We just drew attention to what we could call the challenge model of human well-being.[18] According to this model one's life gets richer, and one accordingly gets better off, the further one pursues a certain value and stretches one's capacity to participate in it. The paradigm of a life lived on the challenge model is the life of dedication to excellence in an ambitious pursuit, sailing solo around the world, unlocking the secret of Fermat's last theorem, finding a cure for AIDS. We think, as we have said, that well-being might be found this way, but might be found in other ways as well. Other critics go further, and say that the challenge model is inimical to human well-being. They venture an incompatible and hence rival model, which favours stretching of a different kind. Life becomes richer, and hence one is better off, the wider the range of values in which one participates. They celebrate exposure to and participation in many ways of life, and hence the many different goals that structure those ways of life, and hence the many values that are embodied in those goals. One cannot call oneself a philosopher unless one knows Eastern as well as Western philosophy. No section in the record store is more important than the world music section. One is no food lover unless one eats Ethiopian food as well as Korean. The model is not necessarily relativistic, although it gives succour to relativists. It

[18] A slightly toned-down version of the model is embraced by Ronald Dworkin in *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), pp. 253–4.

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is consistent with a view according to which there is bad philosophy as well as good, muzak as well as music, unsuccessful as well as successful cuisine. It is compatible, in other words, with a proper grasp of the relation between well-being and value. The point is only that whatever value there is comes in many different flavours, and one is better off the wider the range of those flavours one has tasted in one's life, either in parallel or in series. This we could call the broad horizons model of well-being. So far as engagement with value is concerned, it is no less selective than the challenge model.

It is a mistake to think that one can collect value without paying a price in terms of value itself. An engagement with value as a value tourist is necessarily an engagement with different value than one would enjoy as a value resident (whether one who lives life as a challenge or not). Nevertheless, the broad horizons model has real attractions. Prudentially, to the extent that one participates in the modern world of high mobility and rapid social change, one has a better prospect of living well oneself if one can negotiate the diverse goals of others. But this prudential point also reveals a moral one, which transcends the boundaries of the modern world. One is better fitted for certain roles that require engagement with the goals of others the more one is acquainted with, and hence sensitive to, the full range of values that are embodied in those goals. One may think in the first instance of the roles that used to be known as the humane professions: teacher, doctor, parish priest, civil servant, lawyer (on one, now rather old-fashioned conception of that role). These roles, and hence the well-being of those who fill them, have an internal reference to the well-being of others. Nowadays the list might look a bit different: aid workers, social workers, psychotherapists, and still, one hopes, teachers and doctors. What is more, the list today is tailored to an even broader range of horizons, thanks to our increased contact with other ways of life, and is also arguably made longer, since more roles are wrapped up with more other people in ways that do not merely affect the prudential but also the moral. Arguably success in more roles becomes bound up with one's contribution to the success of others. Be that as it may, even occupying these roles under the heading of the challenge model – that is to say, ambitiously – requires that one also occupy them under the heading of the broad horizons model, for that is how one meets the challenge of success in these roles.

But it is a mistake to think that all roles fit the humane model. The pursuit of value is not always and only the pursuit of goals that integrally involve the well-being of others. Success in mathematics or astronomy represents the contrasting class of case. It does not require and may even be inhibited by engagement with the goals of others. Possibly, the less interest the astronomer takes in family or friends

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the better the astronomer. To say this is not to force the astronomer back into the challenge model. We are not suggesting that the only good astronomer is the one who sells his soul to the discovery of a new planet. Success as an astronomer is compatible with moderation, and hence compatible with humane extra-curricular pursuits, but it does not require it. Still less does it integrally require engagement with the humane.

What this shows is that even when we are thinking about value in so far as it contributes to well-being, it is a mistake to search for one model of a life that is good to live, one way of engaging with value, the way that has exactly the right depth, exactly the right breadth, exactly the right intensity, etc. Different roles, and the goal of success in them, require participation in different configurations of value, that is, participations with different depths, breadths, intensities, etc. What we need to grasp is that as well as a plurality of values, there is a plurality of ways of relating to value that is relevant to human well-being. The challenge model and the broad horizons model represent two familiar rival modes (although not the only rival modes) of engagement with value. Although they are not impossible to combine in some balance, they do vie for the finite space in our lives and hence in the structuring of our goals.

The fact that the challenge model and the broad horizons model are rivals in this way generates certain paradoxical cases, in which dedication to a role understood in terms of one model seems to require the impossible feat of simultaneous immersion in the same role, now conforming to the other model. This is the predicament of any decent artist. Barring exceptional cases, a successful work of art, such as a novel, requires as its raw material an immersion in the goals of other people in the way envisaged by the broad horizons model. Yet writing a successful novel, barring exceptional cases, also requires the total dedication envisaged by the challenge model. As the level of artistic achievement gets higher the possibility of combining these two becomes more remote. So some writers alternate activities, writing in bursts interspersed with human engagement. Other writers are drawn into the challenge model, and so write *Finnegans Wake* rather than *Portrait 2* or *Ulysses 2*, either of which would have required a higher level of human understanding. There is often a romantic notion among young artists that the life of a great artist is the life of perfect humanity. But arguably the opposite is more likely to be the case. Meeting the artistic challenge may lead one to regard other people and their lives as no more than raw material for one's art. At an extreme this may drive one to betray, exploit, use other people for experimentation.

The exploitation is not always of others. Some may say, or come to believe, that great art justifies all, and mean by this the sacrifice of well-being in their own lives as well as the lives of others. Of course this is

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a mistake, but we can now see the source of the mistake. Contrary to the views of those who think that all value lies in the actual service of human interests, and that human interests are all well-being interests, there is a value in great art that defies reduction to the service of actual interests, let alone well-being interests. It is the value that is sometimes referred to mystically as the capacity of art to liberate the spirit. It sounds like a reference to a mystical aspect of our well-being, but it is really an attempt to capture a dimension of value that transcends well-being. Mysticism stands in for transcendence.

THE NOBLE AND THE ADVANTAGEOUS

Aristotle writes that there are 'three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, the pleasant, and their contraries, the base, the injurious, the painful'.[19] Never mind the pleasant, which we have not specifically discussed here. What is at stake in the contrast between 'the noble' and 'the advantageous'? A post-utilitarian outlook, presupposing the interest theory of value, might lead us to interpret Aristotle as contrasting pursuit of self-interest with pursuit of the interests of others or of everyone. It is 'advantageous' to make oneself better off, and 'noble' to make people generally better off without favouring oneself. A rival interpretation, which rejects the interest theory of value, casts the whole classification in agent-neutral terms. In talking of the 'advantageous' Aristotle is not focusing on advantage to the agent but on advantage full stop, i.e. on service to interests. This leaves us with the question of what remains that could count as 'noble' for which 'honour' is 'the appointed prize'.[20] In this essay we have identified a class of value which fits this description and which does not collapse into the advantageous even when it is conceived agent-neutrally. In the modern idiom this value might be referred to in a slightly double-edged way as greatness as opposed to goodness. A great book like *Finnegans Wake* might be contrasted with a good book like the imaginary *A Portrait of the Artist as an Older Man*. Of course this way of expressing the contrast is in many ways misleading. Everything in the realm of value is in the realm of goodness. The only question is whether it is in the realm of goodness that it is hostage to our human limitations (the realm of interests) or in the realm that transcends those limitations and therefore explains the sense in which they are limitations.

Beyond his tripartite classification of 'objects of choice', Aristotle also left us with the puzzle of how to understand his ideal for choosers, the

[19] *NE* 1104^{b}30–3.
[20] *NE* 1123^{b}19–20.

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ideal of *eudaimonia*. Translating '*eudaimonia*' as 'happiness' is widely agreed to be misleading. It brings to mind, in modern readers, the very un-Aristotelian happiness theory of well-being associated with the utilitarians.[21] But translating *eudaimonia* more ecumenically as 'well-being' harbours its own problems. How is well-being, in turn, to be distinguished from or related to the three objects of choice – the noble, the advantageous, and the pleasant? Aristotle denies that it is to be identified with any one of them. Rather, it seems, *eudaimonia* is a way of engaging with the three objects of choice 'in a complete life'.[22] Some writers have been tempted to read the reference to a complete life as imposing a requirement of unity or variety or balance (across the period of a life) on each and every life.[23] But these suggestions make Aristotle's ethics seem more prescriptive than it is meant to be. All that Aristotle has in mind is this: the fact that value is pursued in the course of living a life imposes some constraints on its pursuit. It makes something finite and satiable of the infinite and insatiable. Aristotle rejects the well-being theory of interests – the straight identification of whatever serves our well-being with whatever is 'advantageous' to us – because he sees that this identification neglects the fact that we each have only one life to live. Our well-being is served by whatever serves our interests *as livers of our lives*, our lives structured by personal goals that provide a modicum of finitude and satiability. Translating '*eudaimonia*' as 'well-being' is accurate, as long as this feature of well-being is kept in the foreground. *Eudaimonia* is not value full stop. It is, if you like, value for living, the shape of a life well lived.[24]

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[21] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn. (London, 1907), pp. 92–3; John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Indianapolis, 1986), pp. 89–90.

[22] *NE* 1098[a]18.

[23] e.g. Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford, 1991), p. 26.

[24] Earlier versions of this essay were presented at Oxford's Jurisprudence Discussion Group and at a Yale Law School faculty workshop. We would like to thank John Finnis, Grant Lamond, and Caroline Shackleford for raising important objections at the Oxford occasion that led to significant rewriting.

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