



Well-being and theism: Linking ethics to God

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Review by
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In 2010, Harris published *The Moral Landscape*, which promotes a science of morality based on the idea that morality is relevant to animals and humans only to the extent that morally good things increase wellbeing.¹ To Harris, human wellbeing depends entirely upon “events in the world and states of the human brain,” which means, “there must be scientific truths to be known about it.”² William Lauinger’s *Well-Being and Theism* introduces a model of wellbeing in complete contrast to Harris’. In an argument aimed primarily at philosophers researching wellbeing and others interested in how to reconcile wellbeing with theism, Lauinger advances an innovative and well-argued explanation of human welfare that ultimately links human wellbeing to God.

In developing the connection between human wellbeing and theism Lauinger posits two aims, both of which diverge from more traditional, philosophical approaches to wellbeing that also seek to link ethics to God. Lauinger’s first aim is to introduce a hybrid approach, desire-perfection theory, formulated in response to deficiencies he detects in both pro-attitude and objectivist stances on wellbeing. The second aim of Lauinger’s study is to establish metaphysical grounds for claims posited in part one. In line with his two aims, Lauinger divides the book into two sections.

Part One provides an accessible and detailed overview of pro-attitude and objectivist theories. Generally, pro-attitude theories maintain that, whether factual or not, one’s pro-attitudes, broadly understood as desires or urges, comprise one’s wellbeing. One’s attitude toward what is happening in one’s life determines whether or not one’s life is going well. Within the pro-attitude family, Lauinger focuses specifically on desire-fulfilment theories, which he sees as the most likely pro-attitude model to challenge his own stance. Desire-fulfilment theories maintain that human welfare boils down to desire, whether actual or hypothetical. Lauinger rebuts this stance with a number of potent objections, including what he calls the stability problem, that desires can and do shift over time.

Lauinger’s most potent objection is desire-fulfilment theories’ inability to account for the “good” in “prudentially good for,” mainly because humans sometimes have defective desires, where they desire things not intrinsically good for them, like drugs. For example, according to desire-fulfilment theories if Sam decides to smoke, then smoking is prudentially good for Sam (i.e. smoking contributes to Sam’s wellbeing). Yet, this runs counter to the human intuition that

¹Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2010).

²Ibid., 2.



smoking is harmful and, thus, prudentially bad for Sam (i.e. does not contribute to Sam's wellbeing). Lauinger's objection to desire-fulfilment theory is noteworthy, because he relies on human intuition as the basis for determining what is prudentially bad. However, if we think back to a time before the harmful effects of smoking were known, human intuition would have told us that smoking is a beneficial act, helpful in calming the nerves and in weight control.

Lauinger's work might benefit from consideration as to how the context of culture affects our understanding of what is prudentially bad and, thus, regulates what is considered prudentially good, as it seems implausible that these are static notions divorced from the cultural contexts in which they occur. The cultural basis of many of our human intuitions challenges Lauinger's argument about our intrinsic desires by suggesting that rather than desires being in-built, they may be shaped by our cultural backgrounds, which serve to inform our perceptions and attitudes. Assuming that culture is responsible for determining our pro-attitudes, it might override or at least influence our individual human intuitions about what contributes to our wellbeing. If this is the case, ethics might ultimately be linked to culture rather than to God.

After launching a number of effective criticisms against desire-fulfilment theories, Lauinger turns to objectivist theories, which he largely rejects due to their inability to account for the "for" part of "prudentially good for." Lauinger pays specific attention to objective-list theories, which posit that wellbeing is the result of attaining certain things from a list of meaningful pursuits, like health or friendship. Though Lauinger admits that objective-list theories are able to capture the "good" portion of "prudentially good for," he argues that just acquiring the goods on the list is insufficient, as they must somehow match personal desires to contribute to wellbeing. Notwithstanding that objectivist theories divorce themselves from pro-attitudes, there are certain qualifications that must be met for wellbeing, and, as Lauinger observes, pro-attitudes are reasonable when considered in conjunction with the way the human mind works, since it is unlikely that humans desire something that does not psychologically benefit them in some way.

Lauinger successfully identifies and critiques the shortcomings of both objectivist and pro-attitude stances. Indeed, Lauinger is correct that if one pushes for either a purely objectivist or purely pro-attitude approach, the shortcomings of each drives us back toward the other, creating an unproductive tautological cycle. To break this pattern, Lauinger introduces his own hybrid theory, desire-perfection theory, which seeks to bridge the gap between objectivist and pro-attitude theories of wellbeing. Desire-perfection theory is based on the assumption that most humans have in-built desires for basic, intrinsic goods, such as knowledge, friendship, etc. However, an individual must also desire these intrinsic goods for them to contribute to that individual's wellbeing.³

Lauinger's model is strong on two accounts. One is that it provides criteria for the "good" portion of "prudentially good for," in the form of objective-value constraints, such as health and friendship (the perfection part of desire-perfection theory in the form of perfectionist value). The second is that Lauinger also manages to attend to the "for" element of "prudentially good for" by applying pro-attitude limitations on wellbeing (the desire part of desire-perfection theory). Desire-perfection theory maintains that even when an individual lacks information about certain things that may be prudentially fit for her, as long as she desires the basic goods that represent those things, they are still good for her. Take Sumner's bluegrass example, where someone who has never heard bluegrass music before walks into a park, hears bluegrass, and

³ For a discussion of this point in reference to meaning of life literature please see Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207-25.

decides she likes it. Though she did not know about bluegrass music beforehand, it still satisfied the intrinsic desire she has for aesthetic experience and, thus, contributes to her wellbeing.⁴

It becomes clear in the second half of the book that Lauinger's choice to utilize a hybrid model with both pro-attitude and objective value constraints limits the possibilities for metaphysical grounding that can be employed to support his argument, which results in a few deficiencies. Lauinger examines two metaphysical approaches as grounding for his theory: unguided evolution and Aristotelianhylomorphism. Unguided evolution is the idea that evolutionary processes are directed solely by reproduction. Aristotelianhylomorphism, in the form Lauinger uses, maintains that organisms are comprised of matter and have a "substantial form" that leads the organism toward its optimal welfare (i.e. perfection) as determined by the sort of organism it is.

Though Lauinger astutely presents positive arguments for both metaphysical approaches, demonstrating his knowledge of relevant arguments, in the end, he predictably finds neither evolution nor hylomorphism suitable as metaphysical grounds for his three-fold, Aquinian-inspired model of human desire. The deepest level of human desire Lauinger observes is the desire for infinite good or infinite object, which he assumes is God, though he allows for others who may not make the same assumption. Second-level desire is represented by intrinsic desires for basic goods, like friendship, health, and knowledge, which Lauinger sees as cascading from the desire for infinite good. The third level comprises the desire for finite instances of basic goods, which Lauinger states are neither intrinsic nor stable. Lauinger's specific criticism is that organisms' possession of fixed forms demands that evolution occur within the limitations of these forms, which means that evolution is not responsible for generating the forms themselves. There must be something else ultimately causing the emergence of fixed forms, which in Lauinger's estimation is God. Lauinger argues that the inadequacies posed by hylomorphism and evolution are rectified only by turning to theism, which has the power to bridge the disconnect that exists between evolution and basic goods when it is assumed that objective values are not fully accounted for by natural processes. This is an interesting point, but one that should not necessarily be taken at face value.

Lauinger admits that it is plausible for evolution to generate within humans a need for basic goods but proposes that the natural process of evolution is insufficient to account for the quality of basic goods that is not solely natural, such as mathematical Platonism, which maintains that numbers and sets (abstract mathematical objects) exist independently of humans. "Given this supposition, it seems doubtful that unaided evolution would build into us the ability to engage in mathematical reasoning, for it seems improbable that unaided evolution would build into us the ability to break through to, or to connect up with, some non-natural mathematical realm."⁵ Though Lauinger admits the controversial nature of this statement, he uses it to propose that a non-natural intermediary (i.e. God) is required to respond to this disconnect. However, culture is also worth consideration as the force behind the cultivation of a need for basic goods that cannot solely be ascribed to unguided biological evolution and is of particular interest in the examples of pain and the development of ethics introduced in Section 5.4. Despite Fitzpatrick's claim that "pain is typically bad" and usually avoided, points which

⁴ Lauinger, *Well-Being and Theism*, 27. For those interested in Sumner's work, please refer to Leonard W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵ Lauinger, *Well-Being and Theism*, 126.

Lauinger seems to accept, there are numerous examples of cultural groups with rituals that involve copious amounts of pain, including Māori tā moko and the Lakota Sundance.⁶

In traditional applications of Māori moko, a chisel was used to remove portions of flesh from the face into which ink was then rubbed to create a three-dimensional, grooved design. Part of the Lakota Sundance ceremony often involves ritual piercing, partial suspension, and complete tearing off of participants' flesh to signify individual sacrifice for the benefit of the entire tribe. In these instances, pain is not avoided or mitigated but is intentionally sought and viewed as fundamental to cultural group integration and belonging. Though Lauinger uses the pain example to demonstrate the need to inquire where "value laden" features of facts with dual aspects come from, he overlooks culture as a possible answer.

Ultimately, Lauinger argues that theism is the only means to overcome the gap between evolution and basic goods. Yet a number of scholars, like Weijers, argue this very point and have identified alternatives to theism that incorporate evolutionary theory. One such alternative is optimistic naturalism, which maintains that science and technology might enable humans to find meaning in life by assisting "our actions, which we find meaningful partly because they might have particular infinite consequences to actually have infinite consequences for life."⁷ Optimistic naturalism is worth consideration, not only because of its novel integration of science into human wellbeing, but because of its ability to mediate subjectivist and objectivist views of wellbeing in a way that challenges Lauinger's approach.

Regardless of where one falls on the naturalist/theist spectrum, *Well-Being and Theism* is an interesting and provocative book that enhances wellbeing literature by challenging established approaches and introducing the desire-perfection model that seeks to compensate for some of the shortcomings of current wellbeing theories. Despite its, at times, underdeveloped interpretation of evolutionary theory, questions the work raises concerning the ways in which ethics is linked to God are laudable and will undoubtedly encourage new avenues to open in the study of wellbeing. Overall, Lauinger has managed to attain his goal of developing a model that incorporates elements of pro-attitude and objectivist models and bolsters these claims with a metaphysical grounding that supports his desire-perfection account of wellbeing.

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⁶ Ibid., 135-39. For further information regarding Fitzpatrick's stance, see William Fitzpatrick, "Robust Ethical Realism, Non-Naturalism, and Normativity," in *Oxford Studies of Metaethics* 3, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford University Press, 2008), 159-206.

⁷ Dan Weijers (online first). "Optimistic Naturalism: Scientific Advancement and the Meaning of Life," *Sophia*.
<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11841-013-0369-x>.