

**THE DIFFICULTY OF LIVING WELL:
EFFORT AND FAILURE IN THE GOOD LIFE**

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ABSTRACT

We all want to live good lives, but due to the difficulty involved, few of us ever succeed. We usually either fail in our attempts to live well or remain with our safer, and less worthwhile, options. In spite of this, there has been little, if any, investigation of the role that difficulty plays in our attempts to live well, and thus in our conceptions of the good life. Within the field of the good life, philosophers tend to acknowledge the fact that good lives are difficult to live, and leave it at that. Since we must all face the difficulty of living well, the lack of analysis of the implications of difficulty seems a glaring oversight. In order to redress this, I explore the role that difficulty plays in two requirements for living well, namely achievement and reflection.

Firstly, I examine the relationship between effort and achievement. I argue that difficulty just is the requirement of effort, and that it is required in order for our achievements to be meaningful and for us to value them. Secondly, I look at the relationship between failure and reflection. I argue that reflection on our failures can lead us to knowledge that helps us to live well and that we would not usually come to if we did not fail. Finally, I look at the roles of effort and failure in some accounts of the good life and I draw on psychological research and theory to provide support for my conclusions about the positive effects of effort. I conclude by examining the implications of reducing difficulty for the future of humankind.

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1: Effort and Achievement | 7 |
| I Aspirations, Values, and Valuing | 7 |
| II Is there an Easy Route to the Good Life? | 16 |
| III Meaningful Achievement, Difficulty, and Effort | 20 |
| Chapter 2: Failure and Reflection | 31 |
| I Failure and Difficulty | 32 |
| II What is Failure? | 37 |
| III Human Limits and Vulnerabilities | 40 |
| IV Failure and Reflection | 45 |
| V Failure in the context of the Good Life | 52 |
| Chapter 3: Difficulty and the Good Life | 56 |
| I Aspirations as Desires | 57 |
| II The Psychology of Effort | 61 |
| III Symbolic Domains | 68 |
| IV Self-Direction and Ideals | 74 |
| V Conclusion | 79 |
| Bibliography | 83 |

Introduction

For most of us, our lives are based around the question, “What should I do in order for my life to go best?” We may cash this question out in various ways, depending on our beliefs, desires and attitudes. “What must I do to be happy?” “How can I be successful?” “How do I become a good Jew/Christian/Muslim/Marxist/Humanist?” “How do I become a good person?” “How do I achieve fulfilment?” All these questions have a common origin in the concern we have for who we are and the life that we live. Most of us care about who we are and how we live and want to make the most of ourselves and live the best possible life. I say most of us because many people struggle to just stay alive. They do not have the luxury of being concerned with bettering their life, because they must concentrate solely on their basic needs. For those of us lucky enough to be in the position to better our lives, we ultimately have the goal of living what is known as a good life.

The concept of the good life is at the heart of answering the question, “What should I do in order for my life to go best?” The good life is the life that is best for any given individual. Though, here, ‘best’ does not necessarily denote a single perfect life that the person should live. The ‘best’ life for a person to live is one that contains all of the goods required for human flourishing. These are goods such as friendship, love, pleasure, emotional and physical well-being, autonomy, and good moral character. Any life that contains all of the requisite goods could be called a good life. Exactly which goods are required for flourishing and how one attains them is the subject of great debate. Since ancient times, philosophers have argued for various conceptions of the good life and how we ought to go about achieving it.

My concerns are with what I perceive to be a shortcoming in philosophical work on the good life. This shortcoming involves the lack of analysis of a concept that is central to our attempts to live well: difficulty.¹ It is difficult to achieve the good life. Indeed, it is far easier for us to live meaningless lives, lives of quiet desperation, and thoughtless lives, rather than to live good lives. The good life requires resources that are difficult for most to attain and utilise correctly. It

¹ Throughout this thesis I will use ‘the good life’, ‘a good life’, and ‘living well’ interchangeably.

requires reflection, self-evaluation, and commitment that offer at best delayed returns and at worst no tangible gains at all. It requires us to move forward, trusting our own abilities and judgements, insofar as we know ourselves. It requires this and much more from us. It is far easier to just sit back and indulge ourselves, to stay with our safe bets, however stagnant and worthless they may be. That said, the reason why we may not pursue the good life does not necessarily have to do with the difficulty of achieving a good life. We could be scared of the unknown or ignorant of the possibility of a better life. Nevertheless, all of us who attempt to live good lives are faced with the difficulty of doing so.

In this thesis I will investigate the role of difficulty in the good life. Firstly, I examine the concept of effort and how it is related to the difficulty involved in achieving a good life. I start by looking at aspirations: how they form the central core of our lives and how our valuing them is necessary for the good life. I argue that aspirations are best understood as those things that we think are most valuable. Then I look at whether we can live a good life by achieving our aspirations easily. By appealing to our reflective intuitions, I argue that easy lives cannot be good. They cannot be good because they lack something necessary for the good life. I claim that the necessary component that they lack is meaningful achievement. Our aspirations occupy a central role in our lives and I argue that the meaningful achievement of them is partially constitutive of the good life. Meaningful achievement, Laurence James argues, requires difficulty, which is absent from such lives². Thus, easy lives lack the meaningfulness required for the good life. I adopt James' account and bolster it by explaining the concept of difficulty in terms of effort. What we mean by calling something difficult is that it requires effort to do. This means that achievement requires effort in order to be meaningful. I go further and argue that we cannot value our achievements as achievements without putting effort into them. Thus, in order to live well we need to put effort into achieving our aspirations, so that they are both meaningful and valuable, and this means that they must be difficult for us.

Secondly, I look at failure, which is intimately linked to difficulty. I start by looking at the susceptibility of certain tasks to failure. This does not simply indicate the presence of difficulty, but also constitutes a specific type of difficulty. I then look at what failure is and argue for a

² Laurence James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life'.

much wider definition of failure than is commonly used. Under this definition, failure is being prevented from attaining the things that we want, or from becoming the types of people we wish to become. In order to discover the role of failure in the good life, I look at human nature and its link to failure. Our lives are difficult and we fail because of our limited and fallible nature as human beings, I argue, and this is something we cannot escape. Since it is not possible to eliminate failure from our lives, we should see if we can gain something positive from our failures. Failure does, however, have a positive role to play in our lives, despite its negative consequences for our projects. Failure is one of the few things that consistently stimulate reflection and self-evaluation. Through reflecting on our failures we can come to knowledge about our activities and ourselves. This knowledge can allow us to avoid similar failures in the future. It can also give us deeper insight into our activities and our suitability to those activities. This knowledge is rarely acquired by other means.

Finally, I support my ideas by relating them to two accounts of the good life. I also provide empirical psychological research to support my conclusions about the role of effort in our lives. I begin by returning to the notion of aspirations and look at the role that effort has to play in the good life when using a different account of aspirations than the one I used in the first chapter. I use Alan Gewirth's account of the good life in *Self-Fulfilment*. He combines desire, self-actualisation, and universal morality to create a compelling account of the good life. In order to live well we need to fulfil our deepest desires, which are our aspirations, fulfil our latent capacities, and act in such a way that we respect the right of others to do likewise. While I use a value-based account of aspirations, I do not wish for my entire argument to necessarily require one. Thus, I argue that effort plays the same role whether we use a desire or value based account of aspirations, and also that effort has an important role to play in the actualisation of our capacities.

Next, following John Cottingham's arguments in *Philosophy and the Good Life* that philosophy should take psychology seriously, I look at some psychological research and theory. I examine empirical research done by Carol Dweck and colleagues³ on the effects of praising children and

³ Carol Dweck and Claudia Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance'; Carol Dweck, Lisa Blackwell, and Kali Trzesniewski, 'Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition'.

the effects of teaching children that their brains develop through mental exercise. Her research on praise shows a significant positive effect for children praised for effort over children praised for intelligence and children praised neutrally. Similarly, children who are told that their brains develop through exercise and effort, show an improvement in study skills and attitudes towards work. I argue that the positive effects observed in these studies correlate with the expected positive effects of putting effort into tasks that I described in chapter 1. I then look at the concept of vital engagement, proposed by Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.⁴ Vital engagement involves engaging with symbolic domains, domains of meaning associated with a shared project. I relate it to John Kekes' account of the good life in *The Examined Life*. Kekes' account of the good life is based around self-direction, or autonomy. The good life is the life that we want to live, of course vetted by various moral, practical, and social constraints. To live well we have to cultivate certain virtues, live a life that is suited to who we are, and do so by committing to ideals that are grounded in the moral tradition of our society. I argue that the commitment to ideals enriches our lives by introducing us into symbolic domains, which generate meaning for us. I further argue that this involves effort on our part, since effort modifies our self-concept, which is a necessary condition for deeper involvement in a symbolic domain. Finally, I present a few possible implications of my conclusions, some for humanity in the wider social context and some for the future of humankind.

Now, how does this project relate to the field of the good life? Most, if not all, theories of the good life combine two separate, but intimately connected, elements. Firstly, they provide a conception of the good life that describes what a good life would look like and then give arguments and reasons for why their conception is right. Conceptions of the good life, I think, can be divided into two broad groups. They can be character-based, where living well is mainly constituted by having virtues of character, as well as external goods. Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that virtues are required for flourishing because of human vulnerabilities and dependencies,⁵ falls into this group. Conceptions of the good life can also be what I will call achievement-based conceptions, where living well is mainly constituted by successful achievement of certain things, often with 'supporting' virtues. Alan Gewirth and John Kekes,

⁴ Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement'.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*.

mentioned above, fall into this group. Both groups, however, require successful achievement and virtue. Character-based conceptions require successful achievement, not least because developing a virtue is an achievement in itself, but also because character development does not occur within a vacuum. Our character develops within a context that includes the projects we engage in and their success or failure. Systematic failure in these projects, or a lack of these projects altogether, negatively affects the development of our character. Achievement-based conceptions, on the other hand, require virtues because of the role that they play in achievement. Just as the success of our projects plays a role in the development of our character, so too our character affects how we engage with and react to our projects. Having poor character can lead us to give up quickly or react badly to obstacles, whereas good character can lead to positive engagement with our projects that benefits us. The difference, then, between the two types of conceptions is largely one of focus and emphasis, rather than a difference in kind.

I mainly make use of Kekes' and Gewirth's accounts of the good life, which are both achievement-based. They emphasize the use of our agency to achieve certain things as a key component of living well. They both speak of virtue, but the role that virtues play in their accounts, while necessary, is relatively minor compared to the role that achievement and other aspects play. These accounts show the active role that we play in shaping our lives and developing ourselves. It is through the exercise of our abilities and by pursuing things that are valuable that we come to live well, with moral restrictions, of course. The generic conception of the good life that I make reference to throughout this thesis is of an achievement nature.

The second element of theories of the good life is the proscription they give of how to live well. Having constructed a conception of the good life, philosophers then give instructions of what one should do if one wants to live well. This is necessary because it needs to be possible for human beings to actually live such a life, if the theory is to have any merit. A theory of the good life is meant to be practical, and the onus is on philosophers to adhere to this. Thus, our conceptions of the good life need to be such that human beings can live the lives described by those conceptions. This means that conceptions of the good life need to be mediated by our nature as human beings and how we are affected by things. This is where my project is focussed. It is based on the idea that the notion of difficulty and its implications are largely ignored in theories of the good life. Such theories need to take into account why it is so difficult for us to live well.

By not doing so they ignore facts about us that are important in understanding how we attain goods and thus what our conceptions of the good life should look like. Thus, I wish to turn our attention to difficulty and examine some of these facts in order to enrich our understanding of what is involved in living well.

Chapter 1

Effort and Achievement

Living well does not just consist in knowing what goods we ought to have in our lives and then going out and obtaining them. How we go about pursuing worthwhile ends is also important in achieving the good life. Moreover, the nature of the things that we pursue sets the type of relationship we should have to them, and this is affected by how we pursue them. For example, the nature of friendship determines how one should regard and act towards friends in order to value them. If I pursue friendship for ulterior motives or selfish reasons, then I am not valuing it (as the notion of friendship is incompatible with these things), and thus I cannot obtain the good of friendship. I wish to concentrate here on a certain type of good, namely achievement. I aim to show, firstly, how achievement of our aspirations is central to living well. Secondly, I wish to show that if we want to live well, then we need to achieve things that are difficult for us to do. Living well requires meaningful achievement, which in turn requires that what we achieve is difficult. Finally, the very notion of difficulty necessitates that we put effort into our achievements if we want to live well. We need to put in effort because it is the only way to set up the relationship required to value our achievements, especially the achievement of our aspirations.

I Aspirations, Values, and Valuing

When we think of the good life, we tend to think of it as the life that is most desirable. We think of it as the type of life that every rational agent would want for him- or herself. This, however, is a general and abstract mode of thought about good lives. The most desirable life for an individual is not the 'good life', but rather a particular life that meets the criteria for being a good life, that is, a particular life that is an instantiation of the concept of the good life. We desire the good life only insofar as it is instantiated as a certain life which would benefit, or be good for, us.

People want to live a certain life well, rather than just to ‘live well’. We may, however, be very unclear about just how that life will unfold. We may also be undecided about how we want to live, but in these cases saying that we want to live well would just be saying that we want the life we do choose to be good.

There are a number of available lives a person could live, all of which would count as good lives. In different lives one could take different professions, and have different goals and projects, each of which would contribute to a good life for one. Thus individuals need to make choices about how to live well in order to live that particular good life that they want, choosing it out of the possible range of good lives they could live. Once we have made our choice, we need to then actively engage in the process of bettering ourselves and our lives. This involves reflecting on our values and the life that we live. Whether or not we are aware of it now, we have chosen the values that we have. Part of coming to live well is engaging in reflection that will allow us to examine our values and whether we should have them. This involves questioning whether having those values is good for us and whether a life in pursuit of them would be well spent. This reflective engagement with our values is an essential part of achieving the good life. We must be wary of thinking that we can just discover what values we currently have and then proceed as if they are what is best for us.

In order to decide which possible life we should choose to pursue, we need to see which lives contain the values that we think are best for us and worth pursuing. Our choice of values will be reflected in the way that we live, even if we are largely ignorant of what values we have. For example, the person who chooses not to go to university, but rather to open his own business, expresses a belief that independence or money (or that which the money is a means to, such as supporting a family) is more valuable than the acquisition of knowledge. Similarly the stay-at-home mother may be expressing a belief that the development of her children is more valuable than her own independence or economic standing. These examples seem fairly typical of the way in which all of us live our lives. We make certain choices, not always explicitly, about the type of person we wish to become and the type of life that we wish to have, and these by and large reflect what holds the most value for us. It is by becoming that person, and by coming to live that life, through reflection and within the boundaries set by a conception of the good life, that we come to live well. The conception of the good life we use sets what kinds of goods our life would

need in order for it to be a good life. Different philosophers give varying conceptions of the good life that list what goods we require to live well and often give general instructions of how to obtain those goods. Having a conception of the good life, however, does not set the content of our lives or give us personalised instructions of how to pursue the goods that constitute a good life.

It also seems that people just are interested in certain things and not others, and no-one appears to be interested in everything. Since we have limited time and resources to pursue and develop ourselves, it is therefore not even possible to do everything we want to, even if we may only be interested in a few things. Thus, we need to choose certain things that we will pursue, and then structure our lives in such a way that we can obtain those things. This is what almost all of us do. We aspire to be certain people and live certain lives, choosing what person we want to become and what life we want to live from the host of options available to us. If we choose wisely by reflecting on our lives, avoiding bad luck, and successfully achieving our goals, then we will most likely attain the goods that are required to live well. This means that we need to do a great deal of thinking and reflecting about ourselves and the life that we want. We start with a rough idea of how we want to live, but as we advance, we need to refine our ideas and follow some central thread that directs our lives. This central thread would be our *aspirations*, which are our major goals, the things we want most in life.

Thus, what we aspire to is central to our attempts to live well. There now arises the problem of how we characterise our aspirations, those things we want most. What we want most may be cashed out in terms of our strongest or deepest desires, or we may cash out aspirations as those things we think are most valuable for us. Regarding the former, our deepest desires would be those desires that usually display the strongest motivational force and which are those things we want most, not those desires that always move us to act.¹ Regarding the latter, our aspirations would be the things we think have the most value, and which give us strong reasons to desire them. What we desire most may not be what we think is most valuable, because desiring something

¹ Alan Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 23.

does not entail that it is valuable.² Insofar as we see things as good, however, we have reason to desire them, since that which is good is desirable.

Regarding the link between value and desire, Gary Watson claims that some of our desires are 'blind' in the sense that they arise prior to any evaluations we may make about the object of desire.³ When I feel thirsty I desire to drink water. This can be cashed out as my having an urge to drink water. This would be an example of a blind desire, and describes those cases where we desire something without seeing it as good. These cases, however, are quite rare. Our desires do not normally arise in some vacuum. Most often, when I am thirsty I have a dry sensation in my mouth, a belief that drinking water will take away this bad sensation, and I take elimination of the bad sensation to be a reason to drink water.⁴ My desire to drink water arises from this evaluation, and does not stand apart from it, operating independently. Cases in which we desire something that we do not think is good may happen, but they are special cases, and when we usually talk of desire, we speak of it occurring within an evaluative framework.⁵ Normally, I have desires because of my evaluations, not independently, or in spite, of them. What is important here is that the source of motivation is not the desire itself. The desire is a part of a larger motivational framework that is dependent on our seeing something as good, and seeing ourselves as having reason to do it, in order to see it as worth desiring. The lack of such an evaluate framework would rob us of the ability to rationalize our own actions.⁶

The notion of 'blind' desire, however, is not altogether useless. We do sometimes seem to have desires that are blind, that do not arise from within an evaluative framework. If I need to go to the bathroom, it is sometimes simply due to an urge to urinate, rather than a belief that my bladder is full and the thought that urination will empty it. Rather than seeing myself as having a reason to urinate, I simply have the urge to do so. In fact many of our non-blind desires attain value from the fact that we have appetites that are independent of our evaluations.⁷ Watson gives the example of erotic desire, which arises and gains value from our having erotic appetites that are basic to us. These erotic desires can move us to act independently of our judgments about

² Gary Watson, 'Free Agency', p. 211.

³ Watson, 'Free Agency', p. 212.

⁴ Thomas Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*, p. 38.

⁵ Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*, p. 38.

⁶ Scanlon, *What we owe to each other*, p. 38.

⁷ Watson, 'Free Agency', p. 212.

who it would be good to sleep with.⁸ These very appetites are part of what makes us the type of creatures we are and are what make certain activities valuable. For example, if we did not have erotic appetites, then we would not value physical intimacy, or have non-blind desires for it.

Of course we need to be able to make judgments as to what sort of erotic conduct is good for us, but in giving us reasons to act one way or another, these judgements draw on the appetites we already have, rather than giving rise to them. The judgments, in the case of blind desires, also occur after the fact. We have a desire, and then only are we in the position to evaluate whether performing that action (or even having the desire itself) is good for us. This may help to explain some occasions of weakness of will. When our desires are blind, then the after-the-fact evaluations we make about them may be too weak to stop us acting on those desires. Since our appetites are independent of our evaluations, in these cases, evaluations cannot affect the desire at its source. If we do not want to do what our appetites move us to do, then we need to find opposing reasons that are strong enough to stop us from acting. We cannot just eliminate carnal desire, for example, we have to find reasons not to act on those desires if we find ourselves inappropriately aroused.

So when we have blind desires, then the appetite is the sole source of our motivation – I eat because I have the urge to satisfy my hunger. When we have non-blind desires, having those appetites only partly explains why we act – I eat because I am hungry, this food will nourish me, and being well nourished is good for me, as well as satisfying my hunger. Since we can make after-the-fact evaluations, we can distinguish between valuable and non-valuable blind desires despite the fact that those desires do not arise from within an evaluative framework.⁹ We need to be careful with regard to the evaluations we make, however, as objects may seem better than they are, due to their being desired.¹⁰ In certain cases, simply having a desire for something can lead us to make a favourable evaluation of it when it is not good for us. In contrast to the weakness of will case, where our appetites simply override our judgements, the problem here is that our appetites distort our judgements. Thus we think that what we are doing is good for us, whereas in cases of weakness of will we know that what we are doing is not good for us.

⁸ Watson, 'Free Agency', p. 212.

⁹ Watson, 'Free Agency', p. 212.

¹⁰ Watson, 'Free Agency' p. 214.

The reason for fleshing this out is to discover what sort of things our aspirations are and thus how we should engage with them. If they involve blind desires, then the way that we go about evaluating, changing, and achieving them will be very different than if they involve non-blind desires. This will also allow us to figure out what the main driving force behind aspirations is: appetites or values. Blind desires are driven solely by our appetites, whereas non-blind desires involve our values informing and directing our appetites towards objects we think are worthwhile.

Our aspirations do not seem to be the sorts of things that are blind; we do not simply have urges or appetites to live a certain way. In fact our aspirations seem to be those things in our life that we spend a good deal of time giving reasons for. How we want to live is bound up in our beliefs, what we think is good, and what we think we have reasons to do. We may not have outright life plans and organised structures of ends, but we all have rough ideas of the things we want our lives to contain, and these are our values.¹¹ This suggests that what we want most is what we value most, rather than what we are most moved to do. Those things that we want most are the things that we value most and thus the things that we have most reason to desire, rather than being the things that we actually most desire. Thus, aspirations are not blind desires; in fact they are not any kind of desire. They are values. The non-blind desires that we have for the objects of our aspirations are not the aspirations themselves, but the desires that arise because we have aspirations¹².

As values, our aspirations give us reasons to desire what we aspire to, and this is why aspirations are almost always accompanied by desires for what we aspire to. Aspirations form part of the evaluative framework I mentioned above that leads us to form desires for what we think is good for us. In the case of aspirations, these desires will almost always be very strong because our aspirations are those things we value most. So, as aspirations are our highest values, the deep desires we have for them are the result of our seeing how achieving those aspirations is best for us. Our deepest desires are contingent on us first having aspirations, and so are separate from

¹¹ Watson, 'Free Agency', p. 215.

¹² In the final chapter I will return to this and argue that it does not make a substantial difference to my account whether aspirations are seen as values or desires.

those aspirations. My aspiration ‘to become a master piano player’ leads me to form a strong desire to become one. The desire itself is a product of having the aspiration and not a part of it.

Identifying what we value most, and have most reason to pursue, should lead to us pursue those things, but we may not always act accordingly. Firstly, it is possible to have an aspiration for something without a desire to achieve that thing. I think such a case would be very strange, but it could conceivably occur. Since aspirations give us reasons for desires, we could have stronger reasons for other desires that lead us not to form a desire for our aspiration at all. I think that most of the time that we do not follow our aspirations we will form the desire and just never act on it, but there remains the possibility of our not forming the desire at all. Secondly, even in ordinary cases when we form desires for our aspirations, we may sometimes be pulled by strong desires for other things because of the appetites we have, or we may simply deliberate incorrectly. In these cases, however, we can see that something has gone wrong. There is a clear tension between what we most deeply want (what we aspire to and value most) and what we are moved to do.

Our aspirations also provide us with a way to rank our values. We will order what we pursue in respect to how it relates to what we value most. Those things that contribute to our aspirations we will be more likely to do and those things that are neutral or hostile to those aspirations we will be less likely to do, all things being equal. But what exactly does it mean to follow one’s aspirations and other values? Here we need to distinguish between what it is for something to be valuable, to have value, or to be a value¹³; what it is to make an evaluation; and what valuing is.

Firstly, *values* are those things that are worth pursuing, things that make our lives better, or are worth caring about and valuing. For something to be a value just means that it must meet certain criteria for being valuable.¹⁴ There are certain standards that something must meet in order to be considered valuable. Deciding whether something meets these standards, and thus is valuable, is what we do when we *evaluate* something, which I shall return to below. The standards of value are set by various theories of value. Robert Nozick, for instance, uses the concept of organic

¹³ I use these three as synonyms: To be a value is the same as having value and being valuable.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, p. 3.

unity, whereby things are more or less valuable to the degree that they are organically unified.¹⁵ So if something has organic unity, then it has value in proportion to how much organic unity it has. In fact, for Nozick value just is organic unity.¹⁶

Elizabeth Anderson, on the other hand, utilises social constructs for her theory of value. An object's value is determined by its relation to societal norms and structures, and as such, what has value changes as society changes. The norms of society determine those things that it is right and good to care about and value.¹⁷ This may be in relation to a set of criteria, such as those of beauty for art, but things may also just be valuable in virtue of the relation between the agent and the object of value, such as loving your children.¹⁸ It is right to see a beautiful painting as valuable because it meets certain standards of beauty, but not to see your children as valuable because they meet certain standards, say the standards for being lovable. They are valuable precisely because of their relation to you, that they are *your* children, and that is also why you value them. What is beautiful and what sorts of relationships are valuable is set by the norms present in that particular social environment.

Secondly, engaging in *evaluation*, means discovering what has value, and thus what things would make one's life go better if obtained or valued. When I spoke of evaluating objects of desire earlier, this is the sense in which I was speaking. As I mentioned above, when one evaluates something, one compares it to a set of criteria one has and sees whether it meets those criteria. If it does meet those criteria, then it is valuable, if it does not, then it is not valuable, at least not in the context it was evaluated in. For example, an old violin may be evaluated by a master violinist and found not to meet the criteria of being a good musical instrument. Nevertheless, he may find it to be valuable as a piece of the history of violin playing. How one evaluates something affects what value one assigns to it, not just whether one assigns value to it or not. In terms of the above theories, evaluation would involve judging whether something had organic unity and to what degree, or what sort of relation it has to societal norms and structures.

¹⁵ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, p. 108.

¹⁶ Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, p.108.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, p. 4.

Finally, *valuing* involves a certain relation between the agent and the value. In order to value something, the agent has to put himself in a valuing relation to the value. Thus, one must love one's children, admire good works of art, and foster one's wine tasting skills, in order to value them. Valuing just is having these relationships to things that are valuable. How exactly this relation is cashed out depends on the theory of valuation. For Nozick, there are characteristic ways of valuing things (V-ing them) based on their degree of organic unity. Those things with greater organic unity (more value) we V more intensely, such as loving, adoring, and revering, whereas things with less organic unity (less value) we V less intensely, such as delight in, respect and nurture.¹⁹ For Anderson, what the value is will set the mode of valuation. We value beautiful things by admiring them, and we value them because we have evaluated them as meeting the standard set for beauty. We value our loved ones by loving them, and we value them precisely because of their relation to us. The modes of valuation overlap and are not set in stone. What is important here, for both Nozick and Anderson, is that we put ourselves in the proper caring relationship to the value, which is set by what the value is or our relationship to it, or both. We may admire a beautiful work of art, and also honour it because of what it expresses or what it produces. Examples of such things would be the photograph of the soldiers hoisting the flag at Iwo Jima, or a Stradivarius violin.

We may also want to value certain things that we currently do not value. Alan Gewirth speaks of aspirations to become a certain person that you currently are not as being inseparable from aspirations to value the things that such a person would value.²⁰ Thus if I aspire to become a master piano player, I will also aspire to value manual dexterity, complex music, and the piano itself. This is logically entailed by the aspiration to become a master piano player. Although Gewirth cashes out aspirations as desires while I see them as values, this entailment still holds. If I value being a master piano player then I must also value those characteristics that constitute being a master piano player. Even if I am not aware of this connection, should I reflect on what it is to be a master piano player, I will see that I must also value these things. In fact, it seems that it is constitutive of being a master piano player to value certain things, since he would necessarily be in a certain caring relationship with those things. Part of what it is to be a master

¹⁹ Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 429-430.

²⁰ Gewirth, *Self-fulfillment*, pp. 23-24.

piano player is to be in certain caring relationships with the piano, one's manual dexterity, and the music one plays.

To bring this back to aspirations: Aspirations just are values. Aspirations are those things we think are most valuable to us and our lives. Thus they are the things that we see ourselves as having most reason to pursue, and thus most reason to desire, all things being equal. Aspirations come about when we evaluate certain things as having the greatest value²¹ for our lives.

Aspirations are not developed in a vacuum. They are influenced by our other concerns and values, such that the evaluation we make is of what best meets the standards for what we want out of life or what is best for our lives. The criteria that we use to evaluate what would be most valuable for us are based in our intuitions and rough understanding of what kind of life would be worth living. Sometimes our evaluations will be poor and we will aspire to things that are of little value, wasting our lives in pursuit of something that is not worthwhile. However, I want to concentrate on the times when we are correct in our evaluations. In those cases the aspirations that we form will actually be of great value, and the valuing of which will be key to living well.

We value our aspirations by putting effort into them. Before arguing for this, however, I wish to look at whether it is possible to live well easily. I want to see whether our commonsense views and our reflective intuitions support the idea that effort is required to achieve the good life.

II Is there an Easy Route to the Good Life?

Having decided just what life we want does not mean that is how we will in fact live. Even if we have reflected on our initial rough ideas and made the correct evaluations about what is worth pursuing this does not mean our problems are solved. There seems to be a gap between *thinking* about what we should do to live well and going out there and *doing* those things. As difficult as it may be to reflect and learn about what life would be best for us, going out and living that life is a very different thing. Part of coming to live a good life is reflecting on, criticising and changing our ideas about the life that is best for us as we come to learn more about ourselves and the

²¹ 'Greatest value' here means that we evaluate this thing as meeting standards that are equal to or above those of other things we could pursue. I use 'greatest' because usually we do in fact have one value we see as being most important for our lives to go well, but it could be replaced with 'great worth' or 'utmost importance'.

world. That is something that I will deal with in the following chapter. An arguably greater part of coming to live well is going out into the world, doing things, and achieving our aspirations. Fulfilling your goals (aspirations) and developing as a person is a necessary part of living well. It is not sufficient, however, since you could arguably fulfil your goals and develop as a person by rising to the top of a drug cartel. Your goals must be worthwhile and you must develop into a good person if you want to live well. This is something common to all theories of the good life.

For most of us, trying to achieve our goals involves weighing up what we want, or what we need to achieve those goals, against what we can get, and the cost of getting it. Some things may require sacrifices in that we will have to give up something we currently have in order to get them, which may often be risky. If we have not evaluated things properly, then we may be giving up something with more value for something with less value. Similarly, we may keep things as they are and not pursue things of greater value. Other aspirations may require abilities or resources that we do not currently have or cannot possibly attain. So we will have to make do with what we can get, or change what we want. Some of the things we want may even be incompatible with one another, requiring us to make hard choices about what we want most. Our aspirations may at times also clash with our moral values, forcing us to choose which to honour.²²

These things are not easy; indeed being able to achieve the good life looks very difficult. Suppose, then, we were given a way to bypass these difficulties, a way to simply become the person we want to be or to have the life we want. Would this really help us to achieve the good life? I think not. This is because it has strong echoes of Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment, specifically what Nozick calls the 'transformation machine'. Such a machine is able to turn you into the type of person you want to be.²³ You only have to input the characteristics that you want to have and climb into the machine in order to be transformed. It whirs and clicks and does its business, and you exit a changed person, but retaining certain features of your identity.²⁴ Nozick is not specific about what features you retain, but they would likely be things

²² Some people may deny that there can be a real clash here, since either impartial morality always overrides our partial concerns or our aspirations are already in the moral realm when properly formed. For a discussion of how this sort of clash may be possible see Susan Wolf, 'Morality and Partiality'.

²³ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p.44.

²⁴ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p.44.

such as bodily identity and psychological or memory continuity. You can become your ‘ideal self’. You can become the sort of person that you could have become through living a certain way, and it is only the way that you become that person that is different. That, however, is exactly the problem.

The reason why we would not, and ought not, use the transformation machine is that we want to be the result of our own choices, of our autonomous functioning.²⁵ We want to live our own lives, not have them lived for us by machines.²⁶ We want to move and change ourselves through our own agency. This is not to say that the person need not freely program the transformation machine, for she clearly may do this autonomously. It is that we want to be the result of our own choices and agency in a certain way. We want how we live to result in who we are, just as we want who we are to impact on how we live. We want to be the result of ourselves, to put it crudely. We do not only want to make choices about who we will become, we also want to be what makes us into that person. We want to be active in our lives, and thus come to be a certain person through things we have done.

What if, then, I simply gave you a machine that made things easier for you? The brightest minds in science have devised a Perfect Personal Digital Assistant (PPDA) that can fit into the palm of your hand, and which is powerful enough to greatly assist you. This PPDA will provide you with information that will make your decisions easy. Instead of having to engage in the difficult balancing act and hard decision making that all of us have to, the PPDA will provide you with a much easier way to make that choice. You still have to decide, can get things wrong, and the PPDA will not push you in certain directions. It need not ‘dumb down’ your choices in order to make them easier, just strip away the limits of human nature and provide extra illumination of the situation. The PPDA also gives you information that will help to make your projects turn out successfully. Perhaps it will provide you with a list of outcomes or precise cost-benefit ratios, so that you can tweak your projects for maximum gain. The exact information that it gives you is of no real importance, however. What is important is that the information that the PPDA gives you

²⁵ Even though some people may choose to use the transformation machine, it would seem that this is an irrational choice, as the reasons that follow in the text show.

²⁶ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p.45.

makes things easy for you without infringing on your autonomy or without impeding your living of your own life.

I think that most of us will still believe that there is something wrong here, though few of us may be able to point out exactly what it is. We will probably think that there is something suspicious about someone being able to achieve the good life easily (without effort or difficulty). However, while we know that it is difficult to live well, this does not constitute a reason to think that it ought to be difficult. Nevertheless, it does seem that most of us have the intuition that good lives are not things that may be acquired on the cheap. In our everyday discourse we call people who do not put effort in 'slackers', and think that their lives are anything but good. We may think that hard work is instrumental to or constitutive of the good life, or that people who do not put the effort in cannot, or at least should not, reap the rewards. I think that if we consider what it is to achieve something and how we value things, then we will see that in fact good lives must be difficult to achieve.

So far, I have been talking about external judgements of a life that is easy, taking the viewpoint of external observers who would think that such a life is flawed. Suppose, then, that you are the person living the life made easy by the PPDA. Would you not think that your life is going well, and that this criticism comes from other people being jealous of you? All these objections about an easy route to living well are in fact due to sour grapes. Everyone else has to take the hard route and they are simply jealous of your boons. If they had a PPDA of their own, then they would not have any qualms about using it. I think this could well ring true for many cases where individuals express dislike for successful people. It does, however, miss the point somewhat. In the PPDA case we are suspicious of the value of the life being lived and not really the motives of the person living that life. We may think that there is some hidden flaw in such a life. It may contain the same goods as would have been acquired via the more difficult route that everyone else has to take, but it does seem that something is lacking.

One explanation could be that usually people who appear to be really lucky are in fact just deceiving us or themselves. No-one is actually that lucky, and a life which appears to be that good always contains a hidden or overlooked flaw. It is sometimes the case that lives that appear to be good to an observer, even one close to the individual, turn out not to be. The successful and

well-liked prodigy may be suffering from depression, or the happy-go-lucky family man may secretly be having an affair. This seems quite plausible, as we are all fallible, and all that the PPDA does is help us; it cannot make us happy, good, or perfect. While many lives may in fact be like this, this is not what I am interested in, so let us focus on the person who is good and happy and whose life the machine has made easy.

This person gets what he wants, and gets it far more easily than he otherwise would. This seems like a win-win situation. He has all the goods required for the good life and has not had to struggle nearly as much as others to attain them. The problem of the transformation machine has been avoided, since the person is clearly living his own life. What he is doing is the result of his own actions and agency. Such a life, however, is still lacking something. The reason for this lies mainly in the fact that since such a life is easy, it cannot contain any meaningful achievement.

III Meaningful Achievement, Difficulty, and Effort

When we look at our aspirations, we do not want them just to be values that are worth having, we want them to be reflected in our very self-concept. We do not want to strive to do petty things (though what we regard as petty and others regard as petty may differ). We want our aspirations to be worthwhile in the sense that when we have fulfilled them we will gain satisfaction and a justified sense of accomplishment. That is, not only will we feel that we have accomplished something, we will have accomplished something. This accomplishment comes from achieving our aspirations in a certain way, one that not only gets us the goods that we want but does so in a way that reflects on who we are. We want the achievement of our aspirations to be closely linked to our self-concept. That is, we want the achievement of our aspirations, and how we went about that achievement, to reflect on who we are. Just having the goods is not enough, we want something more.

This ‘something more’ is meaning. Part of what we want from achieving our aspirations is meaning. We want our aspirations to be meaningful as values that are worthwhile within the context of our lives, and also as things that reflect who we are, or have become, when we achieve them. Much of the meaning in our lives comes from the reasons why it is lived the way it is.

Those reasons are intimately connected to the aspirations that the life contains. Most often we tend to judge people's lives by why they have lived them that way and this almost always revolves around the aspirations that they have. Meaningful achievement of these aspirations is an essential part of living well.

So, what we want to do is achieve our aspirations in a way that generates meaning. Now, the meaningfulness of an achievement is not constituted solely by its content. Walking down the street is not a meaningful achievement for the ordinary person. Yet, walking down the street is a meaningful achievement for the person who has just had to learn to walk again after a car accident. The meaningfulness of achievements comes from several factors. Laurence James²⁷ elucidates a number of necessary conditions for an achievement to be meaningful and I intend to make use of his work, albeit with a few modifications. I think that the features he picks out are in fact necessary for our achievements to be meaningful. He, however, admits that he does not think the conditions are jointly sufficient for meaning, just that they are individually necessary. I agree with this and will not seek to give sufficient conditions for meaning. What I will do is explore and deepen the necessary conditions he gives. He admits that at least one of his conditions requires more exploring and unpacking. By unpacking James's conditions I will reveal that what underlies meaningful achievement is effort.

I do not intend to defend an overall account of what an achievement is, only that certain things are required for *meaningful* achievement and thus the good life. What I have in mind in particular is *difficulty*, which I will show to be the requirement of effort. James is in fact explicit about difficulty being required for the meaningfulness of achievements, and two of his four conditions directly involve it. The four conditions are: the achievement must be difficult for the average person to do;²⁸ the achievement must be difficult for that specific person to do;²⁹ the achievement justifiably increases one's self-conception when completed;³⁰ and one has reason to reassess oneself if one fails in one's achievement.³¹

²⁷ Laurence James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life'.

²⁸ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 438. 'Average' is used here in the sense of a statistical norm.

²⁹ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 439.

³⁰ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 430.

³¹ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 434.

Firstly, achievements cannot be meaningful if they are simple, easy tasks to perform. This is because meaning itself cannot be had in easy and arbitrary ways, such as tying one's shoelaces.³² Since it is non-arbitrary, meaning also cannot come from perceived difficulty, and must come from actual difficulty. In order for an achievement to be meaningful it must be more than just doing any arbitrary thing. It must be doing something that most people find hard to do. This seems to be the reasoning behind the first condition, which is that most people must find the achievement difficult to do. It is important to note that James' idea of the 'average person' is contextually based. What he means by 'average person' is 'most people in that particular situation'. It may seem that the average person does not find it difficult to walk down the street. If, however, the 'average person' translates to 'most people who are learning to walk again after an accident', then it does seem that the task is a difficult one, and thus could be meaningful. Thus, this aspect of meaningful achievement involves difficulty that is context-based, rather than difficulty that is intrinsic to certain tasks. James, however, does not investigate the link between difficulty and meaning, nor argue for it, simply saying it is plausible that easy things are not meaningful.³³

Secondly, his next condition of difficulty, that the achievement be difficult for that specific person, also needs filling out. Something may be difficult for the average person, but if it is easy for a superior person to achieve, then it cannot be meaningful for that person. In this case there is the problem of spelling out just what it means for something to be difficult for an individual. In the previous condition we could just do empirical investigation about what sort of things most people find difficult. For that we only require data of what people *find*, i.e. think, difficult. Since we can gather a large amount of data, we can make reasonably accurate judgements about what is difficult for most people. Here, however, James admits that he cannot describe what it is for something to be difficult for an individual. It cannot just be that the person thinks it difficult, because he may not judge things correctly; it must be that the thing itself *is* difficult.³⁴ There needs to be some independent criterion for determining when something is difficult. James admits this, but struggles to identify that criterion, saying that perhaps the actual concept of

³² James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 437.

³³ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 437.

³⁴ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 439.

difficulty is irreducible.³⁵ Like James, I find the idea that difficulty is irreducible unsatisfying, and instead propose that the criterion is *effort*.

For something to be difficult, for an individual or for the average person, it requires effort to do. Here I will speak specifically of difficulty for individuals, but will later show how what I say also applies to difficulty for the average person. This means that any time a person does something without effort, say through luck, then it could not have been difficult for him to do that thing. Difficult things may in fact require a great deal of effort.³⁶ How effort would work as an independent criterion is as follows. Putting effort into something means investing time and resources and also expending mental or physical energy. Time and resources cannot be sufficient, because it seems clear that just spending one's time sitting in an empty room involves no effort, neither does burning a million dollars in a fireplace. The expenditure of mental and physical energy also cannot be sufficient, because one could use a lot of energy guessing answers, or doing something that is merely tedious, and these things do not require effort. A combination of the two seems to capture what we mean when we say something requires effort. Effort is not just trying; it is committing oneself to something. It does not take much effort to do one push-up, but it does take effort to do twenty or a hundred. This is because it requires us to direct the physical resources of our body, and also time, into performing those physical actions. Commitment involves putting oneself into the activity, so to speak. We engage with and bind ourselves to the activity such that its success or failure is our success or failure. Effort constitutes a certain kind of commitment, such that putting effort into something commits you to that thing.

The commitment here is not the same as the idea of a commitment as a type of contract or deal, where committing to something essentially means promising, or constraining oneself, to act in a certain way. By saying that I am a committed teacher I can mean that I have promised to be a teacher and am not going to change my profession. In contrast, I can also mean that I am a dedicated teacher, that I put effort into my role as a teacher. In this sense, commitment should be understood as not being anything over and above putting in effort. Committing, in this sense, just

³⁵ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 439.

³⁶A similar idea seems to be lurking in the background of James' work, as he says, "[Easy] things do not require much effort, physical or intellectual, nor special skills or large temporal investments" ('Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p.438). This implies that if something is difficult, then it requires those things, or at least some of them. It is not a huge leap, then, to say that this may be involved in what James really thinks difficulty is, and he need only pursue this further.

is putting in effort. We may certainly commit to things in various ways that do not involve effort, but commitment in my sense is just another way of understanding the role that effort plays. It must be noted here that this is not an explicit commitment, making a promise, but rather something that is logically entailed by the exercise of effort. Putting in effort *always* constitutes a commitment to what one is doing, because one creates a strong link between self and act through the exercise of effort.

I would argue that this commitment applies even if one is forced to put in effort by others. For example, prisoners forced to put in effort to build a bridge for their captors will be builders of the bridge and be committed to its construction, irrespective of their attitudes towards it. They cannot avoid being bridge-builders just because they were coerced or threatened into it. It was the expenditure of their energy and physical resources that resulted in there being a bridge, where before there was none. Their effort resulted in the bridge existing, and they cannot escape this, or sincerely avoid seeing themselves in respect of this. Due to the ambiguity of the term ‘commitment’, however, I will tend to use ‘effort’ in what follows.

Even if an activity itself may not require a lot of energy or resources, we will still think that it requires effort if the development of the capacity for that activity needs energy and resources. So while a master piano player can whirl through a certain piece of music effortlessly, it still makes sense to say, “It is difficult to play like that.” It makes sense because we can see how it requires effort to be able to become the sort of person who can do that; it requires effort to develop the required capacities. These capacities require effort, and so are difficult to develop, even for someone who has the talent for them. Here an objection may arise: “It is difficult to play like that,” actually means “I think it is difficult to play like that,” or “Most people would find it difficult to play like that.” This is an attempt to show that in fact the difficulty here is based on knowledge of what most people *find* difficult. The difficulty involved here just perceived difficulty, not actual difficulty.

I do not think that this holds much water. Certain things just are going to be difficult for everyone, but they are not difficult because everyone finds them difficult; rather, they are difficult because they require great effort from anyone who tries them. Things are difficult for the average person because most, or all, people need to put in a great deal of effort to do them,

and not just because most people find or think them to be difficult. If ninety percent of people who tried something said they found it easy, but actually had to put in a great deal of effort, we would still say that it was difficult for them. In fact, James agrees that difficulty for the average person is not just about what most people think.³⁷ He, however, has no criterion for difficulty and so has to rely on what the average person finds difficult in order to find out what is difficult for the average person. While I also have to rely on empirical investigation to find out what things are difficult for people, observing instantiations of effort to discover this seems to be more reliable than using what people report. Most often we can tell what sorts of things people find difficult, and we do this by observing them struggling and trying hard, and not just by what they say about whether it was hard or not.

Other things may be seen as difficult because they require capacities that few people have. Again, they are not difficult just because few people can do them, but rather because they require capacities that are rare and need a great deal of effort to develop. Suppose a very small number of people were born with the ability to hold their breath for thirty minutes as easily as we could hold ours for two. Very few people would be able to hold their breath for thirty minutes, but it does not entail that it is difficult for those who can to do so.

Finally, these two conditions tie into James's other necessary conditions for meaningfulness, and we can make better sense of them by seeing how effort is involved. The conditions are: the achievement justifiably increases one's self-conception when completed,³⁸ and one has reason to reassess oneself if one fails in one's achievement.³⁹ We can see how difficulty is related to the former by using the criterion of effort. If I achieve something that is difficult, then I can justifiably enlarge my self-conception, whereas easy things do not enlarge my self-conception.⁴⁰ This is not to say that easy things cannot contribute meaning, for they surely can, just that they are not meaningful as achievements.⁴¹ If I can hold my breath for thirty minutes it does not add to my self-concept as an achievement if it does not require effort. I need to put in effort in order to create the link between achievement and self-conception. If I do not put in the effort and thus

³⁷ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 438.

³⁸ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 430.

³⁹ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 434.

⁴⁰ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life', p. 434.

⁴¹ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life'. p. 434.

commit myself, it seems hard to see how that could justifiably affect my self-conception as something I have done.

It is important here to note that I am only talking about things that are meaningful as achievements. These things could be meaningful due to some other aspect, such as being good to have or having positive consequences. Holding your breath for twenty minutes to avoid drowning is meaningful because it keeps you alive, even if it is easy and thus is not meaningful as an achievement. Why should it be that easy things do not generate meaning as achievements in this way? Is it just a fact that difficult things enlarge people's self-conception? I do not think so, because that simply seems arbitrary, and there is no reason why easy things should not do the same. There needs to be something about difficult things that makes doing them meaningful. James argues that it is doing things at the limits of our abilities that alter our self-conception.⁴² If I do something that I had not previously done, then I can enlarge my self-conception, and even if I fail at it my self-conception will still change.⁴³ I see myself as someone able to do such things, or not able to do such things. What changes is my knowledge of the capacities I have.

While I think that this can be a way to enlarge one's self-conception, I do not think that this is exactly what is going on in meaningful achievement. I can also learn about my capacities, and thus enlarge my self-conception, without of any sort of achievement.⁴⁴ This implies that what enlarges our self-conception, in the case of meaningful achievement, is the knowledge we acquire about our capacities, which seems wrong. It does not seem to me that achieving something enlarges my self-conception just by learning that I have certain capacities. I highly doubt that, having crossed the Atlantic Ocean, Columbus now came to see himself just as someone who had the capacity for such a thing. Learning about our capacities seems at best a by-product of how we enlarge our self-conception through achievement.

A more plausible view of Columbus would be that he enlarged his self-conception by seeing himself as actually having crossed the Atlantic, it having come about due to him. That he may see himself as being able to do such a thing is in this case dependent on him seeing himself as having done that thing in the first place. Saying, "I have the capacity to do these things," does

⁴² James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life' p. 434.

⁴³ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life' p. 434.

⁴⁴ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life' p. 435.

not actually seem to contribute all that much meaning to life, and certainly not the achievement itself, since one can know this without achieving in the first place. Self-conception is not only about what one can and cannot do, but also about what one has and has not done. Columbus sees himself as an Atlantic-crosser, not just a person with the ability to cross the Atlantic, i.e. a potential Atlantic crosser. We see ourselves as *doing* creatures. Meaning does not arise only from what our achievements imply about our abilities. There is also something in the achievements themselves that confers meaning. The meaning I want is not parasitic on our achievements, but consists in the achievement itself.

One reason why we come to enlarge our self-conception and gain meaning from our achievements is because we put effort into achieving them. As I stated above, effort is not simply trying, it is committing to something. The reason why we come to enlarge our self-conception is because our effort constitutes a commitment to the achievement. We put something of ourselves into that achievement and bind ourselves to it, and so when we come to successfully complete it, it reflects on who we are. We see ourselves as *doers* of that thing, as well as having the ability to do that thing. Others also see us in this way. So when we fail in our achievements, this also reflects on us and gives us reason to reassess ourselves. We have reason to reassess ourselves, because in the same way that successful achievement affects our self-conception, so does failure to achieve. It affects our idea of who we are, but in a negative way, giving us reason to reflect.

This reflection is the final condition that James identifies for the meaningfulness of achievements, that you reassess yourself if you fail to achieve.⁴⁵ Reflection and reassessment are necessary parts of the good life, and I will explore them and their link to failure more fully in the next chapter. When we fail to achieve something we have reason to reflect because of the impact it has on our self-conception. Given that achievement is tied closely to self-conception, it provides us with knowledge of what we are capable of, what we can and cannot do, based on what we have achieved and failed to achieve.⁴⁶ Here I wish to return to what James had to say about the link between our failure to achieve and the knowledge we have of the limits of our abilities. As he says, it is important that I come to see myself as lacking the ability to do something (as long as my lack of ability is the reason I failed) and not just see myself as

⁴⁵ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life' p. 434.

⁴⁶ James, 'Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life' p. 434.

someone who has not done that thing. If I do not change my self-conception about my abilities in this way, then I may well try to do things that I cannot succeed at. I do think that we expand our self-conception in this way, as James says, but that we also expand our self-conception through actually doing things.

What all this means is that for our achievements to be meaningful and valuable *qua* achievement they require effort, and thus they must be difficult for us to do. What it means for something to be difficult is that it requires effort, and it is this effort that has a constitutive role both in making our achievements meaningful and in our valuing of those achievements.

I have spent most of the time talking about the role that effort plays in generating meaning, but it also has an important role in valuing our achievements. We value our achievements both because of what is achieved and also because of how they affect our self-conception. These ways of valuing can come apart, such that we can value achievements only because of what is achieved or only because of how they affect our self-conception. The former would describe a situation in which a person achieved something without effort, i.e. non-meaningful achievement. In this case she simply values that thing itself and this would be similar to having been given it as a present. For example, if a person wished something into existence with the help of Aladdin's lamp, she could value it, but it could hardly reflect on her as a meaningful achievement of hers. It could not be called a meaningful achievement; it could perhaps be called an impressive feat. It does not meet the criteria for being a meaningful achievement because it does not justifiably increase her self-conception, nor would failure at it spur her to reflect on her life. What she chose might reflect on her, but only insofar as signalling her good taste or something similar, not as something she has *achieved*. On the other hand, if someone created the largest rubber ball in existence, it could hardly be seen as something valuable in itself. It may, however, reflect favourably on the person who created it depending on how it was achieved. It could be valuable in signifying his willingness to work hard, his dedication, and his drive. It is something about his having achieved that reflects on him, distinct from what he has achieved.

In terms of our aspirations it seems that we want both. We want our aspirations to be for things that are valuable in themselves, but we also want to achieve our aspirations in a meaningful way that adds to our self-conception. What this means is that our aspirations need to be difficult for us

to achieve. If they are not difficult, then we will not be able to gain meaning and value from them as achievements. This requires an understanding of difficulty in terms of effort. As I said earlier, effort explains the positive effect that achievement of difficult things has on our self-conception.

Effort also puts us into a caring relationship with our achievements. I stated earlier that in order to value things we need to put ourselves into the appropriate caring relationship with that thing. We must love our children, admire good art, and we must put effort into our achievements in order to value them. We cannot do anything after achieving something to put ourselves in the appropriate caring relationship to that achievement *qua* achievement, since we have already finished achieving. If one was lazy and took the easy route to what one wanted, one cannot go back and somehow put in the effort required for valuing. Achievements are things that we do, and once they are done they are finished, and we cannot go back to reclaim them.

This, then, means that rather than good lives just in fact being difficult, they *ought* to be difficult. It is not just that good lives are just in fact difficult, it is that there is no way that they can be easy and this is how it ought to be. It is because it is difficult to achieve the aspirations that lead to our living well that good lives gain much of their value and meaning. If good lives were easy, they would still have value and meaning, but they would have less value and meaning than if they were difficult. Lives that are not difficult will not contain effort, and so will lack the valuing of achievements as achievements, and will also lack meaningful achievement. Furthermore, that good lives are difficult adds to our sense of fulfilment and satisfaction when we live them. This is not a conscious patting oneself on the back, but the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that comes from actually having done something worth doing and having put in the hard work while doing it. This sense of accomplishment of meaningful achievement could manifest itself as a sense of contentment. When one lives the good life one will still strive for things that one does not have, but one will also be content with what one has. In this way good lives involve reaching a certain position that is 'good enough' rather than a position of maximal good. One knows that there are goods one does not have that will make one's life better, but not having those goods does not stop one's life from being good. This means saying that the good life is the best possible life a person could live, does not use 'best' in terms of 'maximal good'. Instead, 'best' should be

understood in terms of reaching a sustainable position where one is happy and one's current goods are balanced with the goods that one still strives for.

In this chapter I have shown how difficulty just is the requirement of effort, and how this effort underlies the meaningfulness of our achievements. Achievement is important because it is how we fulfil our aspirations and acquire some of the goods required for the good life. Aspirations are those things that we have evaluated and found to be of great value and which are central to our lives. As values, we need to put ourselves in a caring relationship with them in order to value them. This caring relationship involves both meaningful achievement of our aspirations and our valuing their achievement as achievement. In order to properly value our aspirations we need to achieve them both in a meaningful way and also in a way that values our achievement of them as achievement. Both the meaningfulness of our achievements and our valuing of them as achievements is partly constituted by the effort that we put into them. This is something that applies to all achievements, not just the achievement of our aspirations. It is also something that is reflected in the view that good lives are difficult to achieve. James argues that meaningful achievement requires difficulty. I argued that difficulty just is the requirement of effort, and thus meaningful achievement requires effort. It is effort that makes our achievements meaningful as achievements by positively affecting our self-conception. Effort does this because it creates a strong link between us and what we do; when we put in effort we are committing and binding ourselves to our actions and their outcomes. Putting in effort is also how we value our achievements as achievements because it is this same link between action and self-conception that constitutes our caring relationship to our achievements. Caring for our achievements involves putting in the effort to achieve them such that they become a part of who we are.

In the next chapter I wish to move on from achievement and focus on what could be seen as its opposite: failure. Up until now, I have focussed on what could be seen as the difficulty involved in getting things right, in achieving our aspirations in the appropriate way. What I will focus on next is the difficulty involved in not getting things wrong, the difficulty of avoiding failure.

Chapter 2

Failure and Reflection

We have all experienced failure at one point or another in our lives. Our failures may have been filled with the bitterness of crushed aspirations or they may not have elicited any emotions at all, and been dismissed as trivial. Regardless, failure is a fact of life for every human being. We may never have to deal with life shattering failure, and should hope not to, but throughout our lives we will encounter failure and have to deal with it, especially if we want our lives to go well. Having to deal with and overcome failure is one of the things that makes living a good life difficult. We not only have to learn how to achieve those things we value, but we also have to learn to deal with those times when things do not go as we wish them to. Even when we do have a good idea about how to go about achieving our aspirations, we need to be aware of the fact that at some point or another things will arise that could foil those aspirations, if only temporarily. In this chapter I wish to look at the difficulty that arises from the presence of failure in our lives.

I shall begin by looking at the link between failure and difficulty and will claim that failure does not just come about because of difficulty but that susceptibility to failure is itself a certain type of difficulty. Next, I will look at what failure is and how it is related to our nature as human beings. Is failure inevitable for human beings, and if this is so, why? Can we eliminate failure completely from our lives? If we could, should we? I will then explore whether we can gain something positive from our failures. I will argue that failure plays a key role in allowing us to live well by stimulating us to reflect on our lives and ourselves. I will examine just how and why failure stimulates reflection and why this has positive consequences for us. In the final section I will examine the links between failure, reflection and living well and conclude by arguing that we ought to adopt a reflective attitude towards our failures, even though that may prove difficult in many situations.

I Failure and Difficulty

When we engage in difficult tasks, one of the things that we are most aware of is the possibility of failure. When given a task and told that it is difficult, most often the first thing that comes to mind is whether we can avoid failure and what will happen if we fail. We often think that we are more likely to fail at a difficult task than an easy one, and think that if the task is difficult, then failing it may result in particularly nasty consequences. While failing certain difficult tasks, such as the cryptic crossword, does not result in particularly bad consequences, most of the time we operate under an assumption that an increase in the difficulty of a task corresponds to an increase in the potency of its consequences, whether those consequences are positive or negative. We also tend to think that increasing difficulty correlates with an increasing chance of failure. If someone tells us that there is a high chance of failing a certain task, then we normally take that to mean it is difficult, and vice versa. If I was told that I would almost certainly fail to conclusively prove the existence of the external world, I would take that to mean it was a difficult task.

On the other hand, some instances of failure could involve an easy task that requires a certain ability that we lack. If I was told that I would almost certainly fail at translating a sentence from German to English, I would not necessarily take it to mean that it is a difficult task. I simply lack the ability to speak German. Of course, someone could object and say that in fact translating from German to English is difficult if you do not know German. Here it becomes apparent that we use difficulty in two different senses. We use it to indicate tasks that are always difficult, e.g. proving the existence of the external world, and also tasks that are difficult in specific cases, e.g. translating German to English. Tasks that may be seen as not always being difficult could be difficult for specific people who lack certain abilities. Translation is easy, if you know both languages fairly well. Proving the existence of the external world, on the other hand, is difficult no matter what you know.

This is a different distinction than the one made in the previous chapter between difficulty for the average person and difficulty for a specific person. There I was discussing what it means for something to be difficult for the average person or for a particular individual. Here the distinction is between things that are always difficult for everyone, and things that are sometimes difficult. If something is difficult for the average person, it is not necessarily difficult for everyone. It is

likely that the average person finds it difficult to complete a Rubik's Cube, but some people can complete them quickly and easily. On the other hand, certain things will always require a great deal of effort for whoever engages in them, and these things will therefore always be difficult. Those things may simply require large amounts of energy and resources, no matter how well one has developed the abilities required to do them. Other tasks may be easy to those with talents or certain abilities, while being difficult for those who lack those talents or abilities.

It is important that we know whether an activity we engage in is always difficult or just difficult in our specific case, because that knowledge affects how we ought to go about overcoming that difficulty. When we know that something is difficult in our specific case, we can spend effort developing the abilities that would make that thing easier for us. If it is something that is always difficult, then we should rather spend effort developing the mental fortitude that lets us deal with that difficulty and be prepared to persist in the face of ever-possible failure. Knowing that we will probably fail at something, however, only means that we have reason to think it is difficult for us, and not necessarily that it is always difficult. I do not know of any way other than gathering large amounts of empirical data that would allow us to tell if something is always difficult or just difficult in this specific case. Irrespective of whether something is always difficult or whether it is difficult only in specific situations, there is a link between the difficulty of the task and our failing at it. I wish to investigate this link and while I will use examples of difficulty in specific situations, the conclusions apply to the concept of difficulty in general.

One way of cashing out the link between failure and difficulty is to say that failure indicates the presence of difficulty. That is not to say that any time I fail it means that what I was doing was difficult. I could have failed because I was lazy, I was unlucky, I made a poor choice without thinking properly, or any number of other reasons. What I am talking about here is not actual failure but rather the chance of failure. The more susceptible my task is to failure, the more likely it is that what I am doing is difficult for me. Tasks where my chance of failure is low will generally be easy for me, whereas tasks where my chance of failure is high will generally be difficult for me. In this way the chance of failure is a signpost, letting us know which tasks are difficult and which are easy for us. If we know what the chances of our failing are, even just a rough 'high' or 'low' estimate, then we will have a good idea about the difficulty of the task facing us.

While this is true, I think that the link between failure and difficulty is a deeper one. Failure may well act as a signpost for difficulty, but it does so insofar as susceptibility to failure is a certain type of difficulty. The correlation between increasing difficulty and increasing chance of failure comes about because part of what it is for something to be difficult is that the chance of failing at it is high. Most often, the more difficult a task becomes, the more susceptible to failure it is. This may be because difficulty usually also involves increased complexity. With respect to tasks or activities, the more complex they become, the greater the chance of failure, all other things being equal. This is because the more complex an activity is, the more concentration and consistency one requires for it. Complex activities are tasks constituted by a chain of smaller actions, all of which are required to be completed successfully.¹ For example, the complex activity of putting together a model airplane consists in many smaller actions of gluing the components together. Each act of gluing has a chance of failure, and if one fails at a single act of gluing, then one fails at putting together the model plane. In most cases failing at gluing two components together is easy and not fatal, for one can try again. The point here is that in order to successfully build the model airplane, one needs to succeed at all the acts of gluing components together. Increasing the number of components increases the chance of failing at gluing at some point, and thus increases the chance of failing to build the plane.

What this shows is that the chance of failure itself increases the difficulty, and does not simply indicate the presence of difficulty. The task of building a model airplane just is the task of putting together many different components. It is difficult because one has to take care to succeed when gluing every single component together. The activity itself requires no great skill other than making sure one glues parts together properly (although some models clearly do require skill, such as clipper ships, many are aimed at children and it is these models I am talking about). There is nothing in the activity of gluing itself that makes building a model airplane difficult, most people can glue individual components together relatively easily, yet if you have tried to build a model, it is surprisingly easy to get it wrong. It requires great consistency and concentration in gluing parts together to make sure that one does not fail once. What makes it difficult is that because of the requirement to glue so many components together, it is highly

¹ This is not meant to be an exhaustive definition of complexity, but rather an examination of a feature common to all complex activities. Some complex activities will have additional features that make them more difficult, but my aim is to show how this basic feature of all complex activities is linked to failure.

susceptible to failure at some point. In any complex activity the chance of failure increases when the number of tasks increases, since the chance of overall success involves the multiplication of the probability of failure at each task. Because the probability of success in each task is less than 1, the overall probability of success decreases as more tasks are added, and hence the chance of failure at the activity increases. This is true even if each task has the same probability of success.

Not all of the tasks that constitute a complex activity are necessarily easy. Complex activities may involve chains of tasks that are individually difficult. For example, acting in a play: Certain scenes may involve tasks that are difficult, such as displaying intense emotion or performing intricate physical actions. Here, still, the complex nature of the activity of acting means that the overall chance of failure is further increased by scenes that are easy. The difficult tasks constitute flashpoints of possible failure, whereas the overall chance of failure involves all tasks. The activity itself, however, may be difficult even though the smaller tasks that constitute them are all easy. In the previous example, the task of building a model airplane is not difficult because it requires effort to develop the required skills or to perform the individual tasks. It is difficult because it requires great effort to maintain the concentration required to avoid failure. Similarly, the difficulty of acting an entire play is exacerbated by the requirement to maintain a consistency that is not required for acting individual scenes in themselves. Most of us could act a single scene with adequate preparation, but few of us could act an entire play faultlessly. Actors not only put in effort to develop the ability to perform in different roles, but also to develop the ability to maintain the level of concentration required to perform consistently.

The purpose of looking at complex actions in detail is to tease out the link between the susceptibility of a task to failure and the difficulty of that task. In basic, non-complex, tasks, the difficulty can always be characterised as the difficulty of successfully performing the task. The chance of failure merely indicates whether the task is difficult or easy. Complex tasks show that increasing that susceptibility of a certain tasks to failure increases their difficulty. Thus susceptibility to failure is a type of difficulty. This distinction is important because it affects how we ought to deal with difficult tasks. Knowing what type of difficulty we face gives us the ability to respond to it appropriately.

In the previous chapter I said that something is difficult because it requires effort to do. Here I continue to use that understanding of difficulty. The difference is that in the context of the previous chapter I was talking about the difficulty involved in doing something correctly whereas here I am talking about the difficulty involved in not getting something wrong. Sometimes getting things right does not just involve doing things correctly; it also involves avoiding getting things wrong. This may at first seem trivial, but the distinction between the two is important.

It is often easy to get so caught up in how to do something that we forget to consider the ways that we may go wrong. We need to take care to make sure that our intentions are tempered by knowledge of how not to proceed. We often fail because we overlook potential pitfalls, especially when using familiar methods in new and unfamiliar situations. It is important to avoid proceeding with the view that we can just apply a reliable method, because we can never have complete knowledge of what will happen in any given situation. We must consider the ways that things can go wrong, which sometimes requires knowledge that we come to through previous failures. This is something that I will investigate later in the chapter.

Knowing what the chance of failure for any action is allows us to gain a rough idea of how difficult it is for us to do that thing. The chance of failure also affects the difficulty of complex activities. Almost all activities are complex, since very few things consist of single tasks in isolation. Thus it becomes very important that we recognise what is involved in succeeding at complex activities. When we engage in complex activities we need to put effort into maintaining the level of consistency and concentration that is required to successfully complete the requisite consecutive tasks. Even if those tasks may be individually easy and have a low chance of failure, the overall chance of failure for the activity may be high. When the chance of failure is high we will need to put in a lot of effort to avoid failing, which means that the activity will be very difficult for us. If we know this, then we can be prepared and thus be in a better position to avoid the failure.

II What is failure?

We normally have the idea that failure involves exercising or developing our capacities incorrectly. I fail at my mathematics test because I exercised my mathematical ability incorrectly, or did not develop it enough. If I did not pass the test for a different reason, say I had an attack of narcolepsy, we would not call it failure, but perhaps bad luck. Failure is something that we *do* by getting things wrong through our actions. I wish to challenge this. I argue that failure may come about even when we do not *do* anything wrong. Instead, failure comes about when things *go wrong*. While this may sound rather strange, as our commonsense understanding of failure seems to be that of *doing something wrong*, I think that an examination of what failure is will show that my position is justified. Furthermore, this broad definition of failure allows for a more comprehensive discussion of the link between failure and reflection in section IV.

Firstly, failure comes about not solely because we do not successfully complete tasks, but also because we may choose tasks that we are not suited to. We sometimes fail because we put ourselves in such a position that success becomes very difficult or almost impossible. People have differing abilities, and what those abilities are inform the sort of activities that are appropriate to them. By appropriate I mean those activities that individuals will be more likely to succeed at, and thus obtain satisfaction performing. When a person chooses an activity to perform, be it a job, or a hobby, or something else, then she is more likely to fail at it when that activity is at odds with her abilities, character, and capacities. If you are terrible at mathematics, then chances are that you will fail to become a nuclear physicist, should you try. Similarly if you have poor concentration, then you will probably fail to become a chess master. This is simply because you may lack the means to achieve your goals. Of course there will be people whose lives will succeed, even though they may not be suited to what they are doing, or even be very good at it. This may come about simply by luck, because certain people may find success from being at the right place at the right time, despite being mediocre. These people, however, will be in the minority, and we cannot rely solely on luck in order to succeed.

Secondly, apart from luck, success could also come about if we use the term in another sense. Success can involve not only adequately completing certain tasks, but also may involve a judgment that a person has attained his goals related to that activity. So if a person's goal is to

have an enjoyable job, then he may be said to have succeeded, in one sense, when he obtains enjoyment, even though he may in fact be rather bad at his job. So we can fail at individual tasks, and still succeed in our overall aims. Similarly, we can be successful in individual tasks and still fail to gain the overall feeling of success, achievement, or satisfaction that comes with attaining our goals. If we do attain our goals and still do not gain a feeling of success, then it seems we either have some psychological aversion to success or our goals were not the things that we really wanted.

Finally, we are sometimes prevented from succeeding, both at an activity and in attaining our goals, by external circumstances. That is, we can come to fail in certain situations through no fault of our own. As I said earlier, we normally think of failure as the agent involved having *done something wrong*. If we say that someone failed at something or other, we mean that he performed poorly and tend to blame him for his failure. Sometimes, however, circumstances arise that are impossible to foresee, beyond our control, and which cause us to perform poorly. The crowd may demand that a pianist play a rare and unfamiliar piece of music, or a race-car driver may be forced to drive a car that is very different to the ones he has driven before. In each of these cases, the person involved failed because he was unable to overcome unforeseeable obstacles. Success was in fact impossible under the circumstances. His agency is definitely involved; his failure is due to his acting poorly. We can, however, see how this was forced upon him, and we usually excuse him from blame. I think that while this view of failure does capture what is going on, we can go further and also talk of failure that does not involve any immediate agency.

Sometimes we can come to fail through no fault of our own, and through no direct involvement of our own agency and use of abilities. As I have been saying, our commonsense, everyday, understanding of failure involves a person *doing something wrong*. There are times, however, when we speak of failure without reference to agency. Most often this is when we speak of mechanical failure, or the failure of an ideal, such as communism. Sometimes, however, we speak of a person failing due to contingent external events that have nothing to do with his or her agency. For example, a woman loses a job opportunity to a rival because that rival is more qualified. We say that she has failed to gain employment, even though that failure was not due to

anything she did or did not do. The events that led to her failure were outside her realm of control, and there was nothing she could do to avoid failing.

Of course we can speak of her previous actions and say that she has a certain set of qualifications due to things she has done in the past, which were freely chosen. Thus her failure does in fact involve her own agency. The problem with this is that for *anything* we can trace it back to show how a person's agency is involved. This only shows that the person's agency is part of the causal chain that led them to that point. Can we speak of the agency of passengers who died in a plane crash as having been directly involved in their deaths? It does not seem so, even though it is clear that their agency was involved in boarding the plane in the first place. Their boarding the flight is causally involved in their deaths, but so is their having enough money to board, and their being born. They boarded the plane, and thus ensured their own deaths, but they did not die because they *did something*, which led to the plane crash.

The death of the passengers on the plane, like the failure of the woman to obtain the job, is due to contingent external facts that the people involved could not have known nor done anything about. By external, I mean those facts about the situation that exist independently of anything the agent has done. There already existed things beyond the control of the people involved that led to the specific consequences, and those consequences were not necessary consequences of their prior actions. In the case of the woman failing to gain employment, her failure seems to be the result of the bad luck of someone better qualified being present. Her failure is due to the fact that there is a better candidate, and this is not a direct consequence of the woman's prior actions. It does not make sense to say that the woman has *done something wrong*.

Taking this idea that we can fail due to contingent external facts, I wish to change our definition of failure. Failure is being prevented from attaining the things that we want, or from becoming the types of people we wish to become. In the previous example, the woman failed to gain employment precisely because she was stopped from getting what she wanted: a job. Failure need not involve us *doing something wrong*, but rather involves *something going wrong*. Our agency need not be the direct cause of our failure. Under this definition, things such as losing a leg could be called a failure, or becoming brain damaged due to being hit by a bus, as well as things such as failing a test due to laziness. Of course, they are only failures insofar as their

consequences are not desired. Failures are simply those things that prevent success. If we are not successful, then we have failed. I realise that this is a rather different understanding of failure from our ordinary one, but I feel that such a stipulative definition is preferable to the alternatives. Notions such as adversity are too broad, and encompass things that merely make things tougher, rather than those that prevent us from attaining our ends. Introducing a new term seems clumsy and counterproductive, as I seek to trade on our experiences, intuitions, and understanding surrounding what we regard as *failure*.

We fail, then, in various different ways. Not only do we fail due to poor exercise or development of our abilities, but also through contingent external factors. We are prevented from getting what we want or becoming who we want to be. What is common to all failures is that things go wrong in this way. The reason why things go wrong does not affect whether we failed or not, only how we should react to the failure. There is, nevertheless, a deeper question of why things can go wrong in the first place. If we can discover why it is possible for us to fail, then we will know how we ought to deal with failure. To do this we need to look at the types of creatures that we are.

III Human limits and vulnerabilities

There is no doubt that human beings are far from perfect. Not only do we share the same vulnerabilities as other animals, such as susceptibility to disease, injury, and disability, but our superior brains may fall prey to delirium, delusions, hallucinations, and a frightful number of harmful syndromes.² A simple fall from a horse or down a few steps may kill or disable us. Similarly, the witnessing of a horrific event may render us catatonic or result in severe behavioural problems. Even without such extreme examples, things often go wrong for us. We bump into furniture, leave our car headlights on, eat food that is bad for us, drink alcohol, smoke, injure and kill ourselves and others accidentally and deliberately, and much more.

² See DSM-IV-TR.

We are also dependent on other people for most of our lives.³ Not only as infants who are supremely vulnerable, but also as children, learning language and developing our cognitive capacities. Even when we are older, we still depend on others when we are sick, in trouble, stranded, and so on.⁴ While the case of feral children (children raised by animals or with almost no social contact) shows us that the survival of young children is not dependent on other *human* support, the development of distinctly human traits, such as the ability to reason and be reflective, definitely is. These cases show that the only way to develop these traits is for others to assist and stimulate us, as those traits take the form of capacities that need to be actualised through learning, and cannot develop automatically. Without the support of others we are doomed to a life that appears identical to those of non-human animals. If we want to live good *human* lives, then we need to learn how to depend on others.⁵

Now it is important to my project whether these vulnerabilities, dependencies, and limits are part of what makes us human, or whether they are just contingent facts about what it is like to be a human living in *this* world. The latter claim is that bad things happen to human beings because of the way that the world is, and the way we experience it, not because of the way human beings necessarily are. The world contains imperfections and chance elements that cause us to suffer, age, get sick, and die. These imperfections in the world are what make it difficult for us to live well, and thus their elimination would allow us to live well. We ourselves are perfectible, and all we require is the right environment. Thus, the good life would be living as human beings in a paradise without sickness, vulnerability, age, or death. The opposing view is that vulnerabilities, dependencies, and limits are constitutive of the kinds of creatures that we are, and we could not be human, or value the kinds of things that human beings value, without them. Coming to live well, as a human being, in this case involves dealing with and overcoming difficulty, not removing it from our lives.

Martha Nussbaum deals with this issue of whether human limits and vulnerabilities can be overcome in her essay ‘Transcending Humanity’. She looks at the implications of having, and lacking, human vulnerabilities, and begins by drawing a link between our vulnerabilities and the

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 1.

⁴ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 1.

⁵ See MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, for an in-depth discussion of dependence, vulnerability, and the good life.

sorts of things that we value. She uses the example of the Greek Gods as beings who are similar to humans but lack their vulnerabilities. She says that the lack of these vulnerabilities does not make the Gods *better* than mortals, just very different to them.⁶ In fact, the lives of Gods lack things we think are valuable and worth pursuing.⁷ She also states that it is impossible for the Gods to understand certain human goods: “These goods [friendship and personal love] can only be seen as goods... from within the human form of life with its structures of limit and finitude.”⁸ This means that the seemingly cruel treatment of mortals by the Gods in various stories does not stem from any malice on their part, but rather from an inability to see why human beings require certain goods. These goods are only goods in the context of living as a limited and vulnerable human being. Furthermore, what makes these things good for human beings are precisely the imperfections we currently have. We could say that they are goods partly because they fill certain gaps created by our flaws. Friends, for example, provide things such as physical help and alternate viewpoints that serve to counter weakness and poor reasoning. Nussbaum also looks at sporting excellence as an example of a good that is dependent on these limits.⁹ Sporting excellence requires that we have certain physical limits and that we struggle against those limits.¹⁰ This struggling against our limits requires effort, and this is necessary for the achievement of sporting excellence to be meaningful and valued.¹¹ Not having those limits would make any sort of sporting contest pointless, since everyone could do everything instantly and effortlessly.

Furthermore, it does seem that if we did not have the vulnerabilities and limits we do have, then we would be a different *type* of being than we are now. We would differ not just in terms of those vulnerabilities and limits, but also in terms of certain *core* human features. Growing old and dying, for one thing, seems to form part of what it is to be human. Being a child, an adolescent, an adult, a geriatric, and passing from one stage to another all seem part of what it is to be human. If a child was never marked by the passing of time, if he stayed at age three (mentally as well as physically) permanently, we would probably think there was something

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, ‘Transcending Humanity’, p. 371.

⁷ Nussbaum, ‘Transcending Humanity’, p. 371.

⁸ Nussbaum, ‘Transcending Humanity’, p. 374.

⁹ Nussbaum, ‘Transcending Humanity’, p. 372.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, ‘Transcending Humanity’, p. 372.

¹¹ See Chapter 1, Section III of this thesis.

inhuman about him (not in the pejorative sense, but rather that he was simply non-human). The same goes for a person who reached age twenty-five and just stopped ageing. Furthermore, we cannot see such people as being able to live a life anything like our own. The lives of immortal people in literature seem characteristically tragic as they often fail to reconcile their immortality with their human longings.¹²

Most of us probably think that we would have good reasons to become immortal and invulnerable. I think that we would be wrong. Our specific vulnerabilities not only contributed in the past to forming who we are now, but are also constitutive of who we are. In fact, we have many reasons to remain human, the strongest of which is that we cannot retain many human goods while eliminating our vulnerabilities and limits. Eliminating our vulnerabilities also eliminates the very features that make those things good for us in the first place. Those vulnerabilities are also what allow us to understand and value those goods. For example, those who cannot suffer cannot understand the need for compassion nor can they develop compassion for the suffering of others.¹³ I think that the view that immortals could be classified as human gets its weight from our imagining what it would be like if *I* were granted immortality and invulnerability. Most of us would think ourselves little changed, simply superior versions of our current selves. This is wrong, for we would certainly become very different after such a change.

Were I to wake up invulnerable (by which I mean being devoid of vulnerabilities, not simply being immune to physical harm) and immortal tomorrow, say like a Greek God, I might view myself as the same person who went to bed the previous night. In a short time, however, I think that I would begin to change rapidly. For instance, I would not have to deliberate about whether to perform physically risky actions. I would be able to walk through bad neighbourhoods without having to worry about being stabbed or hit in the face with a brick. In time I think that I would become insensitive to the plight of others unless I made special effort to renew my understanding of suffering (if that were even possible). No longer would my inevitable death partly inform what I do with my life. Numerous other things would also change. It does seem that as a God I would be very different to the self I am now, and have a very different set of values and goods to the ones I currently have.

¹² See *A Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde, amongst others.

¹³ Nussbaum, 'Transcending Humanity', p. 375.

The point here, which echoes Nussbaum, is that I could see that such things might be good, but I could not see how such a life would be *good for me*. Such a life would have its own set of values and goods, understandable only from within its own context. If Nussbaum is right about Gods being unable to appreciate human goods and values, then it would seem that mortals would be unable to appreciate the God's goods and values. It would seem that desiring to become a God is irrational. Since the different values are only valuable within their context, we cannot compare them to say whether one set is better than the other. Mortal values are useless to an immortal, and vice versa. I may be able to recognise that as a God I would value their values, but I have no way of valuing those values as a mortal, and so this does not give me a reason to aspire to be a God.

Given all this, while it does seem possible to imagine a person who has never felt physical pain, never suffered heartbreak, never cried, never done so many other human things, it does seem that by lacking these things such a person would be quite unlike us. He would not simply be like the six million dollar man, a better, stronger, faster human being. He would, rather, be more like we might imagine an artificial intelligence, such as a self-aware android, to be like. He would not be human, but a different kind of being, with perhaps a passing resemblance to us. For all the above reasons, then, we should not desire to be Gods. Becoming a God would lead to us losing many things, such as compassion, love and friendship, which we think are of great value. This is because these things only exist as goods within a limited and vulnerable human life. We also could not say that the life of a God would be better than our own, since we could not say that the goods of Gods are better for them than our goods are for us.

If we accept that being vulnerable to certain things is part of human nature, this then means that failing is an inevitable consequence of being human. Our vulnerabilities ensure that as we grapple with the difficulties we encounter we *will* fail at some point or another. Failure is not conceptually inevitable, since being limited does not entail that one has to fail. The probability of failing at least once, however, is so close to 1 that it may as well be inevitable. Since we can fail at everything we do, sooner or later we are bound to end up failing at something. It is important to remember what failure is: being prevented from attaining the things that we want, or from becoming the types of people we wish to become. Again, we would consider the ability of a child to unerringly grasp complex notions and complete complex activities something decidedly

inhuman. In fact the adjective ‘unerringly’ is often used to describe something odd and not characteristically human.

Our task, on the route to living good lives, is to learn how to overcome the difficulties we face and how to deal with those times when we cannot overcome them. Even if our failures appear small or trivial, it does not mean that they do not constitute actual failures, nor does it mean that they are in no way consequential. Though failure does have negative effects, even if they are minimal, it may also have some positive effects. In fact failure is useful not only to remind us of our limits and vulnerabilities, but also because it may provide us with better understanding of ourselves or the task we failed at. I wish now to examine how failure can provide us with something positive.

IV Failure and Reflection

One of our commonsense understandings of failure is that it is not wholly negative. In fact sometimes we believe that certain people ought to fail, that failure will be good for them. An example of this would a conceited person or a braggart. These are the sorts of people who have certain vices of character, which have mainly to do with false beliefs about themselves. They act in a reprehensible manner, perhaps because they have overblown beliefs about their self-worth. We often think that such people ought to fail because it may be the only way of getting them to lose these false beliefs about themselves, and thus also their particular vice. What failure does is show them, mostly in no uncertain terms, that they are like the rest of us: imperfect. In a similar way we tend to think, in our folk wisdom, that failure can sometimes make people stronger or better. People who struggle against and overcome failure can gain something that people who meet with immediate success do not.

Failure can have numerous positive and negative effects on individuals. Out of all the possible effects of failure, the most ethically important is the ability of failure to stimulate reflection. When we reflect on our failures we may come to learn things that will help us to live well. Of course this is not to say that all failure will cause us to reflect, or that all reflection will provide us with knowledge, or even that any piece of knowledge we come to will help us at all. Some

failures, such as burning the toast, will probably not cause us to reflect at all. We may reflect on other failures and not be able to come to any sort of conclusion; we may have accidentally hurt ourselves during a series of activities, but be unable to figure out exactly what was done to cause the harm. Finally, we may come to learn something from reflecting on a failure, but that knowledge may not be useful for anything in the future. This is not to say that the knowledge itself is not good, but simply that it will not necessarily contribute to any of our prudential concerns.

When we gain something positive from reflecting on failure itself, this can be in a number of different ways. The two main ways are: stimulating us to reflect on our failure itself and stimulating us to reflect on ourselves.

Reflecting on the failure itself involves reflecting on the cause of the failure, finding out what went wrong. By doing this we can come to gain knowledge of what we failed at. If we can know what it is that led to the failure, then we can know what to do in future in order to avoid repeating the failure, or failing at something similar. We may also come to discover whether some things are central components of what we failed at. We may come to find out that certain things are necessary for that activity to be successfully completed while other things are not. Thus, failure may constitute a motivating reason to learn more about certain activities.

One way of looking at failure as a motivator to reflect is to say that none of us wants to fail. So, when we do fail, it motivates us to learn about why we failed in order to avoid the bad consequence of repeating the failure in future. While I think this may explain some occasions of reflection on our failures, it does not explain those times when we reflect on once-off failures, failures that we cannot repeat. For example, a person may reflect on a mountain climbing accident that left her paralysed, even though she is well aware that any knowledge of the accident cannot help her avoid failure in the future. The reason why we reflect on these failures may be because failure is often unexpected, and we want to know why our expected result differed from the actual result. This is not done with future failure in mind, but rather in order to make sure that we form expectations that are justified and based on the way the world is. It may also be due to an innate desire to find explanations for things. It may simply be part of being a rational agent that we attempt to make sure that our world view is based on the way things are.

Regardless of why exactly we do reflect on our failures, it seems quite apparent that we do in fact often reflect on them. Furthermore, we do often come to knowledge through ‘trial and error’, especially when we are engaging in endeavours about which we have little prior knowledge. If I succeed at an activity about which I know little, I will probably not learn anything other than that my method was correct for that specific situation. If I fail, however, and reflect on that failure, I may come to knowledge of things I ought to avoid in future. Since situations are never repeated identically, learning what to avoid seems at least as important as learning a correct method. For example, if I am building a model airplane, I may succeed in building it at the first attempt. The next time I build one, however, all I know is that I should succeed by simply mimicking my previous methods. I do not, however, know whether my success was due to my method being a good one, or simply due to luck. Repeated success may be an indicator that it is a good method, but not necessarily.

If I fail at some things, however, and reflect on those failures, then I may come to know what to avoid doing next time. I may not come to know what I ought to do to get things right, but I will know what to avoid doing, and what to change. This may be very helpful if the knowledge I come to is generalisable beyond my single activity. For example, I may fail because I put too much glue on the slender struts for the landing gear, corroding them. By reflecting on this I may come to the knowledge of the corrosiveness of the glue, and thus that, whenever I am using slender parts, I ought to use as little glue as possible. This is knowledge that is generalisable to any instance when I am using slender parts, not just model airplanes. In contrast, if I had simply used as little glue as possible the first time around, all I would know is that airplane landing gear struts can be glued well with as little glue as possible. I would not know that a lot of glue would damage them, nor would I know that all slender things should have as little glue as possible. Thus, if I were to then move on to the model of, say, a clipper ship, I would be in a better position to get it right if I had the knowledge I got through failing at the airplane, than if I had succeeded at it the first time.

The idea here is that failure may have a beneficial aspect if it leads us to knowledge that could allow us to avoid failure in the future. It could be said that this knowledge would be beneficial even if it did not allow us to avoid failure in the future. This would be if we view knowledge as good in itself, or as prudentially valuable for a reason other than failure avoidance or success.

The knowledge could allow us to engage in activities that we otherwise would not. It could pique our interest by stimulating us to wonder about how something works. That said, there will obviously be situations in which knowing what to do (in the sense of knowing a method that has worked previously, perhaps one that is reliable) is more helpful than knowing what not to do, but it seems that knowing what to do *and* knowing what not to do is best. Thus, I am not saying that failing is *better* than succeeding, even with respect to prudential concerns. I am, rather, saying that failure can be positive, i.e. have beneficial consequences, by providing us with knowledge that is at least prudentially valuable, knowledge that we may not have if we had not failed.

In sum, failure has positive consequences because of what we do when we reflect on our failures. The first way that failure can be positive is by stimulating us to reflect on the failure itself. When we reflect on our failure, our reflection takes the form of an evaluation of our conduct and circumstances. We want to discover why things went wrong, and so we evaluate the circumstances surrounding our failure.

This is important because it seems that we do not often engage in such evaluative reflection unless we are prompted by failure. When we usually engage in reflection it is while deliberating on action. We reflect about what course of action we should take, given a whole host of background considerations, such as what our likes, dislikes, long terms goals, skills, past successes and failures, and so on are. We do not often engage with those background considerations, reflecting on whether they are appropriate to us, whether they are in fact as important as we think they are, or whether we are actually as skilled as we think we are. It is failure that most often leads us to reflect on these background factors.

This then leads us to self-reflection, which involves many of those background concerns. Failure can have a positive effect by causing us to reflect on ourselves. When we fail, we sometimes come to reflect on our character, motivations, goals, plans, and so on. Through this process of self-reflection we may come to self-knowledge that may be beneficial. We can come to know ourselves better, and thus we are in a better position to judge what sort of things are worthwhile for us to do and what things we would excel at. When we reflect on a failure, we may come to see that we failed because it was not something to which we are actually suited. This usually comes about after a series of similar failures. We engage in reflection that may lead us to

discover what we are really suited to, or what we really want to be doing. Of course a series of successes would tell us that we are probably at least somewhat good at that activity. It would not, however, normally cause us to reflect on what we are doing. It does not make us question whether what we are doing is really what we are suited to, or what we want to be doing. We could in fact be doing something that we might be good at, but which is not really what we want to be doing. We could be doing something else that gives us more satisfaction and perhaps makes life more meaningful.

For example, if a person is a decent or even good accountant, the fact that she does not fail will likely not lead her to be reflective about her career. She may not in fact be getting much satisfaction out of her job and her passion may lie elsewhere, perhaps in pure mathematics. The lack of satisfaction itself may prompt her to reflect, but only insofar as it constitutes a failure to gain the satisfaction that she wants from her career. Success in activities tends to make people complacent and unreflective about their suitability to those activities. In fact, even if this person were to harbour some thoughts about changing careers, the fact that she is successful is likely to act against it. Success brings with it tangible gains, such as a good salary, whereas changing careers is almost always risky. Being successful in something that is not in our best interests can have a negative effect on our ability to change to something that is in our best interests. In contrast, failure in an activity can contribute to our changing to something that is in our best interests. So it seems that there is a danger that success may wed us to an activity that is at best mediocre in its contribution to our living well. On the other hand, it must be noted that failure does not guarantee that we will come to discover appropriate activities through reflection, and failure brings with itself obvious negative effects. My claim is simply that failure gives us reason to reflect, which in turn could result in beneficial consequences for us.

These reasons to reflect arise both in failure that is and failure that is not attributable to our agency. Failing due to our own laziness or losing a leg in a freak accident both give us reasons to reflect on what went wrong. As I mentioned earlier, these reasons can be that the failure is unexpected, or that we want to avoid repeating the failure, or that we want to form appropriate expectations that lead us to reflect. If we were to lose a leg in an accident, it would lead us to reflect, and in all probability evaluate our lives, goals, plans, etc... This is not only about the way we will have to live, now that our abilities are different. Such a failure may lead us to discover

things unrelated to the accident that we had been doing poorly, perhaps our parenting or friendships. It may also lead us to discover that we are more suited to certain things. Perhaps by requiring us to reflect on what we can do with our limited mobility it may lead us to discover that in fact we are happier working in a city environment than outdoors. Of course the converse is true, and we may never find an activity to replace the one we can no longer perform. That is just bad luck.

Success, on the other hand, brings with it no reasons to be reflective. We got what we wanted, and there seem to be no implications further than this, unless what we got was not what we really wanted. We do not think that success implies anything about ourselves that we need to think about. Success may tell us things but it only serves to silently reinforce our behaviour and ideas, not to bring anything into question. Success may give us reason to reflect if it is unexpected, but this is rare, since in most activities we expect to succeed.

So far I have been concentrating on the effects of failure upon individuals and individual lives. If we look at failure in another context, however, we may discover a more important effect of failure. Failure may be what causes us to become clever, reflective, and interesting creatures. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche speaks of various ‘types’ of people, the most important of which are the nobles, the slaves, and the priests. The nobles are the physically strong, self-affirming, successful individuals, whose characteristics determine what is good.¹⁴ They are the winners, the ones who are in charge. The slaves, on the other hand, are weak, having physical abilities inferior to that of the nobles, and they end up as the losers, the failures, embodying what is non-good, i.e. bad.¹⁵ They are forced to work for the nobles. The priests, on the other hand, share the social position of the nobles, but lack the physical attributes that make nobles good.¹⁶ Nietzsche argues that the priests’ failure to live up to the noble ideals, their impotence, leads them to become bitter and hate the nobles and their mode of valuation.¹⁷ They begin to stir a

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 7.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 10.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 6.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 7.

revolt among the slaves and invert the noble mode of valuation, such that good (what the nobles esteem) becomes evil, and bad (what the priests and slaves esteem) becomes good.¹⁸

What is of interest here is that although the nobles are self-affirming and physically dominant, they are in fact rather stupid and unreflective; they operate according to what we would today call their unconscious impulses.¹⁹ They have no reason to reflect on their lives, because they always get what they want. The priest, or slave, in contrast to this, is clever because “he understands how to keep quiet, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble.”²⁰ The slaves and priests have to reflect on themselves and their conduct in order to do these things. Their failure to be good (noble) is what leads them to become clever and reflective. They cannot simply assert themselves as the nobles do, since they are physically inferior. Therefore, if they want power (which Nietzsche thinks all people have as their end), they must resort to other means. This is what stimulates them to become reflective, and thus clever, as they have to *think* about what to do, whereas the nobles just *do*. This has the consequence of making them interesting creatures, “it was on the soil of... the priestly form, that man first became an *interesting animal*, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth*.”²¹ Thus, it is failure that leads to humankind becoming reflective, clever, and interesting.

This story quite plausibly shows that failure could play an important role in developing our ability to think about things, and thus make us clever as a species. It could very easily be read as an evolutionary story. Human beings developed intelligence because some of us lacked the physical abilities to just get what we wanted. Not getting what we wanted stimulated us, with our large brains, to reflect on why we could not get what we wanted, especially when others who were physically dominant could. This led us to develop mentally, since clever individuals can use intelligence to overcome the physical abilities of others in order to get what they want, and thus survive to procreate. Thus the ability to reflect on our lives, which is required to live well, developed as a result of certain failures by the physically weak, and not successes by the physically dominant.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 7.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 10.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 10.

²¹ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, Section 6.

V Failure in the context of the Good Life

I have been emphasising failure and its positive aspects in specific situations, and how individual failures may have positive consequences. It is important to note that these positive consequences are as a direct result of reflection, not of failure itself. Failure may spur us to reflect, and thus achieve valuable knowledge, but it is not the failure itself that gives us this knowledge. Failure is important because of its link to reflection. The reason why failure leads to reflection is because of the nature of failure itself. That is, the benefits failure may provide are not dependent on contingent external facts. For example, I may fail a test for a specific course and be kicked out of it. During the exam for that course the venue collapses, killing all inside. It could be said that my failure was, in a sense, beneficial to me, allowing me to avoid being crushed to death. These positive consequences, however, are entirely the result of contingent external factors, and the failure itself in no way contains features that can be linked to the avoidance of death by crushing. On the other hand, the essential features of my failure, that it prevents me from getting what I want and confounds my expectations, lead me to reflect. On reflection I conclude that in fact I ought to be doing another course, which is better suited to me and which gives me more satisfaction. This benefit, unlike the avoidance of crushing, can be directly linked to the nature of the failure. This means that getting something good from a failure is not accidental good luck, but comes from essential features of failure itself, which consistently affect us in certain ways.

What can such an understanding of failure, as constituting a type of difficulty, hope to contribute to our theories of the good life? Why should we bother to philosophically explore failure if we want our lives to go well? Should we not be more concerned with discovering positive avenues to propel our lives forward? Well, the answer is both yes and no. We should be concerned with positively advancing our lives, but we should not assume that living well takes place independently of our vulnerabilities and the difficulties we need to overcome. We must be wary of instructions of how to live well that ignore the very vulnerabilities that contribute to its being so hard to live well in the first place. They may provide *possible* ways to live well, but if they ignore that fact that sooner or later bad things will happen to us, then they presuppose that those things have no impact on our ability to live well, are just obstacles to be removed, or prevent us

from living well altogether. Theories on how to live well ought to take failure into account, irrespective of the positive aspects I claim it has, simply because it forms part of what it is to be a human, attempting to live well. By keeping quiet about failure, theories of how to live well ignore something that often has a profound effect on our lives.

Thus, I think that it would be helpful to outline just why failure and its positive effects need to be taken into account when giving a theory of the good life. Any account of what a good life consists in, if it is to have merit, is going to have to show both how such a life is possible and also how we can go about achieving such a life. It is with regards to achievement that understanding failure and its effects becomes important. Any talk of achieving a good life must involve the kind of meaningful achievement mentioned in the previous chapter. These achievements may not be in the form of achieving goals, but may instead involve acquiring a certain character, or set of skills or abilities. Getting to the point where our lives are going well requires us to achieve certain things. How exactly those achievements are cashed out is largely irrelevant. Failure is important here not only because of its obvious negative effects on achievement, but also because of the possible positive gains from reflecting on our failures.

Reflecting on our failures, or on ourselves due to our failures, can lead us to knowledge that may be useful in achieving our aspirations and helping our lives to go well. Short of just being unlucky, it seems that most of the time our lives do not go well because we do not know how to live well. We are unsuccessful because we do not know of certain difficulties, and thus are unprepared for them, or we do not know whether or not we will be suited to certain things. Most of the time, however, it is simply not possible to know these things until we actually engage in such activities. What we can come to learn, through reflecting on failure, is pitfalls to avoid, deeper knowledge of certain activities, knowledge of things we are or are not suited to, and perhaps simply more awareness of our own limits, strengths, and weaknesses. All this knowledge can help us in our quest to live well. Avoiding the repetition of mistakes and knowing more about what we are doing helps us to be successful at specific tasks, more so than avoiding difficulty and choosing easy tasks we will succeed at. Knowledge of what we are suited to and what our strengths and weaknesses are helps us to choose activities in the future that we will be more likely to succeed in and gain satisfaction from. The knowledge that we get from reflecting on failure allows us to live better. All of this contributes towards overcoming those difficulties

that we face because of our limited and vulnerable nature and meaningfully achieving our aspirations.

This is not to say that failure is the only way to learn such things, just that since we do in fact fail, and fail fairly often, it seems that we are likely to learn helpful things through our failures, if we reflect on them. Thus, if we want to live well, we ought to take a certain attitude towards our failures. This is not to say that we ought to look at our failures in a single light, for each circumstance will determine how a failure appears to a person. Failure at one thing may seem trivial and easy to overcome, while failure at something else may seem weighty and hard to overcome. We ought instead to take a reflective attitude towards our failures, and not ignore or obsess over them. Obsessing over our failures would involve continual questioning about a certain failure means, or unnecessary worrying about what it says about oneself or the future. Reflection, on the other hand, involves trying to determine the cause of the failure, why things did not go as we anticipated, whether the failure says something about our suitability to the task, whether the failure is actually important to us or not. We should, however, go further than this. We should also ask ourselves what positive things we can get out of the failure. We ought to be asking ourselves, “What can I learn from this?”

Now, there may seem to be a contradiction in what I am saying. The evaluative reflection I mentioned earlier is required in order to live well, and evaluative reflection comes largely from reflecting on failure. Reflecting on failure, however, has the consequence of reducing future failure, and thus the chance of future evaluative reflection. So it seems that reflecting on failure has negative consequences for living well, as well as positive consequences. I think this is mistaken. What we gain from reflecting on our failures is knowledge of how to live well, what we are suited to and how to do things better. In order to be able to achieve the good life, we need to know these things. Living well is based on our having knowledge of how to live well. This not only involves knowing how to do things, but also involves knowing how to avoid and overcome difficulties that face us. When we actually have this knowledge we know how to avoid failure (as well as can reasonably be expected) and we know ourselves. When we have done this, we do not need to engage in as much evaluative reflection as we did in the process of coming to know how to live well. The reason why evaluative reflection is required for the good life is because we gain useful and important knowledge about ourselves and the world through it. Once we have come to

learn what is required for living well, we are in a position where we do not need to reflect as much. What we have learnt along the way allows us to deal with the difficulties that we face, to overcome them and rise above our failures, creating the best lives for ourselves that we can.

Chapter 3

Difficulty and the Good Life

In the previous two chapters I examined the notion of difficulty in terms of effort and failure and showed how they relate to our achievement of the good life. Here I want to take the work I have done and integrate it into existing thought on the good life, and relate it to research done in psychology. It is important that the conclusions that I have come to about difficulty, effort and failure are compatible with at least some conceptions of the good life. While the conclusions I have come to may seem important in isolation, if they cannot form part of a larger account of the good life, then there is little reason to think that the things I have argued for are necessary in order to live well.

There have been a great many accounts of the good life and what we ought to do if we want to live well. I will look at the accounts of Alan Gewirth and John Kekes and show how the notion of difficulty, mainly in terms of the positive role effort plays, is not only compatible with their accounts, but in the case of Kekes, also serves to augment them. I will start by looking at Gewirth's conception of the good life, as detailed in his book *Self-Fulfilment*, and show how the positive role that effort plays in our lives is compatible with his characterisation of aspirations as desires, as opposed to values. John Cottingham, in *Philosophy and the Good Life*, argues that philosophy has an obligation to take psychology seriously. Thus, I will look at the psychology of effort, especially the results of psychological empirical research, and argue that it supports my claims about effort. Using the results of a number of psychological studies, and also some related concepts taken from positive psychology, I will show that there is strong support for the idea that effort has a positive effect on us and our engagement with our activities. Next, I will take some of those psychological resources and apply them to Kekes' account of the good life, outlined in his book *The Examined Life*. I will use these resources to show how commitment to an ideal, central to his account of living well, increases the meaningfulness of our lives, when we put in

the effort that constitutes a commitment to that ideal. Finally, I will look at what my conclusions imply in the wider social spectrum and for the future.

I Aspirations as Desires

In the first chapter I argued that aspirations were values and not desires. Some people may feel that this is wrong, that I have conflated aspirations with what we aspire to, i.e. the objects of our aspirations. I do not think so, since I think that aspiring to something involves recognising the great value that something has in your life, and is not the act of your desiring that thing. There are, however, people who take aspirations to be desires, and consequently they may be inclined to reject what I have to say about the role of effort in valuing aspirations. While I have already argued for my position,¹ it would be better to accommodate those who have a differing account of aspirations than to reject their views. Furthermore, it will strengthen my conclusions about the necessity of effort in the good life if I can show how effort fits into an account of aspirations as desires. If effort plays a role in the satisfaction of our aspirations as desires, as well as in the valuing of our aspirations as values, then I think that will dismiss any doubts about its necessity for the good life. I will use Alan Gewirth's account of aspirations as desires, detailed in *Self-Fulfilment*, to show the role of effort in desire satisfaction.

Although Gewirth cashes out aspirations as desires, his account is nuanced enough to relate to my discussion on effort. He characterises aspirations as desires within an evaluative framework. Aspirations are desires, and they have to do with our values, what we want to become and what we want to value.² Our aspirations are the desires for what we think would be best for ourselves and our lives. It seems that Gewirth cashes out aspirations as desires because he wants to stress the motivational aspect of aspirations, which is what, for him, makes them so important. We are moved by our aspirations and live our lives in pursuit of fulfilment of these deepest desires. For him, though, this is only half the picture. Fulfilment of aspirations is not sufficient to live well. We also need to fulfil our capacities, which involves willingly actualising certain potentialities

¹ Chapter 1, Section 1 of this thesis.

² Alan Gewirth, *Self-Fulfilment*, pp. 23-24.

that we have due to our nature as human beings.³ These two feed into each other, as the fulfilment of our aspirations depends on what capacities we have, and the realisation of our capacities is partly driven by our aspirations. His overall project is to show how this is not only compatible with, but logically entails, the adoption of a universalist morality. He wants to show how fulfilling our aspirations and capacities requires us to adopt a universalist morality. He claims that we cannot be free to pursue fulfilment (which we all want and are moved to pursue) without endorsing the ability of others to do likewise.⁴ This in turn requires that we adopt a universalist moral principle that enshrines that right, along with rights to the more basic things we require for self-fulfilment. The conclusion of his argument is the following principle: “Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as yourself.”⁵ These generic rights just are the rights held equally by all human beings, i.e. human rights. He calls this the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC).⁶

There is not a huge difference for this debate between cashing out aspirations as values or as desires. Even when aspirations are cashed out as desires, value still forms a necessary piece of the picture. Similarly, when aspirations are cashed out as values, desire forms a necessary part of the picture. Irrespective of which part you single out as the aspiration, this picture involves having (strong) desires to live a certain way that we think is of great value to us. I believe aspirations are values because I endorse the view that the good life is driven by the recognition of the value of living a certain way. Realising that a certain life has great value to us gives us reason to pursue that life. Thus, it is our evaluation of what life would be best for us that motivates us to pursue the good life. I would argue that Gewirth endorses the view that the good life is driven by our deepest desires, what we most intimately yearn for.⁷ We have strong desires to live a certain way and these desires motivate us to pursue the good life. It probably would not matter to him how these desires arise, though he does show them to arise from within an evaluative framework, because of his inclusion of a universalist constraint. However our aspirations arise, they will have to be mediated, scrutinised, and endorsed by the universalist ethic that is entailed by the PGC. We must adopt the PGC because it is required if we want to

³ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 13.

⁴ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 81.

⁵ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 84.

⁶ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 84.

⁷ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 23.

have the ability to fulfil (satisfy) our aspirations. If we do not adopt the PGC, then we endorse the ability of others to stop us from achieving our aspirations. A universalist ethic will also ensure that our aspirations are not for morally reprehensible things or fulfilled in a morally reprehensible way.⁸ In turn, it will make sure that our aspirations are for things that are valuable. It will also give us a duty to ourselves to develop our capacities. If we have responsibilities towards others based on our duties to them, then we also ought to have responsibilities to ourselves based on our duties to ourselves.⁹ This includes developing the capacities that give us the ability and freedom to pursue our aspirations and live the good life.¹⁰ So along with the self-evident prudential reasons for making sure that what we aspire to is valuable, we also have moral reasons to do so.

Now, as I have shown when I cashed out aspirations as values, how we come to achieve our aspirations is important. The same applies if we cash out our aspirations as desires. How we fulfil or satisfy our desires is important. We do not just want to obtain the objects of our desires. We want to obtain them in certain ways. Our desires do not always satisfy or fulfil us simply because we attain their objects. How we attain the objects of our desires is often important for our being satisfied. Suppose one desires to win a tennis tournament. In every match, one's opponents retire for various medical reasons. It does not seem that one would get much satisfaction from this, even though the object of one's desire was attained. This goes back to Nozick's view that we want to live our own lives.¹¹ We want to be involved in our lives in certain ways. We want our desire to win the tennis tournament to be satisfied through the exercise of our tennis skills and not the incapacity of our opponents through injury. At least this is how we ought to feel if we desire *winning* the tennis tournament, and not just reaping the benefits that would result from winning. The feeling of satisfaction that comes when we attain the objects of our desire is often partly due to the fact that it was we who satisfied that desire. Of course, not all desires are affected as strongly by how we attain their objects. If I want a nice looking jacket, then I will probably be equally satisfied whether I buy it myself or get it as a present.

⁸ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 52.

⁹ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 134.

¹⁰ Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 135.

¹¹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, p.44.

It seems that how we satisfy our desires becomes more important when the object of desire is more central to our lives. When what we want is not very central to our lives, then we do not really mind how we get it, as long as we are not doing anything bad in the process. I do not really mind how I get rid of the itch on my back or what brand of bottled water I drink to satisfy my thirst. I do mind, however, how I get the job that I want and who my friends are. My desires to have a certain job and to have friends are important and so their objects need to be attained in certain ways if those desires are to be satisfied. I want the job, and part of that includes wanting to get it through the recognition of my ability and previous achievements. Similarly, I want my friendships to be based on mutual love and respect and not just the gifts and favours that go along with this. Friendship is a prime example of a desire that comes with specific ways to attain its object. There just is no way to build a truly fulfilling friendship that is not based on mutual love and respect. Someone who says that her superficial friendship bought by gifts fulfils her desire for friendship is either being insincere or self-deceptive, or fails to understand the concept of friendship.

If aspirations are our deepest desires, then they are most central to our lives. Thus, how we fulfil them is very important to us. It stands to reason that attaining the objects of our aspirations through effort will lead to the most satisfaction. In the second chapter I stressed the effect of effort on our self-concept, and this is important here. Satisfying our aspirations, because of the central role they have in our lives, involves us doing certain things to attain their objects, not just getting those objects. This makes us feel like we have done something with our lives that we can be satisfied with. Our lives progress forward through what we do and, while luck may play a large role, when we get what we want most we want to have gotten it through our own agency. We also want it to be something we have accomplished through the exercise of our own abilities. We want to be affected and changed by what we do, not just to obtain objects that we want. Whether aspirations involve the attainment of objects of desire or objects of value, this is done through achievement. Getting what we want most requires successful achievement. Satisfying our aspirations, if they are desires, requires us to do the same things that valuing our aspirations does, if they are values. Thus, everything that I said about the meaningful achievement of aspirations in Chapter 1 also applies to a desire-based account of aspirations. In order to meaningfully achieve our aspirations we need to put effort in.

II The Psychology of Effort

In the second chapter I spoke of how human limits and vulnerabilities were important in setting up constraints for what is good for human beings. Facts about the type of creatures that we are influence what we should do if we want to live well. Our vulnerability to failure means that we need to learn to deal with and learn from it. These facts about human nature include psychological facts. In *Philosophy and the Good Life*, John Cottingham argues that we need to take into account psychological theory, especially the notion of the unconscious mind, if we wish to form an understanding of how to live well. Psychoanalytic thought has greatly advanced our understanding of ourselves and Cottingham believes that it provides convincing evidence that the use of reason alone is insufficient to achieve the good life.¹² His view is that since the unconscious influences how we act, often without us knowing that it does, our use of reason is always open to being undermined by our more primal or repressed self.¹³ Even though our aspirations may be those things that we want most, we may have unconscious desires or impulses that undermine our attempts to pursue these aspirations. Cottingham's answer is that we must undergo what he calls transformational analysis (therapy) in order to 'rediscover' ourselves, to bring the unconscious up to the level of the conscious such that we may reconcile the two as much as is possible.¹⁴

This is important because it shows that coming to live well is not just about choosing the right things to value, and then pursuing them. It is also about developing a mature and coherent psychological makeup that will allow you to successfully pursue your aspirations. Even if you could come to achieve your aspirations despite these unconscious influences, it seems clear that you would not escape those influences. Thus philosophy has a responsibility to take facts about human psychology seriously, because those facts form part of what it is to be human, and the good life is a human life.

¹² John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life*, p. 111.

¹³ Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life*, pp. 135-136.

¹⁴ Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life*, p. 146.

The notions of failure and effort are overlooked in philosophy, just as the issue of the unconscious mind is. That failure and effort play such important roles in the good life – failure in obtaining knowledge of how to live well and effort in valuing achievements and making them meaningful – means that they need to be integrated into prescriptions of how to live well. What is also common, at least between effort and the unconscious, is that these concerns are backed by psychology. The effect of effort on the way that we think about ourselves and our lives is something that psychological studies can measure. There is an important difference, however, in that while the unconscious mind is a core part of the psychoanalytic tradition of psychology, effort only finds support from a few studies. While I could not find any studies done to discover whether effort does in fact play the role in self-conception that I have claimed it does, there have been related studies, the conclusions of which support my position.

Firstly, in a series of studies using school children, Carol Dweck and Claudia Mueller looked at the effect of praising children for effort and compared it to the effect of praising children for intelligence.¹⁵ The studies were conducted by dividing the populations of fifth-grade children (9-10 year olds) into three groups. In one study, students were given three tests to complete, starting with an easy one. The children in the first group were praised for their performance by telling them that they must be very clever. The children in the second group were also praised for their performance, but told that they must have worked very hard. The third group was a control and the children in it were praised neutrally. This praise was given after the first test, and only once. After the praise was given, and before the second test started, the children were told that there would possibly be a fourth test and asked what their achievement goals for this test were. This involved asking them whether they would like problems they would perform well at or ones they would learn something from. Most of the children praised for intelligence (67%) chose a performance goal, which involved easy questions they could do well at, whereas almost all (92%) of the children praised for effort chose a learning goal, which involved harder questions they could learn from.¹⁶

¹⁵ Carol Dweck and Claudia Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance'.

¹⁶ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 36.

The children were then given an impossible test, one designed for children two years ahead of them. The children praised for effort saw their failure at this test as a result of not putting enough effort in.¹⁷ In contrast, the children praised for intelligence saw their failure as an indication that they were not clever.¹⁸ Finally, the children were given a test as easy as the first one. The children praised for effort increased their scores significantly; the children praised for intelligence posted scores lower than in the first test; and the control group increased in performance slightly.¹⁹ An extended study based on the same model replicated these results and indicated that children praised for effort were also more likely to be persistent and positive in the face of failure and children praised for intelligence less positive and persistent, than the control group.²⁰ In total, they conducted six similar studies, all of which corroborated these findings.²¹

This research is telling about the attitudes that we should have when we approach work and problem solving. After conducting interviews with the children, Dweck came to the conclusion that being praised for intelligence led the children to be more likely to think of intelligence as fixed or stable.²² Praise for intelligence led children to think that they would do well because they possessed a certain level of ability, and they spent their time comparing themselves to others instead of learning new strategies that would help them.²³ Their scores went down because the impossible test severely disrupted their view that they had a high level of ability. An implication of this view of intelligence as fixed could be that putting in effort would come to be seen as something that only people who were not smart needed to do. It seems to be that seeing themselves as smart could have the consequence of making children feel like they do not need to put the effort in to learn more, but should rather spend their time justifying their status as smart.²⁴

What is of more interest to me are the results of the impossible and final tests. In these tests it seems that the children who put in effort had the sort of positive attitude that we encourage and which seems to underlie our ability to live well. Those children sought to undertake activities not

¹⁷ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 37.

¹⁸ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 37.

¹⁹ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 38.

²⁰ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 42.

²¹ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 48.

²² Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 49.

²³ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 48.

²⁴ Dweck and Mueller, 'Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance', p. 50.

only because their successful completion was desirable, but also because they saw those activities as being good for them, regardless of success. They saw the activities as good since they knew they would learn something from them whether they succeeded or failed. When those children attempted the impossible test it seems as if they engaged in mature reflection about their failures. When one method failed, they tried a different solution. When they failed the overall test, they did not simply see it as something they just could not do, as the intelligence group did. They saw it as something that they could not do with the abilities they currently had and with the amount of effort that they had used. They thought that they may well be able to do it in the future, if they put in more effort. Granted that these are 10 year old children, and this is still rather a simplistic way to think. It is still nevertheless a better way to view failures than seeing them as indicating a brute limit of capacity.

Secondly, another study, this time by Carol Dweck, Lisa Blackwell, and Kali Trzesniewski, supports these conclusions.²⁵ In this study mathematics scholars from a single school were divided into two groups. Both groups were given lessons on study skills. The experimental group was given a module showing how the brain improves through engaging in challenging tasks, while the control group were taught mnemonics. Scholars in the experimental group were told that the brain was like a muscle and that the more you exercise it, the stronger it will get. Effectively, they were being told that putting effort into school work was something that had its own real benefits, rather than just being instrumental in getting them good marks. When their mathematics performance was measured after a period of time, some children in the experimental group showed a great improvement. Students who had thought intelligence to be fixed, and whose grades had been declining, now started to improve significantly after being taught that intelligence is incremental, or developed.²⁶ The grades of children in a similar position in the control group continued to decline.²⁷

What these studies show is that beliefs and attitudes about studying have a big impact on the ability of children to effectively engage with their work. Praising children in certain ways may

²⁵ Carol Dweck, Lisa Blackwell, and Kali Trzesniewski, 'Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition'

²⁶ Dweck *et al*, 'Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition', p. 258.

²⁷ Dweck *et al*, 'Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition', p. 258.

affect these beliefs and attitudes, and thus their study habits. Children who believe that intelligence is innate, and so have the attitude that effort is unwarranted, do not engage with their work well and only seek to get by. The idea that intelligence is fixed means that they take a somewhat fatalistic view towards work: either they pass and are clever, or they fail and are dumb. Children who believe that intelligence is developed, on the other hand, have a positive attitude towards effort, and engage with their work. The idea that intelligence is developed means that they see work as an opportunity to make themselves better and failure as an indication of the need to improve, rather than indicating a limit on their part.

To bring this back to my discussion on effort, I think that this illustrates well the positive aspects of putting in effort. The children in the study on mathematics who were taught that the brain was like a muscle benefitted not only from a changed attitude towards their work, but from the effect of effort on their self-concept. They believed that if they worked hard they would get cleverer, and putting in the effort not only made them smarter, it also affected their own view of themselves. Learning that the brain was like a muscle showed them that they had the ability to better themselves, and putting in the effort affected their view of themselves when they got good results. It showed them that their marks were the result of the exercise of their abilities and reflected positively on them. This encouraged them to sustain their hard work and develop the good study habits that reversed their grade decline.

Those in the effort group in the first group of studies mentioned also reaped a number of benefits. In addition to noticeably improving their marks in the short time of the study, they also came to value their work and engaged positively with it by putting in effort. The study also has something very interesting to tell us about people who do not put in effort and how they approach things. The intelligence group in that same study came to feel that effort was not required, because of how they were praised. Instead, the praise they were given led them to try and keep up appearances. The combination of trying to keep up appearances and not seeing effort as good led them to choose the easier second task, because they did not want to fail, and did not see the effort required for the harder task as a good thing.

This highlights something very important: if we are not putting in effort, then we must think that our capacities are good enough for minimal exercise of them to be sufficient. We must think we

are like the master piano player who is playing chopsticks at his recital, or like educated adults doing multiplication tables. It seems quite right that developing our capacities means that certain things are now easy for us and require little or no effort on our part. There is nothing wrong with this. The problem comes when we confuse things that require little effort to do well with being able to perform tasks without putting in much effort. We can perform tasks poorly and without much effort and still complete them. We will not perform them well, but we will get them done. We will, however, not put ourselves in a caring relationship with what we have done. Putting effort into what we do is how we value that activity. Setting up a caring relationship to one's activities involves putting in effort to perform them, or to develop the capacity that allows one to perform them effortlessly.

This may, however, imply that we need only put in effort to develop capacities when we are young. When I get older and have developed my capacities to a far greater degree, it seems that I do not need to worry about putting effort in to most things I do. I can pass my days in a fairly leisurely fashion, having put in the effort to develop myself so that I can do so. Some things will require effort, but I can minimise those things and concentrate on leisure activities. This seems to be the idea of a sort of idyllic retirement that pervades our thinking. I can work for forty years, and then at the end of it I will be able to sit back and relax and do the things that I want to, having saved up the money to do so. We often seem to encourage older people to be more passive, and think them deserving of the ability to literally sit around and 'do nothing' (where 'nothing' here means nothing other than relaxing activities).

This appears to be based on an underlying shared idea of children as physical and active and older people as passive. The older you get the less acceptable it is for you to do physical things and engage as strongly with the world. Old people are encouraged to be less active, which exacerbates the decay of their physical and mental capacities. This is exactly the problem with our folk wisdom, and why we should see effort as important not just during childhood, but right through our lives. Part of what makes life interesting and meaningful is the way in which we engage with the world. If we do not put effort into engaging with the world and using our capacities, then we will not only suffer the degradation of those capacities, but also lose interest in the things we are doing.

The psychologists Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi looked at elderly people who, late in life, still found life interesting and found meaning in the activities that they engaged in.²⁸ After analysing how these people approached and engaged in their activities, the psychologists claimed that this positive attitude was the result of ‘vital engagement’ with the world. This vital engagement is characterised by attention and care in activities, no matter how mundane.²⁹ Those people who showed care and attention towards what they were doing not only found their work activities more interesting and enjoyable, but also found them more meaningful.³⁰ Underlying this feeling of joy in their activities is the idea of ‘flow’, the full involvement in activity. The reason these people found what they were doing enjoyable was because they became fully absorbed into it through the experience of flow.³¹ The subjective experience of this ‘flow’ usually involves a loss of self-consciousness, a view that one will be able to handle whatever arises, a loss of sense of time, and finally a feeling that the activity itself is rewarding, irrespective of success or failure.³² This normally comes about when we are engaged in intense concentration in an activity in which our perceived capacities are balanced with the perceived challenges.³³

The idea is that when we are in a state of flow we feel good about what we are doing. Flow involves the subjective experience of performing an activity, and so we are not necessarily getting things right. The importance of this, however, is with regard to our feelings about our lives and what we are doing. Flow is a way in which we engage in activities, and is not necessarily about the quality of what we produce through those activities. That being said, it seems not unreasonable to say that in a state of flow we would probably perform at our best, since we are completely engaged with what we are doing and essentially immune to the usual worries, self-consciousness, and second-guessing that often distract us. It also seems reasonable to say that when we put in a great deal of effort doing something, we are often in a flow state. Effort involves the commitment of resources and the exertion of energy, and that usually involves the intense concentration that can trigger a flow experience. This becomes more likely

²⁸ Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ‘The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement’.

²⁹ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, ‘The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement’, p. 83.

³⁰ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, ‘The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement’, p. 87.

³¹ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, ‘The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement’, p. 89.

³² Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, ‘The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement’, pp. 88-9.

³³ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, ‘The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement’, p. 98.

the closer one's perceived ability is to the perceived level of the challenge. If one is exercising one's abilities almost at one's limits, then one is more likely to enter a state of flow. This is because one is required to concentrate solely on the activity itself and the here and now in order to successfully complete the task.

Still, people can enter flow states when doing things that do not seem to require effort. Flow is also not limited to activities such as work, games, and art that have definite ends. One can have flow experiences while engaging in conversation with friends.³⁴ It is easy to think of many situations when you or someone else became completely absorbed in relating an anecdote or explaining your future plans. These sorts of things could easily be called flow states, even though they may not necessarily involve the intense concentration that usually triggers a flow state.

Flow involves how we feel about the activities that we are doing, and so shows how we ought to vitally engage with the world in order to maintain our interest in things. If we vitally engage and concentrate on what we are doing, then we can trigger a flow state that makes doing that activity feel good. This, however, does not deal with the issue of meaningfulness. I could trigger a flow state by counting blades of grass, but that in itself seems to have limited meaningfulness.

Introducing meaning into our lives and into our flow activities is important. We want our activities to be meaningful, because once flow activities are over, so are the rewarding feelings. If our activities are to bring us real satisfaction, then we need to feel that they are rewarding within a larger context. This larger context is a symbolic domain.

III Symbolic Domains

Grass-blade counting could be more meaningful if it was part of a sustained endeavour over time, exercises that individual's capacities to their limits, and is enjoyable and absorbing.³⁵ That is, engagement with something wider than the single event itself increases the meaningfulness of our lives. For instance, that our work is meaningful to us almost always has to do with the fact

³⁴ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 'The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement', p. 91.

³⁵ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 'The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement', p. 97.

that it is part of a larger whole that we also engage with.³⁶ The history of our workplace, solidarity with our peers, our own self-image reflecting the way we approach our work, all of these and more are layers of meaning that form part of what I will call after Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi the symbolic domain of our field of work.³⁷

While Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi do not fully explain what a symbolic domain is, it appears to revolve around the notion of a shared project. A symbolic domain seems to come about when people are involved in activities, over a period of time, that share the same ultimate aim. The domain comes into being due to this shared project and the meaning arises from the history of what has been done and what is currently being done to pursue the successful completion of this project. For example, chemistry comes about because a number of people have systematically engaged in the project of discovering the properties of elements and how they interact with one another. All the layers of meaning mentioned above, such as shared history, relate to pursuit of the shared project. The history of chemistry, for example, just is the history of everyone who engaged in the process of explaining the elements. For the domain to exist, these people do not need to know each other or be aware that they are part of a symbolic domain.

Knowledge about a symbolic domain is important for meaningful engagement and not for whether one is part of the domain or not. Meaning seems to arise because these layers of meaning give us knowledge about our relation to the shared project itself. The more layers we engage with, the deeper we understand and appreciate the shared project and what it contributes to humankind. Engaging with this symbolic domain, finding that you are working as part of a shared project that has something to contribute to humankind serves to grant your life deeper meaning. Discovering that this symbolic domain includes a history and involves others trying to achieve the same things you are, also makes your life more meaningful. These things, together with flow states, are the essential parts of vital engagement. If we do not interact with symbolic domains, then our flow states are merely isolated moments of pleasurable engagement with individual tasks. When you interact with a symbolic domain, however, you engage with more

³⁶ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 'The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement', p. 98.

³⁷ Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 'The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement', p. 98.

than just the task itself. Symbolic domains create a context in which your activity becomes linked to the activities of others via layers of meaning.

These layers of meaning, such as history and peer solidarity, build on top of whatever inherent meaningfulness the activities you engage in have themselves. Most actions in a given field will have some sort of meaningfulness, usually as being related to certain ends that are desirable. Balancing the company books, for example, is meaningful for the role that it plays in keeping the company afloat. Being part of the symbolic domain of accounting adds extra meaning on top of this. What this is supposed to show is that these extra layers of meaningfulness serve to enrich our lives and, perhaps more importantly, it is the connections within the symbolic domain that play a large part in showing us that what we do has significance in the world. That we are situated within a certain symbolic domain, say that of music, means that we are part of the community that includes all others who are part of that symbolic domain. Finding solidarity with others who share our engagement with music, discovering the history of music and musical instruments, and seeing how musicians have used music to fight against oppression, all serve to make participation in this community meaningful. These things make us aware that we are engaged in the much wider shared project that is music, and it also illustrates the effects that this project has on the world.

Effort plays a key role in making us a part of this community. Becoming a member of a certain symbolic domain is partly constituted by meaningful achievement. Becoming a musician, for example, by entering into the symbolic domain of music,³⁸ is something that does not come just from playing music. It comes from having a certain meaningful relation to music that is built up through meaningful musical achievement. While it is difficult to determine when a person becomes a musician and engages with a symbolic domain, the engagement with a symbolic domain nevertheless builds on top of related meaningful achievement. The meaningful achievement of becoming a musician is not the kind in which there is a definite end like, for example, winning a chess tournament, becoming a senior manager, or marrying the person of your dreams. There is no one achievement that makes one a musician and enters one into the symbolic domain of music. Rather, it is numerous individual achievements that contribute to a

³⁸ Becoming a musician and entering into the symbolic domain of music is one and the same thing.

larger meaningful achievement of developing an ability that makes one part of a symbolic domain.

This is best explained by looking at what it is to be good in a certain field. Becoming a good batsman in cricket is a meaningful achievement. Being a good batsman, however, is not necessarily determined by having a certain technique, or being able to hit the ball far distances, or even having scored a lot of runs. Nevertheless, we are able to identify good batsmen, and we are often able to point out why they are good. It is just that justifying why they are good does not proceed in terms of them having completed specific achievements. When one becomes a good batsman is also not clear. Was this person always good and their performance just made us take notice, or have they been developing? If they have been developing then where do we draw the line?

The meaningful achievement of becoming a good cricketer is, rather, something that is built up by a series of actions that contribute to a development of ability. When I spoke of meaningful achievement in the previous chapter, I spoke of it in terms of specific actions and specific, well-defined ends: playing certain piano pieces or crossing the Atlantic by sailboat. Here, however, the emphasis is on achieving a certain realisation of capacity, or a certain character trait, that is observable, but hard to describe in terms of specific achievements.

We identify that a person is good in a certain field is by the following set of criteria: predictability, consistency, and the ability to produce results. Good batsmen just are the ones who are fairly consistent and predictable in producing results, rather than the ones who have a certain number of career runs. They are the ones who often contribute towards the team setting a competitive total, or chasing down the opponent's score. It is this consistency and predictability that is central to one becoming part of a symbolic domain. Even ordinary batsmen are fairly consistent and predictable; it is just that they are consistently and predictably producing performances that do not contribute as much as the better batsmen do. This is because they have not developed their batting ability enough, either because of poor training or a physical or mental limit. People who partake in a domain are consistent and predictable in how they contribute

towards the shared project of that domain.³⁹ People who only superficially engage with the symbolic domain are more erratic and unpredictable. Superficial engagement with a symbolic domain involves little or no contribution to the shared project. For example, I superficially engage with the symbolic domain of biotechnology by reading articles on cloning when I randomly come across them, and also by engaging in idle conversation about cloning. People who are outside the symbolic domain are those who never contribute to the shared project and who know little or nothing about the symbolic domain.

Deeper, and more meaningful, involvement with a symbolic domain requires cultivating abilities that allow one to contribute more to the shared project. The manner in which one contributes to the shared project, through the exercise of one's abilities, is what defines one's position in the shared community of that symbolic domain. Without being situated within the symbolic domain, without finding one's position in it, one can only engage with it superficially. One cannot see how what one does relates to what others have done to contribute to the shared project. It requires effort to develop the abilities that allow one to participate in a symbolic domain at this deeper level. It requires even more effort to act consistently and predictably while exercising those abilities. For example, one is required to put in effort in order to develop the skills that make one a musician. One then requires effort in order to exercise those skills consistently and predictably in a certain way. In doing so, one creates an identity for oneself within the community by doing certain things in a certain way. If one produces good results (plays well) then one will be a good musician; if one does not produce good results (plays poorly) then one will not be a good musician. Nevertheless, the poor musician and the good musician both engage with the same symbolic domain and may do so at deeper levels, if they put effort in. Mastering a piece by Chopin may bring with it a feeling of shared history to a piano master. Simply being able to play the same piece may bring a similar, though probably not as strong, feeling to the novice. Engaging with the history of the piece is part of vitally engaging with the symbolic domain of piano music, or simply music in general, at a deeper level.

Vital engagement, then, involves the engagement over time with a symbolic domain and the flow experiences one has while engaging in the activities that fall under that domain. The engagement

³⁹ Even so-called 'erratic geniuses' act in a way that, over time, contributes to the shared project in a consistent manner.

with the symbolic domain generates meaning; it serves to show us how what we do is meaningful within a larger context. The flow experiences that we have while engaging in the related activities make engaging with the symbolic domain joyful and they become meaningful themselves over time as our entry into the symbolic domain deepens. The flow experiences becoming meaningful because the rewarding feeling they generate now involves us seeing our activity as contributing towards the shared project of that symbolic domain. If we successfully complete the activity, then the rewarding feeling endures even once the flow experience ends, since we feel that we have accomplished something meaningful.

One issue that may arise with regard to symbolic domains is about how people interact with them. Symbolic domains themselves seem like large and complex entities, containing many aspects and individuals who may differ greatly from one another. It seems very difficult to situate oneself within such a domain. How does one know exactly how one relates to one's peers and the history of the domain, and where one positions oneself in the field? It seems clear that one generally enters into symbolic domains by following one's aspirations. I become a philosopher because I see it as of great value or I have a deep desire to become one. Aspirations, or even circumstances, however, cannot situate me in a symbolic domain, because people who hold differing views may have the same aspirations or be in similar circumstances. I may be an analytical philosopher, whereas someone else who has the same aspiration as me to love wisdom may be a continental philosopher. We may even have the same reason for choosing that aspiration and be in the same position, say having parents who are philosophers.

By looking at the work of John Kekes, and seeing how it relates to my discussions on effort and failure, we can see that the way that we engage with most symbolic domains is through ideals. Kekes' conception of the good life, in *The Examined Life*, places an emphasis on self-direction and commitment to a life-structuring ideal, with a small number of virtues. Kekes' treatment of the good life is far more complex and rich than this, but I take self-direction and ideals to be two major features of his account of the good life. These two features tie into my arguments about failure and effort, and the psychology of effort.

IV Self-Direction and Ideals

Kekes argues that the good life is the life in which we shape ourselves into the person we want to be and pursue the life that we want.⁴⁰ This is self-direction. It is a development of Nozick's idea that we want to live our own lives. Self-direction involves not only living our own lives, but living them the way that we want to live them, or at least trying to do so. In order to be self-directed we need to know ourselves, our wants and what we are capable of.⁴¹ Knowing these things allows us to structure our lives so that we can pursue what we want, or change what we want if it is clearly impossible for us to attain. Gaining the self-knowledge required for this is difficult, and reflection plays a large role. I would say that none of us instinctively knows who we are and what we can and cannot do. We discover this by going out into the world and doing things. If we reflect on what things we have done, have not done, and have not been able to do, then we can come to learn about who we are and what we can do. Through reflecting on our actions, we may come to knowledge about ourselves that we were previously unaware of. I may know that I am a kind person, but only experience and reflection on that experience will show me the limits of my kindness and who it is directed towards. For Kekes, this knowledge about ourselves ought to be practical, in that knowing something about ourselves means that we will act in certain ways.⁴² If I know that I am envious of others, yet this knowledge has no effect on my actions, something must be wrong with me.⁴³ We all have attitudes towards our own mental states, and these attitudes ought to influence how we act.⁴⁴ I ought to see my enviousness as good or bad, because I ought not to be indifferent to who I am. I may hate the fact that I am envious of others, and so try to curb the feeling and act in ways that downplay my envy. My knowing that I am envious in the first place is something that comes from reflecting on my conduct and reactions to others.

As I have stressed previously, we are not often moved to reflection when things are going well for us. Unless my envy starts having negative consequences that affect me, I probably will not know I am an envious person. If, however, my envy leads to failures (not getting what I want) in

⁴⁰ John Kekes, *The Examined Life*, p. 18.

⁴¹ Kekes, *The Examined Life*, p. 19.

⁴² Kekes, *The Examined Life*, p. 115.

⁴³ Kekes, *The Examined Life*, p. 115.

⁴⁴ Kekes, *The Examined Life*, p. 115.

my social life, then those failures may prompt me to reflect on what went wrong. Through reflection I may come to discover that I am an envious person. I do not, however, need to fail in order to reflect on my conduct and discover that I am an envious person. I may engage in reflection for other reasons. Perhaps someone told me that I was envious, and this led me to wonder whether this was true. I also could have observed the conduct of someone else who I knew was envious and seen that his conduct was similar to mine. Nevertheless, the knowledge that I gain about myself should be through reflection. Even when someone tells me I have a certain characteristic, I ought not to blindly accept this. I should engage in reflection on myself to determine whether this is true or not.

Since failure provokes reflection, and seems to be what most often causes us to engage in reflection, it plays a central role in acquiring the self-knowledge that is required for self-direction. By prompting us to engage in reflection, failure allows us to make sure that we are proceeding in the direction that we want, and that we have the resources to do so. It also gives us knowledge about things we should avoid or may struggle with, things that we have failed at before. This allows us to avoid repeating the same mistakes and prepares us for things that we will struggle to succeed at. Failure can also provide us with knowledge about the world. By reflecting on our failures we can come to know what is necessary for certain tasks. Failing at those tasks, whether through our own fault or not, means that something went wrong with what was necessary for the successful completion of that task. It seems obvious, but this means that through reflecting on the failure we may find what is necessary for the successful completion of that task and what is only accidental to its success. This sort of knowledge may help us in the future if we engage in similar tasks. Since part of self-direction is wanting to live a certain way, we will not engage in a random assortment of tasks, but rather similar tasks that build towards achieving what we want. Becoming a master piano player, for instance, requires learning how to play music on the piano. This involves playing increasingly complex and difficult pieces of music and acquiring techniques for how to play those pieces. Failure in the simple pieces and techniques may, on reflection, show underlying flaws in how one plays the piano. This would be knowledge of something that is an essential part of piano playing. One's failure could, however, be due to one being distracted by the death of a loved one or feelings of hunger, both of which are accidental to that occasion of failure.

Our lives do often involve this sort of gradual building towards what we want, bettering ourselves incrementally rather than radically. They also often involve pursuing certain things that require us to engage in similar activities over a long period of time. This means that reflection on failure is of great importance, especially if we fail just as we are getting started on our way to what we want. The reflection on these failures can bring us knowledge that will allow us not to waste time and resources pursuing something that we are not really suited to do, and it can allow us to identify underlying flaws in ourselves that may prevent us from getting what we want even if we are suited to it. Self-direction, then, is much more likely to succeed if we adopt a reflective attitude towards our failures. Now I want to turn to how Kekes says we should exercise our self-direction: by committing to ideals.

The notion of ideals that Kekes uses is well developed, complex, and plays roughly the same role as aspirations did in my previous chapter. Like aspirations, ideals are goals that structure our views on the kind of life that we want to live.⁴⁵ Where ideals differ from aspirations is that while aspirations involve our actual, contingent, wants and goals, ideals involve the, sometimes abstract, universal ideas behind those contingent goals. If I aspire to become a doctor, then I commit myself to the ideal of medicine, which I also could have committed to had I aspired to become a nurse. Exactly what I am a doctor of and how I approach medicine are merely contingent facts that do not influence the ideal I embody. I could aspire to be a western GP, or a crystal healer, or a sangoma, and still be committed to the same ideal. Ideals almost always form part a symbolic domain. They are usually the ways in which we normally engage with and talk about symbolic domains. When we give examples of a symbolic domain it is almost always in the form of ideals. When I want to tell someone what it is like to be a communist (to be part of the symbolic domain of communism) then I will speak of the ideals that regulate and drive communist life. I also may speak of the ideals that embody the various forms of communism, such as the Bolshevik, Stalinist or Maoist ideals.

When it comes down to deciding how we want to live, and then living our lives, the ideals that we choose to commit to just are what we think best embody the features of the symbolic domain we wish to be part of. This may be which ideal we think has the most positive or beneficial

⁴⁵ Kekes, *The Examined Life*, p. 78.

aspects or the ideal we think is most suited to us and our abilities and character, or a mixture of the two. That there are almost always a number of ideals available is one of the things that make engagement with a symbolic domain interesting and rewarding. These ideals may be complimentary or contradictory, and this means that there will be many different views within a given symbolic domain. This diversity of views encourages interaction between members of that symbolic domain. Since all ideals are based on what is common between members of the symbolic domain (how what they all do is meaningful in a larger context), all members should be able to understand, and hopefully appreciate, others' ideals. This leads to interaction between ideals as people seek to understand how the ideals of others relate to, contradict, or compliment their own. Since meaning is the currency of a symbolic domain, being able to understand the position of one's ideals in relation to those of others serves to enrich one's engagement with the symbolic domain.

One way to think about how a symbolic domain is related to ideals is to use a subject of philosophy. The field of self-knowledge, for example, constitutes a symbolic domain. While philosophy itself is a symbolic domain, that does not exclude its sub-disciplines from being symbolic domains in their own right. The various positions within self-knowledge, including internalists, externalists, non-cognitivists, and behaviourists, all embody differing ideals. Some of the positions within this field are compatible and some are not. Some may be compatible, but not really complimentary, whereas others will fit together like hand and glove. All of them form part of the same shared project: to discover whether we can have self-knowledge, how we have it, what it really consists in, and how that affects us. Entry into this symbolic domain comes from engaging with the subject matter. One can engage with it by simply reading and understanding the various positions, how they contribute to the shared project, and how they related to one another. In order to enter deeper into the symbolic domain, however, one needs to put in the effort to develop one's own position. Through the work that one does within the field of self-knowledge, be it formal writing or informal scribbling and discussion, one comes to carve out a position for oneself. This may involve adopting the views of others or striking off in a new direction. Irrespective of what position ones takes, when one puts in the effort that constitutes a commitment to that position, then one deepens one's involvement in the symbolic domain and

thus the meaningfulness of one's work in the field of self-knowledge. This meaningfulness is enhanced by the interactions between the varying ideals that form part of the symbolic domain.

Not all ideals, however, will form part of a symbolic domain - honesty, for example. There does not seem to be a shared history or feeling of solidarity between those who commit to telling the truth. Nor does it seem that telling the truth involves a shared project. The ideals that are involved in the professions and political positions that we adopt, however, will involve symbolic domains. Even if we choose to reject work and politics altogether we will be part of a history of people who oppose these things, and who clearly do form part of a symbolic domain.

Despite the differences, ideals seem to play the same sort of role of directing our lives towards certain ends that aspirations do. Committing to ideals seems to parallel pursuing aspirations. When we commit to ideals we put ourselves in the position to pursue certain ends that are valuable. Just like aspirations, ideals are the central threads that (we hope) our lives follow and committing to these ideals provides a way for us to transform ourselves and our lives into that which we want. By situating us in a broader context, commitment to certain ideals introduces us into symbolic domains that increase the meaningfulness of our lives. We find ourselves part of a community that contains others who are committed to ideals related to our own. Learning how we are related to these people and their ideals serves to illustrate to us how we are part of the shared project of that symbolic domain. This meaningful relationship, along with the flow experiences associated with the related activities, is what constitutes vital engagement. Thus, committing to certain ideals allows us to vitally engage with our own lives.

What all this illustrates is that living a fulfilling, pleasurable, and meaningful life requires engaging in activities that are difficult and developing abilities that are difficult to master. Difficult activities are likely to trigger flow experiences. We are also required to develop abilities that are difficult to master in order to engage with symbolic domains on a deeper level, which we often do through committing to ideals. I have already discussed the beneficial effects of both flow and symbolic domains on our lives. It is important to note, however, that we do not acquire meaning from symbolic domains like we acquire knowledge from reading books. We have to engage in activities and put effort into doing things that have a positive impact on the world. If one does not engage in difficult activities, or activities that require abilities that are difficult to

develop, and thus does not put in effort, then one's life lacks meaning. Similarly, committing to ideals must be difficult, because this commitment just is the exercise of effort, rather than a promise.⁴⁶

V Conclusion

Good lives are supposed to be lives that benefit us. When we live the good life our life goes as best it can. This involves us being morally good people; cultivating our abilities and realising our capacities; engaging in meaningful, worthwhile, and satisfying activities; and having positive attitudes and beliefs about ourselves and our lives. My aim has been to show that these elements require us to pursue ends that are difficult to obtain. In turn, I cashed out difficulty just as the requirement of effort. Developing our abilities and realising our capacities is something that happens when we engage in activities that are difficult for us, that require us to operate at the limit of our ability, that require effort. So too, the meaningfulness of certain activities comes from the fact that they are difficult for us to do; this is especially important with regards to the achievement of our aspirations. In various aspects of our lives, putting in effort may deepen our engagement with certain symbolic domains. This generates meaning in our lives by making us part of a shared community, which consists of all others who engage with the shared project that is at the heart of the symbolic domain. It broadens and deepens not only the activities that are associated with the specific symbolic domain, but also our entire lives as we find ourselves situated within a larger, shared, human project.

Putting effort into even mundane tasks may trigger flow states that make our activities enjoyable. This also instils within us a feeling of being at one with the activity, which then contributes to us working at our best. Finally, realising that effort has a major role to play in our lives encourages us to better ourselves and fosters positive psychological attitudes towards our work. Children who see effort, rather than the exercise of fixed talents, as being the route to accomplishment, perform better and have more positive attitudes towards work and studying. There is no reason to think that this should not generalise to adults. Seeing ourselves as able to better ourselves and

⁴⁶ See chapter 1, section 3 for the distinction between effort as commitment and promises as commitments.

increase our performance without requiring latent talents shows us that putting effort into our work is good for us. This, however, requires that we perform activities that push us close to the limits of our abilities. Certain work may just require effort because it is mind-numbingly boring or the boss is incredibly pedantic. The work that we do needs to be in a field that we can vitally engage with, one that can trigger flow states and which we can symbolically engage with. Doing this makes our lives more meaningful as we come to realise that we are part of a community that is contributing towards a shared human project.

Realising that effort provides the cornerstone of the good life can have positive consequences for our lives. It does not mean that they will go as we plan them, or even that they will go well. Since good lives must require effort, and thus be difficult, there is the ever-present threat of failure. Coming to live well requires that we learn to deal with failure positively. Sometimes reflecting on our failures can lead us to knowledge that sets us on the course to a more fulfilling life or knowledge that allows us to avoid more serious mistakes. Reflecting on our failures can give us knowledge of ourselves, what our abilities, limits and characteristics are. This self-knowledge allows us to pursue ends that we know we can achieve and that will be fulfilling when we do achieve them. Sometimes, however, failures can destroy us or have far ranging negative consequences. We must be aware of the risks, try to develop the ability to be persistent in the face of failure, and put effort into developing our ability to deal with it, in order to lessen its negative consequences. If we can do this and foster a reflective attitude towards failure, then we can increase the probability that we will live well.

What implications, then, does this have for the future and the wider social world? It seems quite clear that our societies currently do not foster our ability to live well. The requirement of material wealth as the basis for any sort of life encourages us to engage in work that is of monetary, and little other, value to us. We are actively encouraged to instead find satisfaction in leisure activities, where any exercise of effort is seen as unacceptable. Advertisements proudly display the ease of use of their products, and the minimal amount of effort required to use them. While we can look to the past and see that the effort required to do some things was clearly out of proportion to anything we could gain, this does not mean that a decrease in the effort required to do something is always good. By seeking to make our lives easier, the use of technology is

serving to remove value from our lives. It denies us the ability to actively engage with our own lives through the use of effort.

If we broaden our scope and look at social entities we can see that difficulty plays a role in uniting groups of people. Only when we are faced with difficulty and become involved in a shared project through the input of effort do we gain a sense of community and solidarity. World wars and natural disasters are prime examples of this. Putting in effort to resist oppression and disaster forms a common bond of humanity between us that leads us to respect, and puts us in a caring relationship with, our fellow human beings. In contrast, trying to form solutions that do not require effort has the effect of making us not care, the solutions to global warming, for example. The refusal to directly engage with the difficulty of reducing emissions and the use of easy ‘solutions’ such as carbon offsets has degraded the feeling that we are part of a shared ecological project. This, I think, is due to failure having less of a reflective stimulus on groups of people than it has on individuals. Failure as a group, say to reduce carbon emissions, does not stimulate everyone in that group to reflect, unless they already feel part of the shared project to reduce carbon emissions. If we do not feel part of the shared project, then we will not see its failure as a failure of ours or a group we are part of. Most of us are not actively encouraged to put in effort to reduce our emissions, and thus do not feel part of this shared project. Therefore, when the project fails to achieve what it should have, we do not reflect on this failure, because we feel the failure was not ours. Some of us do, but clearly not enough to change things so as to incorporate the rest of us into this shared project.

This is symptomatic of a wider problem, which is that the lack of effort erodes our ability to live our own lives. While technology is not at the point where we will be simply directing our lives instead of living them, the future is uncertain. Either we will use technology to eliminate difficulty and vulnerability from our lives and thus change what it is to be human, or we will fail to do so and possibly strip ourselves of the ability to live well. There is no way of knowing whether such a change will be for the better, since we cannot make any sort of comparisons between the goods of humans with and without vulnerabilities.

For the moment, then, prudence demands of us that we do not reject our limited and vulnerable nature. We must make allowances for the types of creatures that we are and be aware that failure

is always possible. We must change our attitude towards failure and see it not just as something bad, to be eliminated, but as something that we can gain valuable knowledge from. Reflecting on our failures may not always be easy, but we owe it to ourselves to make the most of our lives, and so must put in the effort that this reflection requires. We also need to find those things that are still difficult for us to do and engage with them through the application of effort. In the end we find ourselves trapped between Scylla and Charybdis. The good life, the life of great value, requires great effort and for us to face difficulty, which increases our chances of failure. The easy life, however, is one of little value or meaning. If we want to live well, then it means meeting this difficult life head on and struggling to overcome it.

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