

Paul Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness: A Theory of the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ISBN 978-0-19-982736-7, x + 253 pp.

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Paul Bloomfield's latest book, *The Virtues of Happiness*, is an excellent discussion of what constitutes living the Good Life. It is a self-admittedly ambitious book, as he seeks to show that people who act immorally necessarily fall short of living well. Instead of arguing that immorality is inherently irrational, Bloomfield puts it in terms of it being inherently harmful in regards to one's ability to achieve the Good Life, and it's ambitious because he tries to argue this starting from grounds that the immoralist (usually an egoist) would accept. He starts from premises about our desire to be happy, and how happiness is inconsistent with a lack of self-respect, which he claims are premises even an egoist would accept. Bloomfield's key argument is then that self-respect is tied to one's respect for others, so that being happy is therefore inconsistent with a disrespect for others. He then goes on to argue about the necessity of virtue for truly being as happy as we can be.

Bloomfield's book is an interesting synthesis of the traditional Greek focus on *eudaimonia* (i.e., living well) with the Kantian concern of a respect for persons. I found myself in agreement with much of what he had to say, making this review a bit challenging. Nevertheless, I will endeavor to point out areas where, despite my agreement on his conclusions, I think his arguments could be challenged and would require further support.

The book is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 provides the framework for understanding the question of what it is to live well, and what would count as a satisfactory answer to all interested parties. Central here is his argument that morality should not be understood in merely other-regarding terms, such that it necessarily sets up a conflict with self-regarding concerns. Or in other words, some see morality in strictly impartial terms (moralists), which contrasts with those who think living well means focusing on being purely partial to themselves (egoists). Both share a particular conception of morality as something that is inherently at odds with self-interest, and one accepts it while the other rejects it.

Bloomfield's first move is to argue that morality, properly understood, involves an all-things-considered judgment about how to live, which incorporates both self and other-regarding concerns. This move has the advantage of providing some common ground for everyone involved in this debate, such that, for example, the egoists are not shut out

of the discussion at the beginning. On this conception of morality, morality has no special authority by which it trumps considerations of self-interest, as self-regarding concerns already factor into the all-things-considered judgment. At this stage, it has yet to be determined how to weigh self-versus-other considerations (such that perhaps the moralists or egoists will still turn out to be right), but we have at least moved beyond a conception of morality that predetermined how it will turn out.

Bloomfield fairly quickly considers the idea that living well involves only a concern for others, as the moralists might suggest, a fairly untenable position. So the moralists quickly drop out of the picture, and the focus then becomes on how to convince egoists to take seriously the idea that living well sometimes involves placing the interests of others ahead of one's own interests (and not merely for instrumental reasons). Here he introduces two labels for the new dialectic: the "Foscots" (i.e., the egoists) and the "Hartrights" (i.e., the balanced approach), inspired by the novel, *Woman in White*. Bloomfield's strategy for getting the egoists on board for this is to argue that self-respect is necessary for living well, and that disrespecting others implies a disrespect for oneself. He thinks egoists will already concede the first point, so the argumentation focuses on the second point. Since he views Kant as falling too much into the "moralist" camp, it is not a whole-hearted embrace of the Kantian position. But Bloomfield definitely rejects a consequentialist approach to valuing self-respect, arguing that people ought not to take on overly servile roles (for example) even if it maximizes the happiness of the group. Here virtue ethicists and deontologists appear to be on the same page about the reasons for endorsing agent-centered restrictions, contra consequentialism. Whether you put it in terms of developing your character or maintaining your self-respect, it's a project for which only you can be responsible.

Why, then, does disrespecting others involve a simultaneous disrespect of one's self? Bloomfield's "argument from ontology" draws our attention to Stephen Darwall's distinction in the grounds for respect—respecting unique features based on one's merit (appraisal respect), or respecting common features that we share as humans (recognition respect) (61). While the appraisal respect one accords to oneself or others varies by achievements (and egoists seem to be willing to accord respect on these grounds), Bloomfield argues that recognition respect requires a minimum baseline respect for humanity. Although Bloomfield prefers to base recognition respect on the basis of being human, he acknowledges that it could be based on other capacities common to human beings, such as agency or rationality. Since this recognition baseline will be the same for all humans, you have to accord yourself and others the same level of

respect. Not to do so represents a failure to treat like cases alike, and to treat someone as less than she deserves. More importantly, at least for the reasons that egoists are responsive to, when you show a disrespect for the features of another that you also possess, then you also end up disrespecting yourself. In other words, when you disrespect the value of another person's humanity, you undermine the value of your own human life. Ultimately Bloomfield argues that the real problem for egoists is their lack of appreciation for recognition respect being the basis of self-respect.

On similarly Kantian grounds, Bloomfield argues that it will not do to just focus one's self-respect on one's own unique accomplishments (appraisal respect), because one has to take oneself as already intrinsically valuable for those accomplishments to matter. As Aristotle also noted, something has to be taken as intrinsically valuable in order for other things to possess instrumental value. If you treat others as if they are mere objects, such that their humanity is of no intrinsic value, then on what is the value of your own life grounded? Again, it cannot be on the basis of merely your own accomplishments, since those have value only if your life already possesses value, and egoists are already taking their lives to have intrinsic and not merely instrumental value. Appraisal respect is ultimately based on recognition respect. Thus, Bloomfield argues that when you disrespect others, since the common humanity of another was not a sufficient reason to prevent your disrespect, then you have also disrespected your own humanity, on which the value of your life is grounded. You harm yourself when you act immorally, as it undermines the self-respect necessary for living well. In the end, the Good Life involves balancing a respect for oneself with a respect for others, as the two are inherently connected.

How effective is this strategy? To be sure, most people who are overly partial to themselves are unlikely to be that way on the basis of arguments, so there is a limit to how arguments to the contrary will be convincing. But of course the project here is to defeat the rationalizations that egoists produce to defend their position, and in this context Bloomfield's arguments hit the mark. Certainly, we may not feel any loss of respect for ourselves when we disrespect others, but that lack of feeling does not mean that we have not in fact disrespected ourselves in the process. Particularly apt is his example of Craig Cobb, the white supremacist who later in life found out that he is partially of African descent. All the while the disrespect he paid to minorities was also a disrespect of himself, because of the features he shared in common with those he attacked in his racism, even though he did not know it at the time.

On the other hand, the egoists might point out that this lack of feeling

the sting of disrespecting oneself (as he puts it once—it is “hedonically invisible”) allows for the possibility that one could still be happy and live well even while disrespecting oneself in this way. In response, Bloomfield challenges the idea that this fraudulent sense of self-respect could be compatible with the happiest life. He likens acting immorally to a kind of “cheating” in getting what one wants, and claims that it is more valuable to “win” what you want fairly than by fraudulent means. Cheating seems like an empty and hollow “victory,” and people who use deception and manipulation to get what they want are in this respect cheating. Given that egoists seem to have no problem accepting appraisal respect, they should see that respect is due to authentic accomplishments as opposed to those requiring fraud. In this way, they should see that authentic self-respect is better than fraudulent self-respect.

However plausible this might be as a generalization, it might be a bit question-begging as a response to the egoists. One can imagine an egoist replying that “cheating” is just one of several means to achieving an end, and it is not obvious what is inherently worse about selecting this as a means to your end (especially when it is an effective means). It seems to depend on what one has as an end. If it is to actually be the best competitor in some competition, like Lance Armstrong, for example, then it does seem a hollow victory to cheat—for it shows that one is not in all likelihood actually the best. On the other hand, if one just wants to enjoy the rewards that go along with being considered the best, without necessarily having to be the best, then perhaps there is no spoiling of that if one had to cheat to get those rewards. One could see oneself instead as being involved in a different kind of competition—who is the best at deception and manipulation, for surely these are skills as well (and one experiences real failure and genuine success in their exercise as much as the honest efforts that Bloomfield exhorts). So it is not clear that fraudulent behavior is always self-undermining in the way described by Bloomfield, though that concession might not provide the egoist enough leverage in the overall debate regarding the importance of recognition respect.

In chapter 2, Bloomfield deals with another potential line of response by the egoist, wherein the egoist acknowledges the harm in immorality but claims that the harm is simply outweighed by the benefits of being immoral. Bloomfield argues that a correct view of happiness will show that this egoistic mindset is self-undermining, leaving one less happy than one could be. It is in this context that Bloomfield discusses the well-recognized paradox in actively aiming at happiness that one is left less happy as a result. For example, a hedonist, in trying to maximize his own pleasure, will view others as of merely instrumental value to gaining pleasure for himself. Such a person seems incapable of being a good

friend with such a perspective, and gaining all the value there is in genuine friendship, and as a result has a life of less pleasure than those who do not take the hedonistic approach. The further paradox is that hedonism gives you reasons not to be a hedonist.

Bloomfield suggests that we have to reject an egoistic (and hedonistic) perspective in order to get out of the paradox. He claims that “if we make our happiness the most important thing in the world, then those things which make us happy can never have more than instrumental value to us and this is to ignore much of the value in the world” (100). However, there may be another way out of this paradox that leaves the potential for retaining the egoistic or hedonistic point of view. Consider Peter Railton’s discussion of the paradox of hedonism.¹ He distinguishes between subjective and objective forms of hedonism, where both subscribe to the goal of living the happiest life possible, but only subjective hedonism commits itself to hedonistic calculation as the means to reaching this goal. It is subjective hedonism’s embrace of a hedonistic methodology that generates the paradox—consciously aiming at the goal leaves one falling further from it than those who are not so directly aiming at it. The objectivist hedonist, however, need not view everything else as of merely instrumental value.

To avoid the paradox, while still remaining a hedonist, the “hedonist’s motivational structure should therefore meet a counterfactual condition: he need not always act for the sake of happiness, since he may do various things for their own sake or for the sake of others, but he would not act as he does if it were not compatible with his leading an objectively hedonistic life.”² Railton goes on to apply this to consequentialism, which faces a similar problem of failing to maximize value by thinking strictly in utility-maximizing terms (whether for one’s own good or the common good). This might be a way in which egoists can solve the paradox, without having to give up their egoism as Bloomfield contends. The sophisticated hedonist can act for the sake of others, and so is not restricted to seeing everyone and everything else in the world as having merely instrumental value. This appears to meet Bloomfield’s challenge, as he says that the problem is specifically when “our self-interest or our drive to be happy alienates us from those things in life which are prejudicially valuable and are the only things capable of making us truly happy” (125).

What keeps the sophisticated hedonist as still recognizably a hedonist is the counterfactual condition, as one would not act for the sake of

¹Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134-71.

²*Ibid.*, p. 168.

others if it turns out not to be compatible with living the happiest life possible. Bloomfield at one point acknowledges something like this, saying that we may have to consciously focus on our own happiness “if taking care of what we think makes us happy fails to do so, presumably because of some mistake we have made in figuring out what makes us happy” (132). Bloomfield and Railton seem to be in consensus about what it takes to avoid the paradox, but on Railton’s account it does not require giving up on hedonism (or egoism). It is unclear whether Bloomfield’s account can offer reasons to deny this position. At one point, Bloomfield does suggest that when acting for the sake of others, treating them as ends in themselves, we must be “genuinely” motivated to act for their own sake and not some other reason. Perhaps one cannot truly maintain the stance of the sophisticated hedonist—it either slips back too much into subjective hedonism, or perhaps one genuinely gives up one’s commitment to hedonism as a consequence of consistently acting for the sake of others. Bloomfield does discuss how something that only holds instrumental value for us can, over time, come to have intrinsic value. But whether that will necessarily transform the sophisticated hedonist or not remains an open question.

In chapter 3, Bloomfield discusses the connection between being virtuous and being happy. As he puts it, being virtuous does not guarantee that we will be happy, but rather that we will be as happy as we can be given the circumstances of our life. Here he is drawing on familiar discussions in virtue ethics regarding the grounding of virtues in our common human nature, and fleshing out the details of particularly key virtues such as courage, justice, and temperance.

Some of the connections between virtue theory and Bloomfield’s discussion of happiness are fairly straightforward. It is certainly the case that one of the appeals of virtue theory is its broad conception of morality as addressing the question of how to live well. Insofar as a key part of Bloomfield’s argument against egoism is to shift our views of morality to incorporate both self- and other-regarding concerns, there is a natural connection to virtue theory. Bloomfield further subscribes to a common tenant of virtue theory, which is that morality is too messy a subject to be captured by even the most sophisticated of decision procedures. But while the move to a discussion of the virtues seems natural, it is one of the areas where his reasoning moves a bit too fast. After all, one could agree with the above points about reconceptualizing our views of morality, without necessarily cashing it out in terms of the virtues.

A similar problem of moving too fast crops up in Bloomfield’s sketches of the Good Life. His views on how a happy and wise person would act in various situations seem eminently plausible, and filled with

much good common sense. But one hesitation with them is that it is not clear what is behind these sketches other than good common sense. The worry is less about the conclusions he ends up with, and more with how he arrived there. Were thoughts about the virtues really needed—that is, did they really do much work in developing our sketches of how a happy person would act? These discussions were somewhat underilluminating for this reason. Granted, Bloomfield and other virtue ethicists have discussed these issues at length elsewhere, so perhaps more detail was simply not necessary here.

More problematically for a treatment of the virtues is that it frequently is far from clear how helpful it is to invoke the virtues in discussions of various forms of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. This problem shows up most in his section on temperance. In discussing all the psychological literature on grit, perseverance, resilience, and willpower, he says that a problem with it is that “most of this is still discussed with little if any sense of the root character virtue which grounds them all: temperance” (189). But it is not obvious why this is a problem. That is, how does referencing temperance deepen our understanding of these concepts? What is lost by the failure to ground these in temperance?

Another example appears in a discussion of a group of Vietnam veterans, who employed a variety of specific strategies (avoiding rage, maintaining their connection with others, taking responsibility for their actions, and so on) to avoid becoming dehumanized during the war, and managed to avoid committing atrocities or developing PTSD as a result. He quotes at length a summary of the details from Barbara Herman, and then concludes that “[w]hile one might think quite rightly of courage as the first virtue of a soldier, it seems temperance is required to live through war as well as possible” (192-93). But what is gained in summing it all up by saying that temperance is required? That is, invoking a general concept of temperance does not appear to enlighten our understanding of what went on with the soldiers, and it might even risk covering up important distinctions in the strategies used, since it is all glossed over by the invocation of a singular broad virtue. As a final example, in a discussion of avoiding problems of confirmation bias, Bloomfield remarks that “[b]ias or prejudice toward or away from certain perspectives is best understood by moral philosophers and epistemologists as a failure of temperance” (195). Again, how does understanding this as a failure of temperance help us to better understand this phenomenon? Or in other words, what mistakes will we make in dealing with the problems of confirmation bias if we do not view it in the light of temperance?

This is, I think, a more general problem within the virtue literature (and this is coming from someone who considers himself to be a virtue

ethicist), and not just specific to Bloomfield's treatment of virtue here. Of course, if one is working within a virtue-theoretic framework, then it will be natural to try to understand behavior in virtue terms. But it seems as though the relevance of the virtue terms is being assumed, rather than earned in the course of the discussions. I learn which virtue term is supposed to cover some category of behavior, but then I am left wanting on how this helps us to better understand that behavior.

All in all, though, Bloomfield's book is an excellent read. He is certainly right about the damage done in moral philosophy over the years by conceptualizing morality in such a way that it is immediately placed at odds with self-interest. His interweaving of happiness and self-respect is cogent and unique, and shows how much fertile ground there is in combining virtue and deontological approaches. In covering these ideas as well as issues in value theory, this book has much to offer for anyone broadly interested in ethical theory.

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