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1

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT STANDS IN OUR WAY

I am a so-called nice person. I was raised in Canada, so I'm culturally polite. My lifelong type 1 diabetes taught me that disappointing people (doctors, especially) will probably result in my death. When I was growing up in the 1970s, my feminist parents taught me that I could do whatever I wanted, but still, many of my cultural role models were fairly traditional: men were leaders and women were helpers. I'm a pleaser and I'm deeply conflict-averse. I'm also a philosopher. Philosophy attracts and rewards people who have the virtues of fighters—people who are combative and quick on their feet. I'm not a fighter. Especially when I was younger, I spent most of my time listening to debates and thinking about why both sides were right in a way. This often made me feel as though I wasn't cut out for philosophy, despite how much I loved reading and thinking about "big" questions. My nice personality was not the best fit for a field that prizes holding your ground against aggressive intellectuals who often seem more interested in winning the point than exploring the issue.

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This lack of fit has been a problem for me. It has made it more difficult to do the things that matter to me, such as being a nice person and a good philosopher. There was even a time when I became quite an unpleasant person. When I was in graduate school—prime time for learning how to fit in—I would argue like a lawyer at otherwise peaceful family dinners. I can still hear my sister Paula's words ringing in my ears: "Not every conversation is about winning or being right about something!" Training to be a philosopher made me worse at being a good sister.

I'll admit that I have never felt entirely at home in philosophy. I have felt stupid and like a fraud. At various times, I have not felt taken seriously and I have felt that my questions and ideas were just a little "off." A friend once advised me to "gore the ox" in my philosophical writing as a way to get published more easily. He meant that I should identify an enemy position and kill it with a devastating objection before offering my own ideas on the topic. I tried, but I'm just not much good with a stick and I'm never very motivated to harm the ox. (I think of the arguments with my family as inept attempts to gore the wrong animal.) I can say from experience that time spent feeling like an imposter and worrying that you are in the wrong field is time not spent doing your job and getting better at it.

If I had been less concerned with pleasing other people, or if I had been more interested in a career in which pleasing people was a positive, I could have skipped along happily doing what I wanted. Instead, this conflict between my "nice personality" and my career was a wrench in the works that caused me to wonder about what I was doing. What's so great about philosophy, I thought, if so many philosophers are mean and don't actually listen to each other in their rush to prove

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their own point? What's so great about being nice if it causes me so much anxiety about whether I've said the wrong thing and hurt someone's feelings? I had, in effect, a crisis of values that made me unsure what to do. Should I quit and do something else? Should I take lorazepam? Uncertainty about what matters to you makes it hard to move forward. If you don't really know what you want, it's hard to know how to get it.

This conflict from my life is fairly ordinary. It has never been life or death; it's not an existential crisis that drove me to drugs or caused major depression. Also, while the details are particular to me, the broad outline—a conflict between incompatible goals that drives people to wonder what they're doing with their lives—is not uncommon at all. Many of these conflicts involve our jobs: You want to be a good parent and to be successful in your career, but both things compete for your time. You want to make a lot of money, but moving up the ladder in your company means spending time with people you don't like. You want your work to be ethical, but you're really good at defending corporations from environmental protection lawsuits. You're offered your dream job, but it's a thousand miles away from your family. You're torn between a job that pays well enough and leaves you time to go to the gym, or a job you find more fulfilling but that will take a toll on your fitness. Work/life balance, as it has been called, is a prime example of one of these ordinary conflicts, but it's not the only one.

Because we have many goals, we also face many possibilities for conflict. Say, for example, that you are committed to your church, but you have a gay friend and the church takes a position on gay marriage that you cannot accept. Or that you and your partner are having trouble conceiving a child, and you are conflicted between in vitro fertilization and adoption. Or that you want to give your child every opportunity, but

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driving them to lessons and clubs every day of the week leaves you with no time for yourself.[1] Or that you want to learn to tap dance, but you were brought up to think that dancing is a frivolous waste of time. There are as many possibilities as there are people.

All of these conflicts can cause us to wonder whether we're on the right track. Is the work you do at your company worth the sacrifice? Does being a good parent really demand so much driving? How important is money? What is it you value about your church, and could you get it from a different church? Serious conflicts raise questions about the things we value. But even before that happens, conflicts show up in life as stress, frustration, and unhappiness. Chances are that, if things aren't going well, you can find some conflict at the bottom of it.

Now, it's worth clarifying that not everything we would call a conflict is a problem. I'm conflicted about the choice between ginger cheesecake and pumpkin cheesecake, and this doesn't cause me much grief. Minor conflict or friction between our goals can even be beneficial: pursuing very different goals may enrich our understanding of each of them, and confronting conflict can promote creative thinking about new ways to put things together. The kinds of conflicts that we're focusing on in this book are the ones that inhibit our success in terms of what really matters to us. We could call these "serious conflicts," but I won't always add the qualifier. The examples in the following chapters should clarify what kinds of conflicts are the problem.

This book is about serious conflicts, then, and how to manage them in ways that make our lives better and satisfy our reflective minds. It does not prescribe a particular program or set of rules to follow. I believe that different solutions work for

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different people and that the best a philosopher can do is to identify the problem, articulate a general solution, and point to a number of ways we might reach that solution. The general solution requires thinking about what really matters to us, given our nature, and refining our goals so that they are *not* in serious conflict. It's therefore also a book about how to figure out what matters. Exactly how to do this in practice—with help from a friend or a therapist, by journaling and making lists, through meditation—depends on what you're like as an individual, your particular skills and weaknesses. What you'll find in the pages that follow is a general philosophical approach to thinking about our values, our goals, and how they fit together in a life.

GOAL CONFLICT AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Compare the situation of creatures like us to the situation of my little dog, Sugar. Sugar's life also goes well for her when she can get the things that matter to her, namely belly rubs, control of the dog beds, and snacks. There isn't much else she wants.

The human condition, on the other hand (at least for any human being who is reading this book), is vastly more complicated. As babies, we may start out with goals that are similar to Sugar's, but our sophisticated brains and built-in curiosity quickly move us beyond these basic needs. We develop into people with diverse, multifaceted, interrelated goals. We don't stop wanting affection and food, but these basic goals become much less basic as we learn about the norms and expectations of our cultures and families. The need for food turns into a love of haute cuisine, authentic barbeque, or vegan

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cooking. Our need for affection is entangled with the ideals of relationships shaped by our culture. We become people with demanding checklists for mates, rebellious ideas about what types of friends we may have, fantasies of traditional weddings that don't align with our feminist values, or strong commitments to caring about a chosen (rather than biological) family. And, of course, the development of our complex system of goals isn't confined to food and affection. As we discover what we enjoy, what we're good at, and what we're able to do, we add more and more goals and subgoals: work, financial security, sports, music, art, writing, reading, playing games, worship, volunteer work, teaching, learning a language, and so on.

We are also consciously aware of the fact that we have goals, which means that we are capable of examining, doubting, favoring, or rejecting at least some of them. Sugar does experience conflicts, but she (almost certainly) doesn't have conflicts between what she wants and what she thinks about what she wants. She never *doubts* whether belly rubs are worth the trouble or *wonders* if eating poop will be bad for her in the long run. There is no wrench in the works for a beagle, nothing that gives her pause and forces reconsideration of what matters in life.

Of course, we are not always aware of our goals, and we are never aware of all of them at the same time. If someone asked you what your goals are, you could probably think of something to say. You might say that you are working on reducing your blood pressure, or that you're trying to learn to swim, or that you're looking for a job you like that pays decently. But we do not go around in life with a detailed list of goals foremost in our minds. One reason for this is that our brains are

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so complex that much of what happens there does so without our conscious attention. This means that, in addition to whatever goals we are aware of, we also have hidden goals—goals we are not attending to consciously—that move us to do things and cause all sorts of feelings, from frustration to contentment. My desire to please has often been a hidden goal. It has affected what I do and how I feel about interacting with people, even when I've been entirely unaware of it. People with strong motivations to please others likely have hidden goals to choose friends, careers, and lifestyles that are approved by their cultures.

Strong biological needs also function as hidden goals. An astronaut who chooses to spend a year in space without any human contact may experience great sadness due to hidden goals of affiliation that she has consciously decided to put on hold. This example lets us see that a single goal can be present to our conscious minds at one time but hidden from us at another. The astronaut may have been very much aware of the goal of forming close relationships with other people while she was dating in college. But when she decides to concentrate on space exploration for a while, she turns her focus away from relationships, not seeing it as an important goal at the moment. And yet the goal of relationships may still be there, hidden but powerful enough to cause an emotional reaction to isolation. We could think of conscious attention as a flashlight with limited reach: it illuminates some of our goals and brings them to conscious awareness, but many of them remain in the dark until we change our focus.

We'll talk more about this process of illuminating our goals in the following chapters. For now, we can just acknowledge that it's no wonder that the human condition is characterized

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by conflict. There are just too many moving pieces for all of them to fit together in a harmonious way. Does this matter? I think it matters tremendously.

Like my beagle, human beings are animals, and our lives also go well when we can achieve our goals and do the things that matter to us. Serious conflict stands in the way. This is for two reasons. First, conflict between goals makes it more difficult for us to succeed and get what we want. When we have a conflict, working toward one goal takes away from—or even goes against—working toward another. This is a problem we share with other creatures: Sugar can't both hunt for poopsicles and get a belly rub at the same time. But for most other animals, conflicts are easily resolved as one desire naturally overtakes another. This is sometimes true for humans: eventually my desire for delicious cheesecake will force a decision between ginger and pumpkin. But we also have conflicts that are not easily resolved, and these get in our way. Second, for humans, serious conflict can prompt reflection on whether we have the right goals at all. When we feel internally conflicted, constantly frustrated, or pulled in different directions, we may wonder if we're just barking up the wrong tree. Let me explain both of these points more carefully, since they are an important motivation for the rest of the book.

It's easiest to see how conflict frustrates the very goals that fuel it. To put it as simply as possible, if you want to eat an apple and you want to avoiding eating apples, one of these goals will have to be frustrated. Similarly, if my being a successful philosopher demands that I give up being a nice person, then I can't meet both of my goals at once. If either learning to speak Spanish or learning to carve wooden ducks would take up all of your free time, then you can't do both. If being a good parent means staying at home with your child, then

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you cannot both be a good parent and have a demanding career. Now, learning to carve ducks may not take up all your free time, and being a good parent may not mean staying at home. As we'll see, there is room for reinterpreting our goals so that they are *not* in conflict (that's part of the general solution to our problem). But my point is that if the way you conceive of your goals puts them in conflict, then you will be less successful at meeting them.

Conflict also frustrates the pursuit of *other* goals that don't even seem to be connected. When conflict produces bad feelings like anxiety and stress, which it very often does, it frustrates goals that almost all of us have: health and happiness. Conflict is uncomfortable and demands our attention, which takes time away from other things that are more important.

Conflicts often stand in the way of our altruistic goals, too. Think about the advice to "put on your own mask before assisting others." This started as an instruction for airplane passengers, but it has now become a self-care meme. Not having your own house in order makes it difficult to help others; people who are stressed and miserable and torn up with inner conflicts are typically not the most supportive spouses, parents, or friends. A person who is able to do what she values, without debilitating conflict, has more of the resources needed to be helpful. She has more oxygen.

So, the first problem with conflict (when it's persistent and unresolved) is that it makes it harder to achieve many of our goals. The second problem is that conflict can unsettle our busy, reflective minds and make us uncertain about what we really want. If you're pulled in two conflicting directions, you have to decide which way to go. If we're lucky, the solution is obvious to us, but often we're not sure. This is a problem

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because, in order to pursue your goals, you need to know what they are and which ones should be prioritized. Conflict makes us wonder if we really do know this. I described how this happened in my own case: I found myself wondering whether philosophy was really the right career for me or whether my personality was a product of sexist culture that I should try to overcome. Similarly, conflicts between a taxing job and a demanding family can cause people to wonder about the point of career success, or about the soundness of their standards for being a good spouse or parent.

We might pause here and ask: What's so important about fulfilling our goals? To some people, this will seem like a silly question: what could be worse than not being able to do what you want to do? But to others, this is a deep philosophical question about the nature of a good human life, one that philosophers have been trying to answer for thousands of years.[2] Throughout history, some philosophers have said that a good life—also referred to as *well-being* or flourishing—is a life with many pleasures and few pains; the good life is all about our feelings, according to these hedonists, and it's better to feel good than bad. Others have argued that a good life is one in which we live up to our human potential by developing our capacities for reason and moral virtue. Recently, psychologists have entered the fray with their own ideas about what makes life good. Some agree with the hedonist philosophers that feeling good and feeling satisfied with life is what it's all about. Others talk about the importance of satisfying basic human needs for self-direction, relationships, and developing skills.[3]

My own view about well-being is that it is best understood as the fulfillment of the values that fit our personalities and

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our circumstances.[4] We do well when we succeed in terms of what matters to us, and when what matters to us suits our desires, emotions, and judgments. If that's what well-being is, it's easy to see why fulfilling goals is important—my theory of well-being just defines it in terms of the fulfillment of a special set of important goals called "values." There's nothing more to living well than fulfilling your important and psychologically fitting goals. This is the value fulfillment theory of well-being.

One concern you might have about this theory is that, if a good life is just fulfilling your values, then a terrible person might do perfectly well pursuing values that are great for them, but awful for us. This is a thorny issue, for sure, and some philosophers take this to be a deal-breaker for theories like mine. I have two things to say in response. As we will see later, the value fulfillment theory does not make it easy for someone with immoral values to achieve well-being. For most people, morally good values contribute to well-being. In addition, my view has some advantages precisely because it does *not* have an objective standard for which values are the right ones. For one thing, it avoids the very difficult task of proving what such an objective standard might be. For another, it avoids the one-size-fits-all approach to thinking about good human lives. Given how different people can be from each other, I think this is quite important.

That said, you don't have to agree with me about the nature of well-being to agree with me about the importance of fulfilling our goals. We can put these philosophical debates aside. This is because no matter what you think a good life is, no matter how you answer the ancient question about the nature of human flourishing, you will have to make it your goal to

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achieve it. The way that we pursue a good life—no matter how it is defined—is by having goals, figuring out plans for attaining them, and acting on those plans. If you think that human well-being consists in achieving certain objective goods such as knowledge, friendship, or a relationship with God, then you have to figure out what it means to acquire knowledge, be a good friend, or develop a relationship with God, and you have to aim at these things in your actions. Things that conflict with these goals and prevent you from achieving them are bad for you. If you agree with the hedonists that the good life is just the pleasant life, then your goal is to seek pleasure and shun pain; conflict with this goal will frustrate your attempt to live well. No matter how you think about human flourishing or well-being, you can't avoid the importance of goals and goal conflict.

THE BASIC APPROACH

We do better in life when we acknowledge our most important ultimate goals and find ways to pursue all of our goals so that they fit better together. I call these most important ultimate goals "values." The way that I understand "values" is that they are the aims that are very important to us, the ones we think about when we reflect on how our life is going. If someone were to ask you right now to reflect on the state of your life, what would you think about? Personally, I would think about how I've been feeling, my mood, my family, my marriage, my friendships, my health, my job, my contribution to the state of the world—and then my assessment of how things are going for me in general would be based on how things are going in these areas of my life.[5] These things (happiness, relationships,

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teaching, health) are my values. Life goes well for us when we fulfill our *values*, then, and this requires strategies for dealing with inevitable serious conflicts. These strategies enable us to do what matters to us and also to arrive at an understanding of what matters that gives us confidence that we're on the right path.

This basic approach shares certain assumptions with Existentialism, a philosophy that emphasizes individual choice and freedom. Existentialism holds that there are no absolute values imposed from outside of us, but instead that things matter because they matter *to us*. This book also works from that assumption: that there is value in the world because there are people who value things, and that what we need to do in life is figure out what to value and how. I also share the Existentialist assumption that we have some latitude in choosing our goals and actions. We have more than Sugar the beagle, who is driven entirely by her desires for snacks and comfort. The fact that we have some choice about how we understand, prioritize, and pursue our goals means that there is room to make better choices. This will be an important point throughout the book: as we think about our current goals and try to resolve conflicts among them, we are at the same time looking for ways to improve the system of goals that we have.

I part company with the Existentialists on their idea of "radical" choice. Existentialism holds that there is no essential human nature that constrains our choices and so we must think of ourselves as fundamentally free to choose the values that define who we are. Instead, I think that our choices about values are made in the context of our goal-seeking psychology and our highly social, interdependent human nature.[6] We are not radical choosers, because our choices are bound by what

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we are like. To go back to the metaphor I introduced in the "Roadmap" section, we make choices about what plants to grow in our gardens within the limits of our zone, average rainfall, soil quality, and so on. By the time we're able to reflect on our own values and consider changes, we have been shaped quite profoundly by our upbringing and culture. It wouldn't make sense to just root out everything we care about and start from scratch! Even before culture and upbringing get to work on us, most human beings have strong innate tendencies to value such things as relationships, feeling happy, and acting autonomously in ways that use our skills. We may not be "driven" by these basic needs in the way that Sugar is driven by hers, but they provide guideposts for our choices. And, as we'll see, it's not a bad thing to have guideposts.

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