

Chapter Two: A Welfarist Basic Minimum

The previous chapter ended with a challenge to welfarist approaches to a basic minimum. These theories must avoid the horns of a powerful dilemma: either force people to live lives they do not value, or succumb to the problem of adaptive preferences.

This challenge cannot be met without offering a welfarist theory of the basic minimum. This chapter intends not just to do this, but to show how a welfarist approach can avoid arbitrariness *while* respecting the importance of an individual's conception of the good *while* remaining ecumenical between a wide range of theories of the human good. To this end, I offer and argue for an important distinction in welfare goods, beginning in §2.2. Once this distinction is in place, identifying the basic minimum becomes simple, even trivial. In §§2.6-2.7, I identify the basic minimum and defend my account from two important objections. This chapter intends to directly address only the first horn of the welfarist's dilemma; if this chapter succeeds, I will have shown that a non-arbitrary welfarist basic minimum can avoid forcing people to live lives they do not value. I proceed to the topic of adaptive preferences in Chapter Three.

2.1. The Diversity of Welfare

Much of this chapter and the next will be dedicated to discussion of human well-being in light of an interest in articulating a welfarist basic minimum. Though the need for such a discussion may seem obvious, a discussion of the nature of welfare itself has rarely graced the texts of those who seek to defeat a welfarist approach to the basic minimum, or any other moral or political concept.

Opponents of a welfarist approach to the basic minimum, for instance, generally identify welfarism with a highly specific approach to the personal good: the fulfillment of preferences (a view I deem “Strong Strong Subjectivism”, discussed in the conclusion to this chapter), or the experience of valuable mental states (most generally understood as a form of hedonism). For instance, Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit identify welfarism as “the theory of subjective preference satisfaction”.¹ Sen claims that welfarists are interested in the promotion of “utilities”,² which he defines in terms of “mental satisfaction”.³ Even Nussbaum identifies welfarism as “subjec-

¹Wolff and De-Shalit (2007), 21-22.

²Sen (1999), 74.

³Sen (1999), 19. See also, Sen (1979), 473. Sen does not explicitly link welfarism

tive welfarism”, which judges life quality solely on the basis of preference-fulfillment.⁴ The identification of welfarism with an interest in the promotion of preference-fulfillment, or valuable mental states, appears to be entrenched in critical discussions of welfarism.⁵ However, this identification is a mistake. Welfarism about any particular moral domain holds, simply speaking, that one’s moral reasons in that domain are given by facts about human well-being. But different welfarists will accept different theories of well-being. Of course, it is quite true that many theories of welfare will take preference-satisfaction, or valuable mental states, as a primary index of life quality. But these views are controversial among welfarists.⁶

The diversity of theories of well-being offers two lessons. First, a lesson for welfarism’s critics: critics of welfarism cannot simply rest on a rejection of a preference-based, or mental-state-based, account of welfare in seeking to depose a welfarist approach to the basic minimum, or any other moral concept. This point should be clear enough, but, unfortunately, is rarely grasped.⁷ Second, a lesson for me: because any individual theory of well-being is bound to be controversial, it does a welfarist approach no favors to commit to any particular substantive account of the nature of well-being. So, in offering my account of a welfarist basic minimum, I offer a view that is ecumenical between a number of important theories of life quality. Of course, in this chapter and in others, I will commit to a number of positions concerning the nature of human well-being that will inevitably rule out conceptions of welfare that cannot accommodate them. But I hope to show that my own view needn’t rule out a wide range of potential positions in the logical space of welfare theory.

2.2. A Distinction in Goods

For a welfarist account of the basic minimum to be a plausible competitor, one must respond to the charge, leveled by Nussbaum, that such an approach would fail to respect individuals’ own choices that reflect their

with any substantive theory of welfare in this article, but his examples meant to show that welfarism is false rely on an implicit assumption of some form of preference-based or mental-state based theory of well-being.

⁴Nussbaum, however, does recognize some important distinctions. Despite the fact that she identifies “welfarism” with the claim that the fulfillment of preferences improves a given individual’s well-being, she appears to claim that “welfarism” is not an adequate method by which to measure the quality of life. See, for instance, Nussbaum (2000), 116.

⁵See also Dworkin (2000), 17-18.

⁶See, for instance, Arneson (1999), Brink (2008), and Kraut (1994), for just a taste.

⁷See, for instance, Arneson (2000b), 511-514.

conceptions of the good. But, as I noted in the previous chapter, one can respect the importance of the pursuit of a conception of the good by accepting *The Basic Minimum as Proto-autonomy*, which holds that one achieves the basic minimum by maintaining his or her conception of the good to a sufficient degree.

Of course, this proposal is fraught with ambiguity. On a welfarist approach, the basic minimum should be understood as some particularly important welfare achievement, or some particularly central or significant good. But how are we to understand the evaluative “specialness” of the basic minimum in terms of an individual’s conception of the good? One can put this more pointedly. An essential feature of any basic minimum is that it is a “dividing line” between lives that maintain some morally or evaluatively important feature (such as human dignity, subsistence, basic needs, etc.), and lives that do not. But it is difficult to see how that “dividing line” might be established purely in terms of the maintenance of a person’s conception of the good. It is not enough just to say that the achievement of the basic minimum is the achievement of a conception of the good to extent e . One had better show that lives that *fail* e are different, in a morally important way, than lives that are at or above e . But for any e , we could certainly imagine a person who maintains his or her conception of the good to an extent that is below e by a *very* slight amount. And if that’s right, it would appear that there cannot be *that* much difference, at least in welfarist terms, between lives that maintain the minimum and lives that don’t, rendering any basic minimum that satisfies *The Basic Minimum as Proto-autonomy* arbitrary.

I think this skepticism is misplaced. A welfarist basic minimum need not be arbitrary. One can specify a morally and evaluatively resonant e that is successful at drawing the crucial “dividing line” between those who maintain their conceptions of the good to a sufficient degree and those that do not. To see how this might be done, note that there is a distinction between *short-term* (or momentary) goods and *long-term* goals or projects that appears to play an important role in our thinking about the intrinsic good for a person.⁸ We appear to treat welfare goods such as momentary hedonic satisfactions or the satisfaction of short-term desires as less significant when it comes to the evaluative quality of a life than some *longer-term* features of a life. Among these long-term goods are the goals we set for ourselves, or the valued states

⁸There are a number of terms for that which improves a person’s well-being, among them “intrinsically good for”, “good for”, “prudentially good for”, etc. I will use these terms interchangeably.

we maintain throughout the course of a life, that define and give meaning to our life's activities. Imagine, for instance, that I like lollipops, and I regard the pleasure I get from them as beneficial to me. However, imagine that I also value the achievement of a long-term goal: to be a successful novelist. It is surely true that a lollipop would improve my life. But the satisfaction of a lollipop, though I may want it *very much*, has a comparatively insignificant impact on my welfare in comparison to the impact of being a novelist.

Of course, in the normal case this is trivial. Most any person who sets themselves a goal of becoming a successful novelist will believe that this goal is more important to his well-being than the pleasure of a single lollipop. Intuitively, however, the achievement or fulfillment of such long-term goals or projects is more significant to a person's welfare, *even if this conclusion overrides a particular individual's preferences*. Generally, we would regard a person who prefers a lollipop to the achievement of a goal, like being a successful novelist, to have a prudentially mistaken preference. Though I do not insist that some particular achievement can improve someone's life if it is not *valued*, I do claim that valued long-term activities, states, goals, or projects form a crucial element of welfare in comparison to valued *short-term* goods, like the beneficial pleasure of a lollipop. In this way, such long-term projects are evaluatively "special": they form a distinct and central class of welfare goods.

Call a life-structuring activity, goal, or achievement a "global project." For instance, being a ballet dancer or professional trombone player are global projects, as are being a philosopher, climbing Mount Everest, being a cultivator of fine gardens, or a meditative monk. Call any global project p a "valued project" for A if and only if p is a global project and A *values* (in a sense to be explored in more detailed below) p . For lack of a better term, call goods that do not rise to the level of global projects "satisfactions". (I should note that different substantive theories of well-being will offer different accounts of the nature of satisfactions. I shan't commit to any one particular interpretation.) I desire a lollipop right now. To have it would surely benefit me. But having a lollipop is not a valued project, but rather a *satisfaction*. In addition, I might have a goal to finally finish reading John LeCarré's *A Perfect Spy*. Though this might be a valued goal, it is a satisfaction, not a global project.

This distinction is *wildly* underspecified. However, leaving further refinements aside for the moment, I argue for the following claim:

Thesis: Valued projects are the primary element of human welfare, the success or failure of which is the most important deter-

minant of the prudential quality of a life.

Though these views are importantly different, *Thesis* (or a relevantly similar proposal) is accepted by John Rawls,⁹ T. M. Scanlon,¹⁰ Simon Keller,¹¹ and others.¹² *Thesis* expresses what I take to be an initially plausible position. Valued projects are “special”: they are the most important determinants of life quality. *Thesis* can explain the judgment elicited earlier: that my preference for a lollypop rather than to be a successful novelist is prudentially mistaken: in preferring the lollypop, I prefer something that is comparatively insignificant in terms of overall welfare value.

2.3. *What is a Project?*¹³

To begin a defense of *Thesis*, it is important to say a little more about what it means to maintain a global project. It seems a fool’s errand to attempt a precise account of the distinction, and so I will not attempt one here. Indeed, I doubt that a sharp distinction is possible; whether, in a given case, *p* is a global project or a satisfaction will require substantive investigation on the basis of our considered judgments. However, I do hope to clarify this distinction sufficient for my purposes, although I leave open the possibility that further, perhaps better, accounts could be provided.

One thing should be made clear at the outset, however. Whatever account one provides, that there is such it is plausible. A person who satisfies his preference to watch *American Idol* satisfies a *different sort* of preference than a person who fulfills his preference to be a good parent, or a loving spouse, or a great physicist, one with a very different impact on his welfare. Not all lives, even in their full description, will contain projects. Indeed, the distinction between a global project—or as Raz calls it, a “comprehensive goal”—and other more minor goods is an important feature of a number of theories of well-being. Hence though the precise distinction between global projects and satisfactions may be slippery, this does not mean that a distinction is not worth drawing.

A precise distinction is hard to draw in part because global projects can vary widely in structure. One variation seems especially worth noting. Some

⁹Rawls (1971), 411: “If this conception of plans is sound, we should expect that the good things in life are, roughly speaking, those activities and relationships which have a major place in rational plans.”

¹⁰Scanlon (1998), ch. 3.

¹¹Keller (2004).

¹²Raz (1987), ch. 12.

¹³This section was heavily influenced by helpful conversations with Erin Frykholm.

projects take the form of *goals*: a particular achievement someone works for over the course of a life. Consider, for instance, the global project of summitting K2, toward which a given individual may work for an extended period. This project may be valued based only on the final result: if I work tirelessly to climb K2, and don't, my tireless work may have been, at least from my perspective, a waste; prudentially valueless. Call these "goal-like" projects. On the other hand, some projects are "state-like". For instance, one might value the global project of "being a philosopher". In this case, there is no single identifiable goal that defines the project but rather a state a person maintains throughout a life, or at least a significant portion of a life.

What, then, unifies projects of disparate structure? I think there are three jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for project-hood. First, global projects help to narratively unify a person's life. To put this point in Vellemanian terms to be explored below, a global project is a primary element in an individual's *life-story*; they form an essential part of the macro-level narrative of a person's life. For instance, if someone successfully achieves the project of summitting K2, we should expect that that project tells at least a very important part of the story of that person's life.¹⁴ Of course, not all features of a person's life story are global projects. The second feature of global projects is that they must not just help to tell a person's life story, but must also narratively unify, in a broad sense, a person's *actions* and *decisions* and must be the *product* of such actions and decisions. For any person with a goal to summit K2, she will deliberate, make decisions, and act through the course of her life in a way that is explained by her maintenance of this goal-like project. Furthermore, any success at this project will be the product of her actions and decisions. In this way, global projects are not just any old feature of a person's life story, but are, literally, *projects* that a person might or might not choose to undertake. Third, global projects are "global"—the story they help to tell is that of a segment of a person's life of *significant temporal duration*. Though someone might "be a philosopher" for a day, to say that she maintains a global project of being a philosopher, this project must structure her life and explain her activities for at least substantial section of her life.

Some embellishment is in order. Take the first requirement. For a person to maintain a global project, it is not enough that some particular "story"

¹⁴Of course, this needn't be true of all individuals who climb K2. I'm assuming, however, that this particular goal is something that must be worked toward by the person involve not just for a little while but over the course of a life.

of their life could be told. Rather, their lives must be narratively integrated. To see this requirement, consider the difference between two lives. The first person, A, spends long periods on college campuses, teaching courses and doing research, engaging with colleagues and traveling to conferences. A's life could be narratively integrated by the fact that she is an *academic*. The second person, B, acts in a different way. B attends school briefly, drops out, takes employment for short periods of time, spends time as a drifter, but establish a permanent home for at least some extended periods, etc. Though B's life might be rife with satisfactions, it does not maintain a global project insofar the activities of this life do not maintain any unifying thread. Of course, a story *could* be trivially told of this person's life. Such a story would simply consist in a list of this person's activities. But without a unifying thread, this life maintains no global projects.

One might ask further questions about what it means for a life to be narratively unified. Though I will not be able to provide any precise account of this generally intuitive idea, two points are worth noting. First, narrative unification requires *common explanation* of a substantial part of the events and activities in this life. For instance, A spends lots of time on college campuses, teaches courses, and goes to conferences. These activities permit of a common explanation: A is an academic. Second, narrative unification provides the events and activities of a life with a shared meaning. Again adapting a Vellemanian thought to be explored in more detail later, it seems to me that a life is narratively unified if the *meaning* of particular events (or at least a substantial amount throughout a life) cannot be properly understood in isolation. A narratively unified life will treat the moments or events of a life as not simply atomistic, but as having a meaning that is shaped by events prior and subsequent to the moment or event itself. For instance, imagine that A gives an academic talk at Big State University. This activity, for A, has a certain meaning: it is a natural part of an academic career, and, depending on her past research activities, may even be a highlight. The meaning of this event, in terms of A's life, is necessarily shaped by the longer-term project in which she is engaged: being an academic. However, we could imagine another person, C, who gives precisely the same sort of talk at Big State University. But if we imagine that C is a politician, rather than an academic, the meaning of this event will be quite different. This event will be an oddity, something unusual, perhaps an honorific capstone to a successful career in politics. The global project of being a politician will help to explain this event, but will also provide this event a meaning

distinct from the meaning of this event in A's life.¹⁵

Take, now, the second requirement. Global projects are the products of, and help to narratively unify, our *actions and decisions*. This feature of global projects helps to rule out certain things that may narratively unify a person's life, but that do not, intuitively at least, constitute global projects. Take a person whose life was entirely taken up by her brain being manipulated by electrodes for the purposes of eliciting certain pleasurable reactions. We might narratively integrate her life by saying that she was *hooked up to an experience machine*. Indeed, this will be a *central* part of her life story. But though this may be a narratively integrated life story, it is not integrated by means of a particular project. No narrative unification of this person's activities or decisions is possible, insofar as there are no such activities or decisions. This person's life is wholly passive, and hence does not maintain a global project.¹⁶ Furthermore, some features of a person's life may well narratively unify a his or her actions and decisions, but do not constitute global projects. For instance, one might say of a particular person that an essential part of his life story is being a member of a certain *race*. For instance, if A is born a Native American and spends virtually all of his life on a reservation, one can rightly say that a large section of his life is narratively integrated by the fact that he is a Native American. Indeed, the fact that A is a Native American will help to explain many of the actions and decisions he takes. But "being a Native American" is not a project in the sense I mean: whether he is a Native American or not is not the *product* of any actions or decisions on A's part.

Finally, the requirement that global projects be of substantial temporal duration is crucial: this element differentiates those mere momentary goals (such as to pour myself another cup of coffee), and those goals that form the major element of human welfare. But one qualifying note is in order. The global nature of such projects should be understood to require *long-term* narrative integration of one's actions and decisions, not *long-term* and *constant* narrative integration of one's actions and decisions. To be engaged in the project of "being a philosopher" or "submitting K2", one needn't be engaged in those characteristic activities at every moment during which they are valued. One can be a philosopher and spend a day or two reading LeCarré. However, we wouldn't say of a particular activity or goal that it is a global project if it doesn't provide a sufficient level of narrative integra-

¹⁵See, for instance, MacIntyre (2007), ch. 15.

¹⁶One might, quite accurately, say that "hooking one's self into an experience machine" is a goal-like project, insofar as this is a goal one might work toward, and that might narratively unify one's activities and decisions over the long-term.

tion in the long-term. Consider, for instance, a state-like project of being a “Christmas churchgoer”. This project consists of attending church once per year, on December 25th. Though this might narratively unify some of a person’s activities and decisions in the long-term, it does not provide sufficient narrative unification: this state does not rise to the level of a global project. I take that to be the correct answer. This being said, the requirements of sufficient unification from project to project will likely vary substantially. Hence I won’t be able to offer any precise account of “sufficient” narrative unification. Whether a particular project satisfies this constraint will require case-by-case inquiry.

Two further features of the achievement of global projects should be noted here. I have not insisted that for p to be a global project of A’s, A must *know* that he is engaged in, or explicitly *decide* to maintain, this project. But this is the correct answer. One can successfully maintain a global project without ever fully knowing or deciding to do so. For instance, it might be that through a simple accident, and without ever planning to, A has maintained a successful career as an accountant. This project is still narratively unifying, despite the fact that *being a successful accountant* was never itself the product of deliberation on his part nor, perhaps, was it even known to him. We can live according to global projects in spite of our ignorance of so doing, or explicit decision to do so.¹⁷ Sometimes we may just “fall into” global projects that may form the basis of an assessment of the quality of our lives. If that’s the case, I see no reason to bar their value simply because the projects themselves, as opposed to the activities that constitute these projects, are not a matter of explicit intention.¹⁸

¹⁷In this way, my account of a global project differs slightly from Keller’s. Keller writes:

When we think of someone as having a goal, we think of her as *pursuing* it—as to some extent organizing her life, or intending to organize her life, around that goal. The extent to which something is a goal, or to which it is a strong goal, is in part a matter of the extent to which its bearer organizes her life around its pursuit. What’s important here is that your taking on a goal involves taking an attitude towards *your* activities and *your* life (even if your reasons for forming that goal are entirely selfless). (Keller (2004), 32-33.)

I do think, as noted here, that global projects are “organizers”—they organize and narratively unify the activities and decisions of our lives. But they can play this role without being the object of any conscious decision or active intention on the part of the person involved.

¹⁸Along the same lines, I do not regard a feature of such global projects as necessarily requiring any significant “self-sacrifice” on the part of the agent. In this way, my view differs from Douglas Portmore’s. See Portmore (2007).

Furthermore, this account of global projects allows for a *very* wide range of potential projects, insofar as many things might narratively unify our actions and decisions.¹⁹ Consider, for instance, the project of “being a reality TV-watcher”.²⁰ It might be that I live a life in which I watch reality TV, and that this particular “project” (state-like) in fact narratively integrates large sections of my life, my actions, and decisions (I plan, each day, to watch n reality shows before lunch, m before dinner, etc., etc.). I might also do this throughout the course of my life. It seems to me that there is very little reason to bar “being a reality TV-watcher” from being a global project in the sense I mean here. Of course, many will not value such a project. Furthermore, some might believe that such projects are not of sufficient “objective” value to constitute a project that would improve the quality of my life in a significant way (for further discussion of this point, see the conclusion of this chapter). Nevertheless, it seems to me that being a reality-TV watcher might very well constitute a global project, and is certainly a *different sort of good* than the good of satisfying one’s preference to, today, watch *The Next Iron Chef*. Somewhere along the line, engaging in these day-to-day activities shapes one’s life story or narrative at a macro level, explains and unifies one’s actions and decisions, and does so over the long term in a way entails the maintenance of a global project.

This rough-and-ready account of the distinction between global projects and satisfactions is likely subject to counterexamples. Furthermore, my account of such projects uses *extremely* vague language (“significant temporal duration”, and the like). A more thorough examination is surely required to account for the extent to which any particular welfare good is to constitute a global project rather than a satisfaction. Any general account will include a substantial amount of gray area. In any event, the intuitive idea is robust enough for my purposes here.

2.4. Thesis: *Two Arguments*

This section contains two positive arguments for *Thesis*. First, I offer a simple appeal to intuition. Second, I advance a rationale for this view, independently of any direct appeal to considered judgment.

¹⁹One interesting possibility is that any such narrative unification might have to be within the bounds of recognized “social forms”, as Raz urges. See Raz (1987), ch. 12. However, I shall not make this requirement explicit, though it does seem to me that any sensible narrative unification by a global project should at least be recognizable as such a project.

²⁰Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this case.

2.4.1. *A Bare Intuition*

The Penguin paperback edition of the rousing 1915 novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* features this biography of its author, John Buchan:

John Buchan was born in Perth in 1875. His father was a minister of the Free Church of Scotland; and in 1876 the family moved to Fife, where John walked six miles a day to school. Later they moved to Glasgow and, when he went to Glasgow University, he published articles in periodicals. When at Brasenose College, Oxford, he published five books and many articles, and won several awards, including the Newdigate Prize for poetry. His career was diverse and successful, and despite ill health, he was a barrister and Member of Parliament, in addition to being a writer, soldier and publisher. He married, and had four children. He was created Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield in 1935 and became the Governor-General of Canada, until his death in 1940.

His first success as an author came with *Prester John* in 1910, and he went on to write a series of adventure thrillers, or ‘shockers’ as he called them, all characterized by their authentically rendered backgrounds, romantic characters, their atmosphere of expectancy and world-wide conspiracies, and the author’s own enthusiasm. His main heroes were Richard Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and four other books, Dickson McCunn, the Glaswegian provision merchant with the soul of a romantic, and Edward Leithen, eminent lawyer. Buchan also established a reputation as an historical biographer with such works as *Montrose*, *Oliver Cromwell* and *Augustus*.²¹

In reading this biography, I am immediately overtaken by the feeling that Buchan’s life was of tremendous quality. And this judgment has very little to do with any assessment of the merely momentary benefits he may have received. In particular, Buchan’s life was so good not because of any momentary feelings of pleasure, say, but because he was successful in a number of widely varying pursuits throughout his life. Not only was he an accomplished novelist, biographer, and poet, he was also a startlingly successful politician, serving in Parliament, eventually taking the position of Governor-General of Canada. Of course, many politicians are also (or claim to be) writers, but

²¹Buchan (1915), Author’s Biography.

Buchan's writing went beyond the normal subject-matter of politicians. Not only was he a historian, he was also the author of books that are meant, primarily, for fun and distraction: "shockers", or romantic thrillers told with distinctive panache. And at this endeavor he had perhaps his most lasting influence: *The Thirty-Nine Steps* has been filmed countless times, including once by Alfred Hitchcock, and has even been the subject-matter of a successful stage spoof, currently (as of this writing) playing off-Broadway.

Reflection on Buchan's life, I think, supports *Thesis*. His life was of high quality, and we appear to maintain this conviction even in the absence of knowledge of his satisfactions, or mere momentary goods. If so, it would appear that Buchan's valued projects—being a writer, politician, etc.—and their success are the most important determinants of the quality of his life.

Those who would reject *Thesis* might argue that Buchan's life was extremely good not because of the projects he valued *per se*, but rather because these projects generated in him, say, pleasure, satisfied desires, or other momentary goods. But I think this is incorrect. Assume that he took less pleasure than other less successful men, or that his momentary desires might have been less satisfied than others. Does this alter our judgment of the broad quality of his life? It seems to me that the answer is surely *no*. One is tempted to judge Buchan's life of high quality not because it contained large amounts of pleasure (and indeed, his biography gives us very little information about Buchan's mental states, save for the fact that Buchan was never of robust health, and was probably more than a little annoyed at the six-mile-a-day walk to school). Beyond my assumption that Buchan seemed to value these projects, information about his mental states or preference structure seems unimportant to our judgment.²² His long-term projects—*being* a historian, novelist, politician, etc.—seem to be the most important determinant of our assessment of his life as of very high quality. In light of these valued projects, the evaluative importance of potential satisfactions seems to fade into the background. Of course, few who maintain valued projects will reach the Buchan's heights. But his case is illustrative, if only of the following point: Buchan's case shows that in assessing the quality of lives, we look, first and foremost, to the long-term projects that matter to the persons whose lives they are.²³

²²When it comes to Buchan's well-being, we would certainly change our mind if we came to find out that he didn't really enjoy being a writer and didn't value it, or couldn't have cared less about his career in politics.

²³One might complain that there is no evidence that Buchan actually valued any of the projects he maintained; but if we happen to discover, e.g., that he did not value being a politician or writer, etc., it seems to me that this would be good evidence to revise our

This argument notes an intuitive reaction only, but this particular reaction seems to me sufficiently robust as to provide a reason, if only *pro tanto*, to accept *Thesis*. It simply seems right to say that judgments of life quality are dominated by the extent to which a person successfully maintains valued projects.

2.4.2. *Shape, Meaning, and Self-Direction*

The above section noted an intuition I regard as robust. I hope the reader will agree. But it would be nice not to rely too heavily on it. In fact, I think that *Thesis* can be given a powerful independent rationale. Valued projects provide a life's activities with a long-term, self-directed *meaning*. To maintain a valued project is to be able to see one's life as more than simply the sum of its individual moments, but as tied together into a narrative whole. Maintenance of a valued project allows one to see one's life as organized around a central principle, which itself provides a shared and valued meaning to one's actions and decisions. This feature of valued projects explains, I think, their tremendous importance when it comes to overall judgments of life quality.

The importance of a life's self-directed meaning is on full display in the following insight by David Velleman. Velleman argues that well-being is not *additive*; in other words, the overall welfare value of two lives can differ even though these lives contain equal amounts of momentary well-being. Velleman's evidence for this claim is that the *shape* of a life (i.e., whether welfare benefits fall at earlier or later times) is itself important to well-being. Velleman writes:

Consider two different lives that you might live. One life begins in the depths but takes an upward trend: a childhood of deprivation, a troubled youth, struggles and setbacks in early adulthood, followed finally by success and satisfaction in middle age and a peaceful retirement. Another life begins at the heights but slides downhill: a blissful childhood and youth, precocious triumphs and rewards in early adulthood, followed by a midlife strewn with disasters that lead to misery in old age. Surely, we can imagine two such lives as containing equal sums of momentary well-being. . . Yet even if we were to map each moment in one life onto a moment of equal well-being in the other, we would

judgment of the quality of his life downward.

not have shown these lives to be equally good.²⁴

Velleman contends that the former life is better than the latter, despite the fact that the sum-total of momentary benefits are identical in each case. Part of the explanation, according to Velleman, is the shape of one's life: an upward-sloping life is better than a downward-sloping life.

I think there is much in what Velleman claims. But we should be careful to avoid the claim that the *shape* of a life makes a *per se* difference to well-being.²⁵ For instance, imagine a person who is hooked up to an experience machine at an early age. This experience machine has imperfect software, so at an early age the person experiences pain as well as pleasure. Gradually (say, once per year), the software is updated, so that later in this person's life she experiences much more pleasure than earlier in life. This life is surely no better than the life of a person whose experience machine works perfectly in the beginning, and then slowly deteriorates. If this is correct, Velleman's intuition should be explained in a way other than by referring to the mere shape of a life; the shape itself does not, apparently, have the ability to alter the quality of one's life in all cases.

But Velleman quite rightly notes that later successes redeem earlier failures not because the shape of a life is *per se* valuable, but because there is an important *relationship* between the later successes and the prior failures:

Why would a person care about the placement of momentary goods on the curve that maps his changing welfare? The answer, I believe, is that an event's place in the story of one's life lends it a meaning that isn't entirely determined by its impact on one's well-being at the time. A particular electoral victory, providing a particular boost to one's current welfare, can mean either that one's early frustrations were finally over or that one's subsequent failures were not yet foreshadowed, that one enjoyed either fleeting good luck or lasting success—all depending on its placement in the trend of one's well-being. And the event's meaning is what determines its contribution to the value of one's life.²⁶

According to Velleman, the *meaning* of particular goods can be affected by events prior and subsequent to the achievement of a particular good itself. But later success can affect the meaning of earlier failures (and vice

²⁴Velleman, "Well-Being and Time" in Velleman (2000), 58.

²⁵Velleman, as I note below, avoids this claim. Frances Kamm, however, endorses it. See Kamm (2003), 223.

²⁶Velleman (2000), 63.

versa) only if these successes and failures are, in some sense, a narratively unified across time.²⁷ The meaning of earlier events is affected by later events when these events concern the unified activities, goals, and projects in which one is engaged. Hence the variable meaning of these events is not best accounted for in terms of a downward or upward trend, but rather is better accounted for by the narrative structure of the longer-term projects of which these individual events are a part. If one has early electoral success, but a long downfall, it would appear that this early success, though perhaps pleasurable, was not a step along the way to success in the project of being a successful politician. In this way, the later events of one's life affect the "meaning of" prior events—not because they indicate a *per se* welfare-relevant trend, but because the meaning of these events are shaped by a narratively unified project, one that, in the case of the failed politician, he is unlikely to value.²⁸ What I think Velleman's insight shows is that in judging the quality of a life as a whole, we are not *uninterested* in momentary achievements. But we are *most* interested in that which narratively unifies, and provides a shared meaning, to a life's activities and events in the long term. Velleman is right to declare that the "meaning" of a particular event helps to shape its importance to our welfare. But this claim itself implies the importance of valued projects, insofar as these projects are what *provide* such a meaning to the individual activities and decisions of our lives.

The importance of the sort of meaning provided by valued projects is also stressed by Bernard Williams. Williams notes that "A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give a meaning to his life."²⁹ According to Williams, it would be "absurd to demand" of individuals that they give up such projects for the sake, e.g., of greater overall utility or conformity to the sort of impartiality required by Kantian moral theories.³⁰ And though I do not want to adjudicate between utilitarianism, Kantianism, and other moral theories at the moment, one reason that Williams' point is so resonant is the plausibility of *Thesis* itself: that the meaning provided by such projects is a dominant

²⁷Compare Velleman (2000), 63-64.

²⁸We can, of course, imagine a politician who did not seek to be successful in the long term, but who valued the project of being a politician even under circumstances of a tragic downfall. But in this case it does not seem plausible to believe that the shape of a person's life is *per se* important. I am tempted to believe that, given that this project is valued with full knowledge of its circumstances, it does not deserve to be placed lower on an overall ordinal rank merely for having a "downward" trajectory, as it were.

²⁹Williams (1981), 12. See also (1974), §5.

³⁰Williams (1974), 116.

determinant of life quality. Being able to see my life and activities as participating in a shared meaning—a meaning I regard as valuable—is of great significance to the quality of my life as a whole. (This is true whether or not this project is a “ground” project in Williams’ sense.³¹)

The importance of global projects in providing for a life’s “meaning” shouldn’t be oversold. Global projects are not the only things that can narratively unify a life or large sections of a life. Hence it would be incorrect to say that global projects are required for any sort of long-term “meaning” at all. After all, in certain cases the events of a life may be narratively unified by things that, e.g., are not achievable by action, such as a person’s born-into nationality or race. However, the meaning provided by global projects, stressed by Velleman and Williams, is central in an important way. Because global projects are achievable in action, they provide for a shared, *self-directed* meaning to one’s activities in the long-term. A global project of mine captures the meaning of my life and activities that *I* help to shape. A nationality or race into which one is born does not.³² But this supports the supreme welfare value of valued projects: we generally do not regard the sort of meaning provided by one’s nationality or race as of intrinsic value, though it may naturally give rise to projects the satisfaction of which *is* intrinsically valuable.

Whether Velleman or Williams would agree with my gloss on their insights is beyond my purview here. However, their reflections ring true, and support the evaluative “specialness” of valued projects. Maintaining a valued project involves being able to see one’s life and activities as participating in a shared, self-directed meaning—one that reveals one’s life to be more than a simple collection of undirected activities. In light of the nature of valued projects, their evaluative dominance seems no more than commonsensical.

None of these arguments are knock-down. But *Thesis* is plausible, and is supported by further considerations about the essential connection between global projects and the shape and self-directed meaning of one’s life. I have left until Chapter Four the vexing topic of the precise evaluative relationship between valued projects and satisfactions. But the importance of

³¹Williams (1981), 10. Williams, in his critique of utilitarianism, defines ground projects as: “projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what is life is about,” (Williams (1974), 116).

³²Though, of course, I may undertake any number of meaningful global projects in reaction to facts of my nationality or race. For instance, I might have as a global project of becoming a member of a new nationality, or a global project of advancing the outlook for members of my race, especially if I am a member of an oppressed racial minority.

valued projects to assessments of life quality, i.e., their evaluative “specialness”, must now be clear.

2.5. *What is a Valued Project?*

Before I turn to my account of the basic minimum, one further element of *Thesis* must be clarified. *Thesis* insists on the evaluative dominance of *valued* projects rather than mere *global* projects. Indeed, it makes sense to do so. One would hardly accept that projects are evaluatively “special” as claimed by *Thesis* if they do not reflect the conception of the good of the person whose projects they are. But what, precisely, distinguishes a mere project from a valued project?

Two issues immediately arise. First, for a particular project p to be valued by A, A must take some sort of pro-attitude toward p . But which attitude is this? One could understand this attitude as a belief, a particular conative or affective pro-attitude, or some other mental or intentional stance. Sorting out which psychological state one must take toward p to value p —especially if this sort of valuing is to reflect A’s genuine conception of the good—is important, and my answer to this question will lay the groundwork for my response to the problem of adaptive preferences. I thus leave this problem aside until the following chapter. But there is a second problem that must be addressed here. The fact that I take a relevant pro-attitude toward a global project does not seem sufficient to render it the case that it is *valued* in the sense that would render it the most central element of a person’s welfare. Take a simple example. I might take a pro-attitude toward p , but only as a result of a preference for p rather than q . But simply preferring something does not mean that I *value* it. For instance, I might prefer being a Grand Central Station janitor to being the king’s food taster. (Indeed, I may even desire to be a Grand Central Station janitor insofar as I am currently the king’s food taster.) But this certainly doesn’t entail that, all-things-considered, I *value* being a janitor. All this might mean is that among the projects I do not value I hold that being a janitor at Grand Central Station is better than being the king’s food-taster.

To take a pro-attitude toward a particular project is surely necessary for it to count as a valued project. But the pro-attitude must be of the right form. Now consider my stance toward being a Grand Central Station janitor in comparison to Glen, who *actually* values being a Grand Central Station janitor. What is the difference between Glen and myself? It would appear that though we both take at least some sort of pro-attitude toward this project (insofar as I prefer it to being the king’s food taster), we differ

along a crucial dimension. To value a project, one must not simply prefer it to some other project or welfare good. Rather, one must assess it as good in an *absolute* way. Glen, rather than myself, regards the project as being good rather than bad, of positive rather than negative value, as being “worth it” rather than not. Though I may prefer it to being the king’s food taster, I still do not regard the project *itself* as being of positive value.

But how do we determine when a person regards a global project as good and not bad, “worth it” rather than not? Before I answer this question, I should add one complicating factor. I might value a particular project under some circumstances and not others. For instance, I might value the project of being a sailor on the assumption that my physical makeup is strong and robust. As I am (weak and sapless), I despise sailing: I regard it as tiresome and not worth the exertion. Do I value the project of being a sailor? Surely the answer is no. But if this is correct, whether I value this particular project will depend on *other* things in my life: my level of exertion, pain, seasickness, leisure, time off, advancement, etc., some elements of which are not properly regarded as part of the project itself. But it seems to me, then, that whether a particular project is *valued* is *context-sensitive*: to determine whether it is valued, we must view it in the context of the life in which that project is actually to be lived. Sometimes context will determine whether, within a particular life, a particular project will be valued rather than unvalued.

However, this feature of project valuation actually renders what it means to “value” a particular project less, rather than more, complicated. Because projects are valued, or not, in the context of an entire life, to value a particular project requires one to take the right kind of pro-attitude to the *life* in which that project is lived. But the question of whether a life has positive versus negative value, or has been “good rather than bad” is easier to understand: to assess a life as “worth it” rather than not, one must see it as *worth living*.³³

³³One might ask what it means for someone to assess a life as being “worth living”. Though I shall not commit to any one particular method, one interesting proposal is offered by Campbell Brown. (See Brown (MS).) Brown argues, very roughly, that the best way to understand the notion of “living a life worth living” is to compare one’s actual lifetime well-being score to the well-being score one has in the life of shortest finite time. In other words, imagine a life that is .5 milliseconds long. One’s life is worth living if and only if one’s well-being is greater than the well-being one has in a life that is .5 milliseconds long (or whatever extremely short duration). A life of shortest possible duration has neither satisfactions nor projects. It has no welfare goods at all. It seems to me that Brown’s suggestion can be adapted to my purposes here. On this view, one “values” a particular project only if one prefers a life that contains this project, and no other projects, to a life of shortest possible duration. On this view, if one prefers the life

The foregoing reflections might lead us to the following account of what it means for a global project to be a valued project: A values a global project p if and only if (a) l is the life in which p is actually lived, and (b) A regards l as worth living. (The qualifier in (b) is essential: it is important for the valuation of a given project that the presence and/or valuation of other projects not interfere.)

Though this possibility is initially plausible, it is unsuccessful as stated. I might regard the life in which I am a Grand Central Station janitor as worth living, but in a way that does not entail that I value the project of being a Grand Central Station janitor. The explanation of my assessment that my life is worth living might be the product *simply* of non-project contextual factors. Imagine that I am gaga for lollypops. I might regard a life in which I am a Grand Central Station janitor as worth living but only *because* I am able to obtain a threshold number of lollypops in that life, not *because* I maintain said global project. If so, to value the project means more than to regard the life in which that project is lived as worth living. One's judgment *that* such a life is worth living must be *explained* in the right way.

The fix is easy. To properly be said to find a global project valuable rather than valueless, good rather than bad, etc., it must be the case that one's assessment of one's life as worth living is—at least in part—*explained* by the global project this life maintains.³⁴ Though, when it comes to sailing, whether or not I view my life as worth living will crucially depend on non-project contextual factors (such as exertion, pain, etc.), if I am to value *being a sailor*, it must be that being a sailor *also* helps to explain why I regard my life as worth living. Glen sees his life as worth living in part *because* he engages in the project of being a Grand Central Station janitor. For me, though I take a pro-attitude toward this project, if I do happen to assess my life as worth living, this assessment is in spite of, rather than in part because of, this activity, which I do not value.

Putting this all together, A values a global project p if and only if (a) l is the life in which p is lived, (b) A regards l as worth living, and (c) A's assessment of l as worth living is at least in part explained by p . Though this account of the nature of valued, rather than global, projects is some-

of shortest possible duration to all lives that maintain global projects, one values no such projects. (I do not wish to lean too heavily on Brown's proposal, though I myself find it attractive. There may be other ways of understanding what it means for a life to be "worth living", or what it means for someone to assess a life as worth living. In what follows, I shall rely specifically on the notion of a life worth living: the reader is welcome to substitute whatever analysis of that concept she prefers.)

³⁴I address the nature of such "explanation" in §3.3.2.

what stipulative, need not be inconsistent with *Thesis*. Quite the contrary: we would hardly say of a particular project that it is evaluatively special in the way suggested by *Thesis* if the life in which that project is lived is not seen as worth living, or that the project itself does not contribute to the worthiness of the life in question.

2.6. *The Basic Minimum*

In defining a welfarist basic minimum, we must offer an evaluatively special welfare achievement that could plausibly form a morally resonant threshold or “dividing line”. Given *Thesis*, I submit that a plausible welfarist basic minimum can be formulated as follows:

Welfarist Basic Minimum (WBM): A achieves the basic minimum over the course of a life l if and only if A successfully achieves or maintains a valued project in l .

There is much to say for WBM. First, it is not arbitrary. Those who maintain a valued global project maintain a central, essential element of welfare. These lives have the sort of valued and self-directed “meaning” to which Velleman and Williams directed our attention. Those who fail to maintain such a project do not. Given the arguments detailed above, this is a substantial difference, and is hence forms a plausible “dividing line” between lives that fail the basic minimum and lives that do not. Furthermore, WBM is appropriate to the concept of a welfarist basic minimum. The central intuition behind the appeal of a welfarist approach is that individuals should live lives that are at least minimally decent, to cite a Millerian point from the previous chapter. But in maintaining a valued project, A lives a life that A judges not only to be *worth living*, but worth living given its long-term, narratively unified structure. When looking at individual lives strictly in welfarist terms, the maintenance of a valued project seems to entail a life of *at least* minimal decency.

Second, indexing the basic minimum to valued projects is itself plausible. Consider, for instance, the lives of two destitute sex workers A and B. Assume, however, that for A, her pimp grants her an unlimited supply of lollypops, which she finds delicious. In all other ways, these lives are identical. The lollypop-rich life of A, though better than B’s life, does not achieve the basic minimum, we are tempted to say, no matter how many lollypops she gets. So what else must be achieved for a person to maintain the basic minimum? Lollypops are not enough, but why? In this case, we

are likely to say that though A surely values the experience of such lollypops, the *major* element of her life, that which provides the basis for her life story, involves *being a destitute sex worker*. And it is *this* aspect of her life that most clearly drives the extent to which her life is awful. Few would see such a life as worth living, but even fewer would see this project as an active contributor to the worth of a life in which it is maintained. It is thus plausible to say that A's basic minimum is indexed not to momentary satisfactions, like the satisfaction of a delicious lollypop, but rather to the long-term elements of her life: the extent to which she maintains a valued project.

Third, WBM seems to correct important defects of its primary competitor. Recall that any basic minimum must be a valued state of persons with *at least* weak moral priority. But the capabilities approach would imply that capabilities for those who would make no use of them are morally prior to capabilities that are used, in fact, to enhance lives. But WBM does not make this error. Consider, for instance, a person who values a long-term, unifying project, but succeeds at this project without need of a particular capability. WBM rejects the claim that granting such a capability takes weak moral priority: this individual already maintains the basic minimum. Furthermore, Nussbaum's approach failed in part because her account could not support upward distribution. And though I discuss this point in more detail in Chapter Four, it seems correct to say that, at least on a one-to-one basis, the welfare goods that individuals might sustain without also sustaining a valued project (i.e., satisfactions, or are unvalued projects) are insignificant enough to justify upward distribution for the sake of those who might obtain the most central element of human welfare: a valued project.

Finally, WBM successfully accommodates *The Basic Minimum as Proto-autonomy*. Because no one obtains the basic minimum without engaging in *valued* projects, there is no moral pressure, given WBM, to require someone to live a life that does not conform to his or her conception of the good. For WBM, as required by *The Basic Minimum as Proto-autonomy*, a given individual maintains the basic minimum if she achieves her conception of the good to a sufficient degree: if she maintains a valued project. Given these advantages, I conclude that WBM has much to say for itself.

One further point is worth making before I move on. WBM is a theory of the basic minimum across the whole of one's life. However, it appears sensible to ask, apart from the "whole-life" judgment offered by WBM, whether a given person does or does not maintain the basic minimum at a particular *time* within a life. Here WBM offers no guidance. However, WBM can be easily characterized in a time-relative manner:

Welfarist Basic Minimum (Time-Relative) (WBM)*: A maintains the basic minimum at t if and only if A engages a successful valued project at t .

Of course, WBM* has a number of problems that must be cleared up. WBM* is a theory of what it is for a given individual to maintain the basic minimum at a time, but the definition of what it means for a given person to maintain the basic minimum at a time makes reference to the maintenance of valued projects at a particular time. But it would seem that this definition is appropriate only for *state-like* projects, such as “being a philosopher”, for which the success conditions can hold of an individual at many different times, rather than *goal-like* projects, such as “submitting K2”. If I will eventually succeed in my goal of submitting K2, but have not *yet* submitted K2, is it the case that I fail the basic minimum (assuming that this is my only valued project)?

Intuitively, the answer to this question is no. But this point is easily accommodated. If, at t , my actions and decisions are narratively unified by a goal-like project, the success of which is determined at t_1 and, at t_1 , this goal is successful, I maintained or participated in a successful project *at t*. The meaning of my actions at t are determined, at least in part, by participation in this activity. Hence, for some goal-like projects, it may not be obvious at t whether a given individual maintains the basic minimum at t . But this is the correct answer. If I work my entire life to climb K2, for the sole purpose of climbing it (such that I would not have valued the resulting narrative if I happen to fail), and, in fact, I fail to climb K2, I do not maintain a life of minimally decent quality; my life is a failure.

With the possibility of WBM* open, a further question arises. Which version of the basic minimum is the appropriate target of moral concern? If a person lives a life that maintains the basic minimum, but fails to maintain the minimum *now*, should we treat his or her state *now* as possessing (at least) weak moral priority to other states *now*? This question has been the topic of much discussion.³⁵ Rather than addressing this literature, however, I will assume here that the central moral question that concerns the basic minimum is the question of whether a given person maintains the basic minimum over the course of a whole life. I take my assumption as justified for the following reasons. First, this answer seems plausible. Though a person early or late in life might fail to maintain a valued project, they may very well have done so later or earlier in life: in this case, it seems wrong to treat their current state as maintaining the moral priority required by BM3.

³⁵See, for instance, McKerlie (2001), Lippert-Rasmussen (2003), Temkin (2003).

Second, nothing in this book rides on one particular answer to this question rather than another. Those who are more compelled to treat individual times as the locus of moral concern are free to replace WBM with WBM*; the arguments I offer will apply *mutatis mutandis*.

2.7. Objection: Dignity and Capabilities³⁶

WBM faces a number of objections. I will consider three in this chapter, more in Chapter Six. The first claims that a capabilities approach can accommodate an important claim unavailable to WBM. Nussbaum's capabilities approach, but not WBM, can accommodate the connection between the basic minimum and basic human dignity. According to Nussbaum, the capabilities approach draws support from its claim to link the basic minimum with a conception of truly human functioning.³⁷ However, WBM includes no constraints on the *sort* of projects that might be valued. In particular, we might consider a project that seems wholly incompatible with a life of human dignity, e.g., a life of a grass counter, or a life of total deprivation and destitution which by some strange occurrence allows the maintenance of a valued project. But, it might be said, without basic human dignity, or truly human functioning, one cannot maintain the basic minimum.

An easy response might be to claim that the basic minimum is indexed not just to the achievement of valued projects, but to the achievement of valued projects that maintain some connection to human dignity. Though any valued project might be valuable, this project cannot rise to the level of the *basic minimum* unless that project is reflective of the dignity of the person who lives it, or maintains some threshold level of preference-independent value. I consider this possibility in more detail in §3.5.

But though such a view might be sufficient to forestall the objection from human dignity, I think there is less to this objection than meets the eye. Two points. First, Nussbaum's own approach seems ill-designed to guarantee lives of basic human dignity, however this is understood. After all, Nussbaum's is a *capabilities* view. Because she does not grant moral importance to the *achievement* of human dignity, rather only to the capability for such achievement, the extent to which any given person actually maintains a life of minimal human dignity on Nussbaum's view is up for grabs. Any particular person could maintain the basic minimum while thoroughly lacking in achievements constitutive of basic human dignity or truly

³⁶The argument of this section is developed in more detail in Dorsey (2010a).

³⁷Nussbaum (2006), 74.

human functioning. In fact, the relationship between the achievement of basic human dignity and the achievement of the basic minimum on Nussbaum's approach appears to be fully dependent on people's conceptions of the good. My view says something similar: whether the basic minimum (as specified by WBM) requires a given person to maintain a life of human dignity depends on whether this person values dignified versus undignified lives.³⁸ Hence if a life of basic human dignity is a *requirement* for the basic minimum, a capabilities approach seems to fail.

Leaving aside this problem, however, there is a second, more fundamental, one. One must be careful in claiming advantage for any view on the basis of human dignity. There is a danger that the notion of human dignity is simply a placeholder for lives, activities, or projects we think are good enough to maintain the basic minimum. If basic human dignity is operating in this way, it is clearly table-pounding to claim advantage for Nussbaum's approach (or any other) on grounds of human dignity. To do so would be to simply assert what I deny, namely that some other approach to the basic minimum is more plausible than WBM.

Nussbaum might respond in the following way. Basic human dignity is not empty. One might understand basic minimum dignity in a *perfectionist* way. In other words, one might claim that a life of basic human dignity or "truly human functioning" involves the development of a certain conception of human *nature*.³⁹ On this view, dignity is to be given an interpretation that links truly human functioning with the characteristic or essential properties, activities, or traits of humans. If a person cannot obtain or achieve these activities to a sufficient extent, it might be claimed that this person does not maintain basic human dignity and hence cannot obtain the basic minimum.

However, the appeal to a perfectionist account of basic human dignity simply pushes the problem back a level. To see this, consider a classic objection to accounts of the good that treat human nature as morally significant, stated here by Bernard Williams:

[A] palpable degree of evaluation has already gone into the se-

³⁸Although one might reasonably respond by claiming that *for some individuals*, Nussbaum's approach yields a life of greater dignity than the maintenance of a valued project would. Imagine that A values two projects, one of which is undignified, the other dignified. Granting A Nussbaum's ten capabilities would yield the opportunity to complete the dignified project as well as the undignified. For WBM, A need only complete the undignified project. While this is a possible scenario, I doubt it is common. More importantly, however, Nussbaum cannot very well reject a basic minimum on grounds that it fails to guarantee a life of dignity; whether or not Nussbaum's approach allows for *more* dignified lives, it certainly does not *guarantee* them.

³⁹See Nussbaum (2000), 71-2.

lection of the distinguishing mark which is given [the role of human nature], such as rationality or creativity. If one approached without preconceptions the question of finding characteristics which differentiate men from other animals, one could as well, on these principles, end up with a morality which exhorted men to spend as much time as possible in making fire; or developing peculiarly human physical characteristics; or having sexual intercourse without regard to season; or despoiling the environment and upsetting the balance of nature; or killing things for fun.⁴⁰

Williams' critique is important to take seriously. Thomas Hurka labels this the "wrong properties objection".⁴¹ If "human nature" can explain the moral or evaluative resonance of certain properties that fall under its purview, it must be the case that we feel some requirement to treat "having sexual intercourse without regard to season" as morally or evaluatively important. But as this property is trivial, the appeal to human nature seems to imply the evaluative significance of the wrong properties, and hence fails as a morally or evaluatively important concept. Many qualities and characteristics separate humans from the non-human animal kingdom, not simply rationality, creativity, or any other element on Nussbaum's list. Some of what separates us from the animal kingdom is undesirable.

One might put the wrong properties objection in the form of a challenge. For an appeal to human nature to accomplish real work in rejecting WBM, it must avoid the problem that seems to plague a raw appeal to human dignity: lives that develop or exercise human nature are those, simply, that we think are good enough to maintain the basic minimum. This would render an appeal to human nature a simple table-pounding assertion that WBM is false. Instead, the appeal to human nature must itself *explain* why certain lives are better than others: human nature must itself be morally or evaluatively important, independently of whatever particular evaluative judgments it supports. But the wrong properties objection seems to shed doubt on the *per se* importance of human nature: we do not regard any old property as being important to an account of the basic minimum simply because it is a feature of human nature. If so, human nature does not maintain the requisite explanatory power.

Hurka offers an important response to this challenge.⁴² His strategy is to

⁴⁰Williams (1993), 59.

⁴¹Hurka (1993), 8.

⁴²I should note here that Hurka rejects perfectionism as an account of human welfare. But this is irrelevant for our purposes here. See Hurka (1993), 17-18, 194n17.

provide a morally important concept of human nature that does not succumb to the wrong properties objection. For Hurka, the right way to rule out the undesirable traits noted by Williams is to provide an account of human nature in terms of the human *essence*, and to restrict evaluatively significant essential properties to those properties human beings possess necessarily and that are conditioned on their being living things, as opposed to things generally.⁴³ This rules out properties such as “upsetting the balance of nature”.

But Hurka’s move, I think, has the following problem. In narrowing our understanding of human nature to the *human essence* we appear to have simply chiseled out an understanding of nature that delivers the proper verdicts. The reason we have restricted our understanding of human nature, and not restricted it *further*, is that *this* account seems to yield verdicts we find plausible—*not* because there is anything intrinsically important about this, rather than any other, account of human nature. But if this is correct claiming that a certain life fulfills human nature to a greater extent than some other life is simply tantamount, once again, to a declaration of our confidence that this life is good (along relevant dimensions). An appeal to human nature or human dignity is simply eliminable, and, as an objection to WBM, reduces to table-pounding.

Hurka disputes this. Hurka agrees that in order to defend an appeal to human nature, it *must* be the case that human nature is a plausible ideal independently of whatever consequences it might entail: “A substantive defence of perfectionism must follow the same lines as a defence of morality. It must show that the theory coheres with our intuitive moral judgments at all levels of generality, or, in Rawls’s phrase, is in ‘reflective equilibrium’ with all these judgments. . . It must show, first, that the general perfectionist ideal, that of developing human nature, is attractive when considered by itself as a potential foundation for morality.”⁴⁴ But Hurka claims that human nature is itself an independently plausible ideal, and hence any “fine-tuning” of an account of human nature (i.e., accounting for human nature in terms of the human essence) in light of the wrong-properties objection does not show that an appeal to perfectionist concepts performs no explanatory work.⁴⁵ After all, the concept is morally significant in itself, independent of any *particular* solution to the wrong properties objection.

⁴³Hurka (1993), 15-17. Philip Kitcher argues that Hurka cannot, without imposing his own intuitions, derive a notion of goodness from human essence. I agree with Kitcher, but my argument will address a different point. See Kitcher (1999).

⁴⁴Hurka (1993), 31.

⁴⁵Hurka (1993), 16, 32.

But I think Hurka is mistaken. I deny that his strategy is simply fine-tuning of a *prima facie* plausible ideal. The appeal to human nature would not be plausible but for the fine-tuning in which Hurka is engaged. Without this fine tuning, the appeal to nature, or essence, or any other perfectionist concept would be a non-starter. And if this is correct, there is no evaluative work performed by an appeal to human nature, dignity, essence, or “truly human functioning”; appealing to a concept of human nature to defeat WBM is simply tantamount to asserting that WBM wrongly describes some lives as maintaining the basic minimum.

To see this, note that Hurka’s claim that human nature is an independently plausible ideal is *testable*. One relevant test is *resistance to recalcitrance*. Consider the extent to which we are willing to revise our beliefs about value in light of a recalcitrant belief about what is part of human nature, even in Hurka’s refined sense. If such an appeal is a plausible indicator of value, we should believe that this appeal has at least *some* power to override recalcitrant intuitions. For instance, let’s imagine that we come to believe that a disposition to develop hypothermia under cold conditions is part of what is essential to humanity, conditioned on being living things. What pressure would there be to accept that property as morally significant or intrinsically good? I contend: none whatsoever. Instead, the response (which models Hurka’s own strategy) would be to revise that account of human nature further, such that the trivial property is avoided. For an appeal to human nature to play a role in a reflective equilibrium, it must have at least some resistance to recalcitrant beliefs. But it does not.

Consider *mortality*. Let’s say that we come to believe that mortality is a valuable property of humanity, i.e., it’s better not to live forever. Assume that this is a settled matter. However, on any plausible view, *length of life* is not valuable in and of itself; extended life is good or bad based solely on what that life contains. Length of life is surely only instrumentally good or bad. But suppose that we come to believe that mortality is part of human nature in Hurka’s refined sense. (I’m uncommitted on this proposal.) On a perfectionist view, mortality would not simply be instrumentally good, but intrinsically good, good in itself. But are we prepared to make this change in our beliefs on the basis of a verdict about human nature? I find this far-fetched to say the least. A claim about human nature appears to have no power to influence the value of mortality one way or the other. But if so, human nature, the human essence, or other perfectionist concepts appear to be weak ideals, indeed.

Notice that in making this argument I’m not imagining that our nature or essence is different than it is. (As Hurka points out, one cannot evaluate

a counterfactual involving essence.⁴⁶) Rather, I'm imagining that we come to believe that our nature or essence contains mortality, which perhaps it may not. But this is the relevant test: if human nature is an independently plausible ideal, we ought to feel at least some pressure to revise our considered judgments about goodness or welfare in light of a contrary belief about human nature. If *we believe* that an appeal to nature comes along with a counterintuitive verdict, we ought to feel some pressure to accept that verdict. But it appears we are prepared to accept *no* such verdicts. An appeal to human nature is only as plausible as its verdicts. But if this is correct, the appeal to human nature has no more force than a direct appeal to the verdicts it supports. It can play no *per se* moral or evaluative role.

We should be reluctant to believe that an account of the basic minimum should take as crucial an appeal to “truly human functioning,” “human dignity,” or various other quasi-perfectionist notions as important in defining the basic minimum. By way of an objection to WBM, an appeal to human dignity (however it is understood) has no greater force than merely insisting that some lives that maintain the basic minimum according to WBM are not worthy of the basic minimum. And while there is a powerful objection of this form on the horizon—that WBM allows insufficiently good lives to maintain the basic minimum—WBM is not threatened by any objection that derives its force from an appeal to human nature, human dignity, or “truly human functioning”.

2.8. *Objection: Autonomy*

Though an appeal to human dignity cannot motivate an objection to WBM, there may still be some hesitation to accept it, given that it includes no reference whatever to *autonomy*. Some have held that autonomy is essential to the basic minimum.⁴⁷ Indeed, in the abstract, such a view is plausible. A slave, or a destitute sex worker, would seem—no matter how well their lives are otherwise going—not to possess the basic minimum simply because they fail to exercise a proper degree of autonomous control over their lives.

Take, for instance, the following case:

Sarah: Sarah is a slave. She is forced, under threat of death, to perform tasks, some offensive to her, for the benefit of others. Though she never escapes slavery, Sarah develops and maintains a long-term love relationship with another slave. Sarah values

⁴⁶Hurka (1993), 21-22.

⁴⁷See, for instance, Hassoun (2008).

this relationship and maintains it for much of her life.

The problem presented by Sarah appears to be this. If Sarah's love relationship with another slave is a valued project, WBM must hold that Sarah maintains the basic minimum. But this is *wildly* implausible. The partisan of WBM might respond that Sarah's love relationship is not a *global* project, but this seems difficult to motivate insofar as her relationship might very well be life-structuring, narratively unifying, and of significant temporal duration, i.e., might display the various necessary features of a global project as identified in §2.3. But, contrary to WBM, for Sarah to maintain the basic minimum she must not be a slave. She must be (to at least some extent) autonomous.

One might reasonably ask why Sarah lacks autonomy in the relevant sense. After all, she seems able to choose a love relationship that she values. Why is she not, then, autonomous? Or, at least, autonomous enough for the basic minimum? To answer this question, it is important to note that the sense of autonomy important to the basic minimum—according to those who insist on its importance—is more robust than that which Sarah maintains. Consider, for instance, the account of autonomy proposed by James Griffin. Griffin writes that to be autonomous, one must “choose one's own path through life—that is, not be dominated or controlled by someone or something else.”⁴⁸ This view is expressed forcefully by John Stuart Mill, in a crucial passage from *On Liberty*:

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision. And these qualities he requires and exercises exactly in proportion as the part of his conduct which he determines according to his own judgment and feelings is a large one. It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm's way, without any of these things. But what will be his comparative worth as a human being?⁴⁹

The ideas pointed to by Griffin and Mill might plausibly be grouped under

⁴⁸Griffin (2007), 33.

⁴⁹Mill (1759), III 4.

the heading of “agency”. On this view, to live an autonomous life, one must live the life of an *agent*. To live the life of an agent, one must do more than simply live a life that *to some degree* reflects one’s values, or that was chosen in some minimal way. One must deliberate practically about one’s life and decisions, and act on the result of this deliberation. In this way, Griffin and Mill seem to have the power to plausibly account for our reticence to describe Sarah as fully autonomous, and to describe the extent to which Sarah fails the basic minimum as the extent to which Sarah is *not* fully autonomous. Though Sarah’s life might pass the test of the basic minimum laid down in WBM, she certainly does not choose her own path through life; she is under the thumb of her captors, despite achieving a long-term project she values.

However, I resist the claim that one must deliberate or engage one’s practical rationality or agency to maintain the basic minimum. Take, for instance, the following character.

Han: Han is a soldier of fortune. He has no plan of life, and does not deliberate according to his own activities. He acts in short-term ways; he engages his rational capacities only insofar as these capacities are required to obtain sustenance. His life is not in his deliberative control. In performing a particular action or in engaging in a certain activity, Han decides solely on whim—how he is feeling in that particular moment. Han never has any desire, nor performs any action, that is sustained by deliberation. Hence Han does not choose his own path through life. However, he does value the project of “being a soldier of fortune” (which unifies and explains a large chunk of Han’s decisions and actions despite his lack of agency) under the conditions under which his life is actually lived.

Han does not reason practically about his life, but rather conducts his life on the basis of whim, caprice. He chooses on the basis of mere fleeting inclinations. He does not adopt plans. According to WBM, Han maintains the basic minimum. As you will recall, one can “fall into” valued projects, as Han has done here. Though he does not deliberate, does not exercise his agency, and is controlled by the winds of fortune, he obtains the basic minimum because the life he ends up leading is narratively structured by a project he values, i.e., being the sort of person who eschews the agency in question. But this verdict is not embarrassing; it seems to me quite wrong to say that Han does not, pretheoretically anyway, conform to the basic minimum. If so, agency is not required.

Those who insist on the importance of autonomy will object that Han clearly has something that Sarah does not, viz., the absence of external control. Han, were he to so choose, *could* reason, deliberate, etc., about the projects and activities of his life. Sarah, on the other hand, is forced to live a particular kind of life, a life that is beyond her control. Perhaps, as a compromise position, one might insist that the basic minimum needn't require substantial agency, but—given Sarah's condition—it *must* require *options*, different ways one might live one's life.

Two problems arise. First, the original problem comes up again: why does Sarah lack options? After all, one might claim that Sarah does have *certain* options, viz., Sarah has the option to either engage in a love relationship or refrain, about which she might or might not choose to exercise her deliberative agency. Furthermore, Sarah might have her choice of possible partners, and may even use her capacity to deliberate and reason practically to determine which possible partner would provide her the most fulfillment.

Of course, the obvious response is that Sarah does not have the right *kind* of choices or options about the structure of her life. To maintain the correct kind of autonomy, Sarah must also be able to deliberate about and choose her life in a *broad* sense, viz., must have options that are more all-encompassing than the choice between one or two particular projects. But leaving aside the vagueness of this suggestion, it is difficult to see how any person could have control over such all-encompassing options over the direction of his or her life. The extent to which any particular life is open to someone will depend on many things, including intelligence, talents, upbringing, etc. Almost every person will have certain significant possibilities for life closed by the forces of happenstance and the choices of others. Hence substantive options in a broad sense—however this is understood—do not seem necessary to the achievement of the basic minimum.

A further case sheds light.

Rex: Rex is king. His status as such comes along with great privilege and high social esteem. Furthermore, being a good king (a task at which he succeeds) is for Rex a valued project. However, were Rex to abdicate his throne, this would cause his nation to be thrown into chaos, and would result in Rex being executed by a neo-facist revolutionary front.

In a very real sense, Rex has no ability to alter the long-term, all-encompassing nature of his life. He is either king, or abdicates his throne, leading to capture and execution. But I am strongly inclined to believe that Rex, as king, does not fail the basic minimum. Further, it seems plausible to say that

Rex's life goes well beyond the basic minimum: Rex lives a life that is a rousing success. But this is compatible with saying that Rex, like Sarah, has no reasonable options. Thus the basic minimum does not require options, agency, or autonomy.

2.9. Objection: Too Low, Part One

A final objection to WBM must be dealt with here. WBM seems *too low*. Leaving aside dignity, autonomy, or agency, WBM seems to allow lives that are substantially awful to obtain the basic minimum. One need look no further than Sarah.

This is an important objection; it will require careful examination. Indeed, one can read the suggestion that WBM sets the minimum too low in (at least) two ways. First, one might say that according to WBM the basic minimum can be achieved without some of the central paradigmatic elements of a basic minimum, viz., medical care, shelter, decent food, basic needs, etc. If that is correct, WBM is not responsive to the initial intuitions that motivate the acceptance of a basic minimum. I consider this in the following section. A far more serious challenge, however, is that WBM implies that—leaving aside agency, autonomy, options, resources, capabilities, etc.—someone could maintain the basic minimum without living a life of minimal decency. In discussing this objection, I focus again on *Sarah*. The problem with Sarah, as we have so far discovered, is not that she lacks autonomy, options, or other non-welfarist goods. Rather, she simply lives a life that is not good enough to describe as maintaining any reasonable basic minimum. I discuss this problem in §2.9.2.

2.9.1. WBM, Basic Needs, and Basic Capabilities

WBM seems to set a basic minimum that is *far lower* than competitor conceptions. To see what I mean, consider Shue's account of subsistence: "unpolluted air, unpolluted water, adequate food, adequate clothing, adequate shelter, and minimal preventive public health care... the basic idea is to have available for consumption what is needed for a decent chance at a reasonably healthy and active life of more or less normal length, barring tragic interventions." WBM guarantees none of these things. Furthermore, one might consider WBM in relation to Nussbaum's approach. Nussbaum's list is too expansive, but one might even consider the most basic elements of the capabilities approach: nourishment, basic security, etc. If, to maintain the basic minimum, one need only maintain a valued project, surely

some sort of achievement of the basic minimum is possible to eke out without even the most central of Nussbaum's capabilities. This is especially true if—pursuant to my conception of valued projects—to achieve the basic minimum one need only *barely* regard the life one leads as worth living.

Of course, to argue against WBM on the ground that it does not guarantee some particular level of food, basic needs, or other non-welfare good will beg the question against any welfarist approach: no welfarist approaches will guarantee that those who obtain the basic minimum will obtain some set of *non-welfarist* goods or resources. But the problem here might be stated in a different way. Even among welfarist views, WBM is uniquely problematic. If we set the basic minimum at a *higher* level of welfare, we may be able to insist that the basic minimum in at least most cases guarantees more of the paradigmatic basic needs or commodities that generate of the intuitive pull of any basic minimum. After all, if the basic minimum does not guarantee, to at least most people, “unpolluted air, unpolluted water, adequate food,” etc., who cares about a basic minimum, anyway?

In response to this problem, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the basic minimum does not constitute simply the achievement of some welfare good or other, or any old life that is preferred to the shortest possible. Rather, it requires a valued global project. WBM requires that one live a life that is narratively unified, the activities of which maintain a shared meaning, such that this particular meaning is part of an explanation of one's own assessment of that life as worth living. But if this is correct, two points are important to keep in mind. First, engaging in valued projects requires a life to have a certain narrative thread—something that explains and unifies one's life in the long-term and is, at least in part, constituted by one's actions and decisions. And although such a narrative thread can be sustained without agency in some cases, as in Han's, most lives that maintain such unity must do so as a result of the agency of the person involved: effort to stick to a particular track, agency to make the relevant decisions, practical reasoning sufficient to be successful.⁵⁰ In short, the achievement of a global project, for most people anyway, will require autonomy or agency just in the sense Griffin describes. If that's correct, and if this sort of agency requires a sufficient degree of education, shelter, food, freedom from disease, the achievement of a valued project will require these things (for most people anyway).⁵¹ I find it very difficult to believe that any global project of this sort could be successfully maintained in the long-term if a person lacks

⁵⁰Rawls (1971), 423-4.

⁵¹Cf. Hassoun (2008).

access to adequate food, shelter, medical care, and the absence of violations of a person's body in the form of violence and coercion. Without these things, few could engage in the unified activities and deliberations that are constitutive of a long-term global project.

This point permits of an easy response. As noted above, global projects just *are* narrative unifiers. Any such unifier, if it successfully explains, is in part constituted by, and provides a shared meaning to one's activities and decisions in the long term, will count as a global project. But if that is correct, any number of lives that lack basic needs, or even a moderate set of capabilities, etc., could be described as maintaining long-term projects: "being a destitute sex worker" could in principle unify and be constituted by one's activities across the course of a life. But surely this project cannot be sufficient to capture the intuitive concept of a basic minimum, insofar as this individual will not maintain virtually any basic needs, or even the most central elements of Nussbaum's capabilities approach.

Of course, this is correct. Any number of wildly poor long-term states or activities could count as global projects in my sense. But—and this is the second point—even if some people might be able to engage global projects while lacking access to adequate food, shelter, medical care, and the absence of violations in the form of violence and coercion, virtually no one will *value* the achievement of a global project *under such conditions*. Though I may be able to complete a global project of being a destitute sex worker, I will not *value* this project. Insofar as my life is worth living at all, any explanation of my assessment of it as worth living will surely *not* appeal to the fact that I am a destitute sex worker. If that is correct, though *some* global projects might be achievable without the central basic needs, or central capabilities, virtually none will be valued.

Of course, the key phrase in the preceding paragraphs is "virtually none" rather than "none". But to insist on a basic minimum that requires *all* persons to maintain, e.g., Shue's basic needs or Nussbaum's capabilities is simply to beg the question against any welfarist approach. However, I have shown that *most* people will require such basic needs, and a stiff helping of Nussbaum's capabilities, to be able to engage in any project, let alone a *valued* project. And that is all that is required to defend WBM from the objection at hand. Any approach to the basic minimum that insists on the further provision of needs, capabilities, etc., to those who do not need them to maintain the central element of human welfare will display a problematic fetishism of needs, resources, or capabilities that we have already uncovered in rival conceptions.

2.9.2. Reconsidering Sarah

So WBM captures the most intuitively significant of the paradigmatic basic needs or basic capabilities. I take this to be substantial evidence that WBM is not too low for our considered judgments. However, there remains skepticism not about the ability of WBM to capture the requirements of other theories of the basic minimum, but rather to be compatible with the driving force behind a *welfarist* basic minimum, i.e., that those who maintain the basic minimum should live lives of minimal decency. In short, the problem is Sarah. Sarah's life seems bad enough as described. But let's embellish. Though Sarah maintains a valued project, and thus must see her life as worth living, we can assume that as far as Sarah is concerned, her love relationship renders her life only *barely* worth living. Thus, given that she is a slave, and given that she *barely* regards her life as worth living, can we legitimately say that she lives a good enough life to maintain the basic minimum? Surely the answer is no.

I must admit that this intuition is powerful. I won't waste my time arguing that this considered judgment is not robust. But even if this is correct, I think the balance of reasons tell in favor of Sarah's achievement of the basic minimum. This is a bullet-biting response. But it seems to me that to embrace Sarah's basic minimum is in fact a *strength* of my approach. I offer two arguments to this effect. The first is an argument from within Sarah's perspective. I claim that if we recognize the nature of global projects and what it takes for them to be valued, it is less implausible to believe that Sarah's life is good enough to maintain the basic minimum. The second argument, however, appeals to the nature of any basic minimum. The basic minimum *by nature* picks out a very low threshold. If so, any view that suggests that Sarah *does not* maintain the basic minimum is, as a theory of the basic minimum if not as a theory of desirable social goals, false.

First, when looking at Sarah, it is tempting to declare that her slavery itself renders her life insufficiently good to exceed the minimum threshold. (For someone who achieves a valued project and is not a slave, we wouldn't have the same hesitation to declare that she maintains the basic minimum.) But this intuition should be discarded. It seems to me incorrect to believe that no one could possibly maintain the basic minimum or live a life of minimal decency under conditions of slavery. Surely whether a slave can meet the minimum threshold depends on the sort of life one lives *as* a slave. We could imagine a slave treated with a reasonable degree of respect (beyond the obvious violation), provided a thorough education, left physically unharmed, allowed and encouraged to pursue projects and interests, etc.

Though there may be very good moral reasons to condemn this sort of slavery despite this person's overall level of welfare (see below), these reasons surely do not result from an interest in the basic minimum. But if that's right, cases in the midst of slavery, and other typically awful conditions, must be considered case-by-case.

What about Sarah? I think the most telling evaluative aspect of Sarah's life is the attitude she takes to her love relationship. Recall that any valued project must be valued in context; it must be lived within a life seen as worth living, and must help to explain why that life is seen as worth living. However, under slavery conditions virtually *no* global project would be valued because virtually no one would regard such a life as worth living. Of course, this is only in the normal case. We have assumed that even under conditions of slavery, Sarah values the maintenance of a successful love relationship with a fellow slave. Even considering the conditions *as* a slave, Sarah regards the life in which she maintains this love relationship as having been worth living. To put this another way, Sarah values her love relationship *enough* to accept slavery as a condition of obtaining it. Her achievement of this project helps to explain why she regards her life, even under the otherwise horrible conditions of slavery, as good rather than bad, "worth it" rather than not, of positive rather than negative value. If this is correct, I find it difficult to see why her life shouldn't be good enough to maintain the basic minimum even under conditions of slavery. (One might be tempted to claim that Sarah's preferences might have been shaped by her slavery, and that for this reason these preferences are not to be trusted. This is certainly possible, but this critique falls under the general heading of adaptive preferences, and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.)

I find the foregoing suggestions convincing, but I confess that the contrary judgment is powerful. My second argument for biting this bullet runs as follows. Recall the *concept* of a basic minimum. BM3 declares that when it comes to the reasons to promote valuable states, including welfare states, the reason to promote the basic minimum will be stronger, on a one-to-one basis, than the reason to promote any other valuable state. Given this, any basic minimum must occasionally allow upward distribution: moral priority for the better-off. Nussbaum's capabilities approach failed in light of this feature of a basic minimum: *Expansive List* was too expansive to plausibly support upward distribution. Hence we should be hesitant to set the basic minimum too high. If that is right, the *conceptual nature* of the basic minimum drives its appropriate level downward.

Indeed, as I shall now argue, WBM supports this form of upward distri-

bution, and basic minimums that could avoid Sarah's case *do not*. Consider Mary:

Mary: Like Sarah, Mary is a slave, but fails to maintain any valued projects whatever; if she obtains any welfare benefits at all, they are mere satisfactions.

Imagine that one has a choice between granting Mary a valued project (while a slave), and allowing Sarah to escape slavery (which would, assume, improve Sarah's life). Which is to take priority? Such a choice is obviously tragic, and is difficult to intuitively evaluate. But I cannot allow myself to believe that, in this case, Sarah's escape from slavery is to take moral priority to Mary's achievement of a life of valued, self-directed meaning, a life she regards as worth living in part because of the meaning she helps to shape. But if Sarah's escape from slavery does not take weak moral priority to Mary's valued project, Sarah's escape from slavery *cannot* be an essential part of her achievement of the basic minimum. Whatever the basic minimum is, it must be compatible with its achievement while a slave. Any view with a contrary verdict seems to imply an implausibly degree of upward distribution. Of course, virtually no one will value a project in such circumstances. But this does not alter the general point: we should not treat Sarah's case as a counterexample to WBM. Rather, WBM gets a feature of the basic minimum *exactly right*. WBM is not barred from plausibly accommodating the requirement of upward distribution.

Take a different example.

Glen and Jerry: Glen fails to maintain any valued project, but could become a Grand Central Station janitor, a project he barely values. Jerry is a Grand Central Station janitor, which he also barely values. However, Jerry could be promoted to a Grand Central Station ticket-taker, a project he values more strongly.

Is there greater reason to grant Glen the life of a Grand Central Station janitor, or to grant Jerry the job as a ticket-taker? Plausibly, Glen ought to take moral priority. Jerry's life already contains a long-term, narratively unified, and self-directed meaning, which Jerry regards as helping to explain why his life is worth living. Insofar as Glen does not obtain this central element of welfare, it seems to me that his potential project takes priority to Jerry's promotion. If that's right, then the conceptual requirements of any basic minimum support WBM rather than some "higher" minimum.

A critic might accuse me of cheating. So far I have compared Sarah to Mary, Glen to Jerry. But let's compare Glen to Sarah. Insofar as Glen does

not, but Sarah does, maintain a valued project, WBM must hold that Glen's (barely) valued project takes moral priority to Sarah's escape from slavery. But this, one might think, is absurd. *Surely* Glen's valued project is less morally significant than Sarah's freedom from slavery. Glen has something very important going for him: he is not a slave. If that is correct, it cannot be that Sarah's valued project constitutes her achievement of the basic minimum.

For what it's worth, I do not share the foregoing judgment. Given Sarah's interest in her valued project, which includes a willingness to regard a life of slavery itself as worth living *because* of it, I do not find the mere fact of her slavery compelling reason to believe that her freedom takes moral priority to Glen's valued project. But I shan't rest much on my considered judgment, as I recognize that I may very well be in the vast minority. Assume, for the moment, that Glen's valued project *does not* take moral priority to Sarah's freedom from slavery. Even if we accept that Sarah already maintains the basic minimum, Sarah's moral priority to Glen *is perfectly compatible with WBM*.

Recall the difference between BM1 and BM3. BM1, which I rejected as too strong, holds that political institutions must not allow anyone to fail the basic minimum; in this sense, the basic minimum is the dominant, overriding, priority of justice. If we accept BM1, we had better not say that the basic minimum is constituted by the achievement of a valued project. If the basic minimum is of overriding moral importance, and if WBM is true, Glen's valued project must take moral priority. But BM3—the correct account of the concept of a basic minimum—differs in two ways. First, the basic minimum need only take weak priority: priority on a one-to-one basis. Of course, this does nothing to alleviate the problem in this case. But notice that BM3 also claims that the basic minimum must take weak priority only when it comes to reasons to promote the achievement of valuable states of persons. But there may be other important moral reasons that go beyond reasons to promote valuable states. For instance, it might be that there is a blanket moral prohibition on slavery, and that a reason to free someone from slavery takes moral priority to the promotion of any valuable states in non-slaves (including Glen's basic minimum). Furthermore, we might believe that to honor the rights of individuals (such as Sarah) not to be enslaved is morally decisive with respect to the promotion of valuable states for others. Freeing Sarah from slavery is surely the promotion of a valuable state; and viewed strictly in terms of the promotion of valuable states, Glen's project takes priority. But this does not entail that there are not other, perhaps very strong, moral reasons to free Sarah from slavery, including reasons that have

nothing to do with the promotion of valuable states. Hence those who are convinced that Glen's valued project cannot take moral priority to Sarah's freedom from slavery needn't believe that Sarah's freedom from slavery is an essential element of Sarah's basic minimum. All such a person need believe is that there is more to morality than the promotion of valuable states of persons.

To sum up, there is good reason to believe that the achievement of a valued project, as I define "valuing", is not too low to constitute the basic minimum. It's "lowness" is precisely one of its strengths given the nature of any basic minimum (a strength that evades accounts of the minimum like Nussbaum's). While I recognize that there are strong considered judgments that tell against Sarah's maintenance of the basic minimum, many of these judgments can, in fact, be accepted by WBM: it is perfectly in keeping with WBM to declare that though Sarah maintains the basic minimum, her rescue from slavery should take moral priority (given reasons other than the promotion of valuable states) to benefits for non-slaves. I should note here, however, that the objection that WBM is too low will *rise again*.

2.10. Conclusion and Theories of Well-Being

This chapter has argued that reflection on the importance of valued projects in assessments of life quality leads naturally into a welfarist theory of the basic minimum. WBM is plausible in its own right. WBM is able to fix the defects of previous approaches. Furthermore, WBM has resources to avoid three substantial objections. Hence, it seems to me, there is good reason to give WBM a very serious look.

By way of a conclusion, I want to make good on a promissory note. In the first section of this chapter, I said that my version of a welfarist basic minimum is compatible with a number of substantive theories of well-being. To show this, it is helpful to note an important distinction in welfare theories. The logical space of theories of well-being is entirely covered by the distinction between *subjective* theories which, in the words of L. W. Sumner, treat "my having a favourable attitude toward something as a necessary condition of the thing being beneficial to me";⁵² and *objective* theories, which hold that "something can be (directly and immediately) good for me though I do not regard it favourably, and my life can be going well despite my failing to have any positive attitude toward it."⁵³ To put this a little

⁵²Sumner (1996), 38.

⁵³Sumner (1996), 38.

more precisely, subjectivism about well-being holds that p is valuable for A only if A takes a pro-attitude toward p . Objectivism holds that it is not the case that p is valuable for A only if A takes a pro-attitude toward p . These views are mutually exhaustive and exclusive.

Though not every theory of well-being can accept WBM, a wide range of objective and subjective theories can. I begin with subjectivism. Subjectivism encompasses a wide range of theories of well-being, including desire-satisfaction theories, “life satisfaction” theories, and various other views. But there are distinctions to be made when it comes to the broad structure of subjectivism, and the relationship between a given individual’s valuing attitude and that person’s good. First, consider:

Weak Subjectivism: p is intrinsically good for A (at t) only if p is valued by A (at t).

Weak Subjectivism insists on a weak connection between a person’s well-being and a person’s conception of the good. Weak Subjectivism leaves it open that A might endorse, or take a pro-attitude toward, some particular p , but that, because of some independent fact about p , p is not good for A. For Weak Subjectivism, ratification by A’s conception of the good is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of genuine prudential goods for A. However, some subjectivists will hold that the connection between well-being and one’s own conception of the good is considerably stronger. There are two versions of a strong subjectivism that are worth distinguishing here. Consider:

Weak Strong Subjectivism: p is intrinsically good for A (at t) if and only if p is valued by A (at t).

According to Weak Strong Subjectivism, that p is intrinsically good for A is simply determined by whether A endorses p . However, Weak Strong Subjectivism still leaves it open that there may be facts about A’s well-being that are independent of A’s conception of the good. In particular, Weak Strong Subjectivism allows that though p and q might both be endorsed by A, and hence both improve A’s well-being, the comparative value of p and q could, in principle, be determined not by A’s preferences among p and q , but rather by some other facts about p and q that are independent of A’s conception of the good. With this in mind, the strongest version of subjectivism is:

Strong Strong Subjectivism: p is intrinsically good for A (at t) if and only if, and to the extent that, p is valued by A (at t).

Strong Strong Subjectivism, as opposed to Weak Strong Subjectivism, holds that not only is A's endorsement of p a necessary and sufficient condition for p 's prudential value for A, but that *how valuable for A p is* is determined by A's conception of the good. A might, for instance, maintain a preference for p over q , which would then entail that p is better for A than q .

Strong Strong Subjectivism is incompatible with *Thesis*. One might imagine some individual A who prefers some particular satisfaction p to some particular valued project q . In this case, Strong Strong Subjectivism would entail that p makes a bigger prudential splash for A than q , violating *Thesis*.

Of course, there is nothing internal to Strong Strong Subjectivism that prevents it from claiming that the achievement of some valued project or other is that which constitutes the basic minimum. Nevertheless, in denying *Thesis*, Strong Strong Subjectivism lacks a crucial rationale WBM.⁵⁴ Weak Strong Subjectivism (not to mention Weak Subjectivism) can declare that the achievement of a valued projects is evaluatively *special* when it comes to individual well-being in a way that Strong Strong Subjectivism cannot. For Strong Strong Subjectivism, the achievement of a valued project is just one preferred good among many. Hence, without being able to accommodate *Thesis*, it would appear that Strong Strong Subjectivism is ruled out as accommodating WBM.

I take this result to be a problem for Strong Strong Subjectivism, not for WBM. Insofar as there are independent reasons to accept *Thesis*, there are very strong reasons, or so it seems to me, to reject Strong Strong Subjectivism. However, this does not mean that subjectivism on the whole-sale is prevented from accommodating WBM. Weak Subjectivism and Weak Strong Subjectivism can support *Thesis*. Because they allow that certain preference-independent facts about particular welfare goods can alter the overall rank-ordering of welfare goods, Weak and Weak Strong Subjectivisms can claim that q is a more significant determinant of A's welfare than p despite the fact that p may be preferred by A to q . Hence, WBM can be

⁵⁴Take, for instance, two individuals A and B. A prefers all valued satisfactions to all projects. B prefers all projects to all satisfactions. A and B prefer their preferred objects with the same intensity, or to the same extent. Assume that each person A and B satisfy their preferences to degree x . Strong Strong Subjectivism claims that A and B must live lives of equivalent quality, though WBM declares that A—because A prefers satisfactions—does not maintain the basic minimum. This seems to violate the basic guiding principle of any welfarist basic minimum, i.e., that the basic minimum should be some evaluatively special welfare achievement, that the life of a person who fails the basic minimum should, at the very least, be *worse* than the life of a person who maintains the basic minimum.

supported by subjectivist theories, if only two of the three distinguishable versions.

Objective theories hold that for p to be intrinsically good for A, A need not endorse, or take a pro-attitude toward, p . In other words, a view is objective if it holds that so much as one particular welfare good p is good for one particular person A without A taking a pro-attitude toward p .

The most famous version of an objective theory is the so-called “objective list”. The objective list view is simply a list of items that benefit individuals. The items on the list need not share any individual unifying thread. For instance, an objective list view could identify the maintenance and fulfillment of a valued project as one entry—indeed, a very important entry—on the list. Other items on the list could include hedonic satisfaction, the fulfillment of momentary desires, knowledge, virtue, etc.⁵⁵ Hence it is perfectly open for an objective list view to declare that the fulfillment of a valued project is evaluatively special, and hence to accept *Thesis*, along with WBM.

Some might object. After all, the basic minimum as defined by WBM is importantly subjective: whether I maintain the basic minimum depends only on whether I achieve a valued project, which is in turn defined relative to my own conception of the good. Nothing in this definition of the basic minimum makes any reference to preference-independent or “objective” value at all. However, it is important here to distinguish between *subjectively defined welfare goods* and *subjective theories of welfare*.⁵⁶ One might suggest that the achievement of a valued project is a subjectively defined welfare good in the sense that such a good is defined relative to an individual’s subjective pro-attitudes, including their own assessment of their lives as worth living, and the contribution of a particular project to that assessment. But to suggest that a subjectively defined basic minimum is an important aspect of human well-being is not to be committed to a subjective *theory of welfare*. Subjective theories of welfare treat A’s pro-attitude toward p as a necessary condition for p ’s intrinsic value for A. Objective theories of welfare do not. Objective theories are perfectly licensed to accept that some welfare goods can be subjectively defined. Indeed, it is sensible for them to do so. Sometimes things can be good for me simply because I value them: some nights I just prefer Spanish plonk. The value of this may very well depend simply on its being the object of some preference of mine. But objective theories can accommodate this: sometimes the satisfaction of a subjective attitude

⁵⁵For the best defense of the objective list view, see Arneson (1999).

⁵⁶Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for calling this ambiguity to my attention.

as such improves one's life.

Objectivism is thus extremely flexible. Whether an objective theory should accept the achievement of a valued project as prudentially special thus depends on the substantive arguments I offer in favor of *Thesis*. I hope that the arguments in this chapter have convinced—including objectivists—that it should be so regarded. It is worth noting here, however, that some objectivists will see an important “dividing line” not just along the dimension of those lives that maintain valued projects and those that do not, but along the dimension of those lives that maintain valued projects of *sufficient preference-independent value* and those that do not. Whether this “dividing line”, or the one identified by WBM, is the proper basic minimum I leave until §3.5.

Of course, not all objective views are compatible with *Thesis*. One such objective view, at least as I identify the taxonomy between objective and subjective, is *hedonism*. Hedonism holds that pleasure is the only welfare benefit. But given that pleasure cannot plausibly be described as a valued project (though, perhaps, the *pursuit* of pleasure could), hedonism cannot support even the claim that valued projects, of themselves, are welfare benefits, let alone accept *Thesis*. A hedonist might attempt to capture *Thesis* by claiming that people will take greater pleasure in the achievement of long-term goals, or in the maintenance of long-term valued states than they will in the fulfillment of various momentary desires, etc. But this point is far from obvious, and surely depends on the psychological state of any given individual. Hence, it seems to me, there is a limit to the ecumenicalism of *Thesis*, and hence WBM. (Though, like Strong Strong Subjectivism, I hold that there is greater reason to reject hedonism than *Thesis*.⁵⁷)

The basic point of this section has been to show that one needn't commit to, say, subjective welfarism, or any other particular theory of well-being to accept WBM. Though WBM rules out some individual theories of well-being, it is broadly ecumenical.

My discussion of the basic minimum has gone down a number of tangents, so I would like to briefly remind the reader of that for which I take to have argued for and what I take to have merely left open. First, I argued for *Thesis*, which holds that valued projects are a central element of human well-being. Second, I argued that WBM is defensible as a theory of the basic minimum. In addition, I have responded to three objections. Most importantly, even in light of *Sarah*, WBM is not too low. When it comes to

⁵⁷I shall not spend any additional time rejecting hedonism here. I have tried to show that hedonism is untenable elsewhere. See Dorsey (2011).

the conceptual nature of a basic minimum, WBM is just right. Furthermore, I have argued that *Thesis* and WBM can be accepted from the standpoint of a wide range of substantive theories of well-being, both objective and subjective.

One important lesson of this chapter is that a non-arbitrary welfarist basic minimum can respect *The Basic Minimum as Proto-autonomy*. However, I have not responded to the second horn the welfarist's dilemma: it would seem that any view that takes seriously conceptions of the good in defining the basic minimum must succumb to the problem of adaptive preferences. In the next chapter I argue that WBM can avoid this problem—or, at least, can do no worse than Nussbaum's capabilities approach.