

Review of:

Aaron Smuts, *Welfare, Meaning, and Worth*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 160 pages. ISBN: 978-1-138-21662-4 (hbk.). Hardback/Paperback: \$ 160.00/48.95.

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What makes life worth living? And, what makes a life good for the individual who lives it? Aaron Smuts's central thesis is that these are importantly distinct questions and admit of separate answers. Moreover, Smuts contends that distinguishing between worth and welfare helps to make progress on a range of long-standing puzzles about prudence and morality.

Smuts sees the concept of worth as having normative priority. Ultimately, what we (or most of us) want is to have a life worth living. Chapter 2 attempts to develop a heuristic test for homing in on this notion of worth. Smuts considers a variety of tests with historical precedent, and finds them wanting. For instance, the suicide test, on which one lives a life worth living so long as one doesn't want to commit suicide is rife with problems involving irrational attitudes towards one's life. A teenager who wants to commit suicide after a breakup does not thereby fail to have a life worth living. Attempts to idealize away such irrational attitudes, however, lead to their own problems, the central one being that it might well be rational to end one's life at time  $t$ , while still on the whole, having lived a worthwhile life. What this suggests, then, is the need for a *prospective* test. On Smuts's view, the best heuristic takes the standpoint of a benevolent and knowledgeable caretaker: a life worth living is one that such a caretaker would allow to begin. This has an additional advantage over related tests, like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence thought experiment. One might not want to live the same life again and again simply so as to avoid repeating oneself. But this need not mean the life was not worth living to begin with.

The test is not intended as an *account* of worth. This comes in Chapter 3, which develops an objective list theory. Roughly, the idea is that a life is worth living to the extent that it contains objective goods such as loving relationships, achievements, knowledge, and welfare. Objective bads, such as suffering, vice, or waste detract from worth. Thus, welfare is one ingredient of a life worth living, but it's not the only thing that matters. It's noteworthy here that the objective list theory is typically framed as an account of welfare (along with hedonism and desire-satisfactionism). Smuts thinks this is a mistake – rather, the objective list theory does much better as an account of worth. The view has some key attractive features. First, it makes sense of self-sacrifice. It's plausible that we can sacrifice our well-being for the sake of achievement or love. But an objective list theory of welfare according to which the latter are themselves constituents of well-being seems to lack the resources to account for such self-sacrifice. Second, it can allow us to say that a life high in well-being might nonetheless not be worth living. Consider a person who enjoys a high level of welfare – insert your favorite theory of welfare here. But suppose he commits great evil over his life. It seems natural to say that this

life is not worth living, even if it contains high levels of welfare. One might insist that by committing evil, this person *ipso facto* decreases his welfare below the neutral threshold. But this is implausible. “Vice is not its own punishment,” as Smuts puts it convincingly (p. 40).

Now, Smuts is committed to thinking that a life of hardship (that is, one that’s below the neutral threshold of welfare) can be worth living. Some readers might feel a tension between this and Smuts’s heuristic test for a life worth living – namely, one that a *benevolent caretaker* would allow to begin. The natural question that arises is: benevolent towards whom? It will seem odd to say that this caretaker is benevolent simply towards the individual who is living the life of hardship. Rather, such a caretaker seems benevolent towards the world at large, so that she allows this individual to be born and suffer hardship for the sake of others. But taken at face value, this would have the untoward consequence that the miserable child in Ursula Le Guin’s Omelas has a life worth living. Smuts might be able to avoid this consequence by appropriately spelling out how welfare competes with the other objective goods in contributing to a life worth living, but there is little discussion of this issue.

The distinction between welfare and worth allows Smuts to mount a novel defense of the mental statist account of welfare in Chapter 4. The basic idea is that only one’s mental states are able to affect one’s well-being. Smuts is ecumenical about which mental states count and how, but pleasure and pain are central. The key argumentative move is his claim that the welfare/worth distinction undermines common objections to the mental statist picture of well-being. Consider for instance Nozick’s experience machine. Our refusal to plug in is commonly taken to mean that life inside the machine would be *bad for* us. That is because we would miss out on various objective goods – all our relationships and achievements would be fake, and this would detract from our welfare. Smuts, however, armed with the distinction between welfare and worth, is able to claim that all the thought experiment brings out is that we care about things besides our own welfare. For most of us, a life inside the machine would be less worth living than our current lives, but this need not be because plugging in would detract from our well-being. Rather, by plugging in we would be forgoing the other goods that make life worth living. Smuts convincingly brings this out by noting that for most of us, plugging in would be a *selfish* act. Indeed, this is the natural construal of what Cypher does in the Matrix, when he betrays his crew, wanting to pursue a status and pleasure filled life within the virtual reality. But if plugging in detracts from our well-being, it’s difficult to see how doing this is selfish.

Smuts also offers some positive arguments for mental statism, the most distinctive and compelling of which is the following. The only things we cannot self-sacrifice for, Smuts says, are our intrinsically valuable experiences. On the other hand, we can sacrifice our own good for a variety of other items on the objective list. We can sacrifice our own well-being to attain knowledge (as Marie Curie did), or we can sacrifice ourselves to protect our loved ones. But it seems perverse to say we can sacrifice our well-being so as to increase our (long-run) pleasure.

Chapter 5 asks the question: what makes a life meaningful? Smuts answer is that a life is meaningful “to the extent that it promotes the good.” (p. 75) Purely subjective accounts lack the resources to claim that individuals contentedly devoted to activities like grass counting are

leading (relatively) meaningless lives. Thus, it's not sufficient for a life to be meaningful that one *find* it meaningful. It's not necessary either, according to Smuts. This is a problem for hybrid views of meaning, like Susan Wolf's, on which one leads a meaningful life to the extent that one pursues, and subjectively appreciates, projects that have objective positive value. Smuts argues that one can mistakenly think one's life is meaningless, even though it's replete with positive meaning. The central example is the case of the protagonist, George, in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Smuts's construal of the case is that George leads a very meaningful life, by doing much good for his community, even though he fails to appreciate his life's meaning until the angel Clarence shows him a vision of what his community would look like without George's sacrifices.

Some readers might wonder whether the account holds as a general matter, though. It seems plausible to say that for our lives to be meaningful, the objective goods we promote have to bear *some* connection to our values. This does hold in the case of George. But imagine an agent whose life, unbeknownst to her, promotes some good X, which she doesn't care at all about. Suppose that she makes a lot of money which is posthumously donated to an objectively good cause that she simply did not value. It's not obvious that this posthumous donation makes her life more *meaningful*, though of course it makes it the case that her life causally promoted the good.

The last three chapters are less central, though interesting qua applications of the main thesis. Chapter 6 argues against the view that only welfare matters morally. Chapter 7 addresses the puzzle of why it can be valuable to experience painful art, such as a tragic movie. Finally, Chapter 8 makes the case that most lives are worth living, *pace* David Benatar's recent arguments to the contrary.

Smuts's book is novel, thought-provoking, and convincingly argued. It should be of great interest not only to specialists within the well-being literature, but to moral philosophers and students of ethics more broadly.

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