

Mark Vernon

Wellbeing.

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Has an earnest youth ever asked you, ‘Which philosophical work would you recommend to me if I am looking for some basic philosophy that could relate to me personally?’ Were you at a loss as you mentally scanned your bookshelves without satisfaction? Did you walk away thinking that your recommendation was not exactly what they were looking for, perhaps because it was too technical?

You might consider recommending Vernon’s book after you have had the pleasure of reading it yourself. Because it adroitly surveys traditional approaches to the concept, it will be valuable to the student and the general audience; because it expresses personal frustrations with our intellectual culture’s inability to address the concept, it will be a provocative read for the academic.

Drawing from a wealth of literature ranging from ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary positive psychology, Vernon has composed this book with a view to surveying what we expect the concept of wellbeing to satisfy. The book is framed by excellent questions from its first page to its last, movingly Platonic paragraph. In addition to utilizing stoicism, Epicureanism, utilitarianism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Buddhism, he makes salient points about his own dissatisfactions with contemporary approaches to the concept. In fact, some of the most engaging aspects of the book are found where his perspective is least academic, as when he refers to his own frustrations as a writer to underscore the shortcomings of the ‘flow’ theory of happiness.

The book is divided into three parts, each dedicated to notions associated with wellbeing: happiness vis-à-vis pleasure, transcendence and mindfulness, and love and goodness. In the first part, which offers clear introductions to aspects of utilitarianism, Epicureanism and the work of Aristotle, Vernon argues that wellbeing is not synonymous with happiness, if happiness can trough and crest as pleasure does. Since the pleasure we pursue is not always what we receive, some pleasures are undesirable and can produce pain. However, Vernon notes that the pain such a pursuit often produces can be an important aspect of wellbeing, provided that it is meaningful. So the mental perturbation resulting from the pursuit of pleasure/happiness itself does not produce wellbeing, but learning from the experience can prepare one for its attainment.

In the second part, where Vernon uses the work of Charles Taylor, Peter Singer, Douglas Hofstadter, Karl Jaspers, William James, John Hick, Robert Pirsig and others to good effect, he emphasizes that we would do well to think of ourselves as striving for wellbeing, not happiness, since happiness fits less adequately with our desire for meaning

in our lives. The meaning we strive for, after all, is not the everyday meaning often associated with pleasure and preconditioned by normative requirements, but something that is beyond the very world that provides opportunities for such pleasure. We strive for meaning in respect of the transcendent, which today assumes any number of forms. Vernon is especially eloquent about the Buddhist notion of ‘mindfulness’, which among other things he understands to represent ‘flashes of non-conceptual intuition and experience’ that are the grounds of wellbeing. Subtly critical of the contemporary approach to the transcendent, Vernon argues that even if we have lost some of the skills constitutive of ‘higher flourishing’ (a term on loan from the recent work of Charles Taylor), we still cannot resist the attraction of the transcendent. The meaning ‘beyond’ experience we strive for, he maintains, is necessarily an inexpressible good. Ultimately, this good is best pursued by means of a spiritual exercise that can involve personal pursuits, rational argumentation, personal interaction, and even political commitment. In spite of these several methods of spiritual exercise, it is definitive of the pursuit of goodness necessary for wellbeing that the transcendent be suggested in lives without being reducible to an object of experience.

Vernon concludes by giving content to this irreducible point of contact between the striving for the good and the temptation of the transcendent. He notes that although Buddhism remains for him the best form of spiritual exercise in terms of openness to the conditions of wellbeing, it is Western philosophy that has provided him with the tools for understanding how it can be lived. What we love, he suggests movingly, expresses something of who we are. The ‘higher’ the object of our love, and the more we love it, the more we become like the thing(s) we love. Love expands our sensibilities to the point of enabling us to embody love itself, thereby placing us in contact with the trace of the good that is the very ground of wellbeing. Interestingly, the book concludes with Platonic questions about virtue and the good, as if starting elsewhere on a spiritual journey and an intellectual trajectory has taken him back to the origin of the problem of wellbeing. ‘By seeking the good in life you find wellbeing’ may be a frustrating conclusion, yet when it is understood as indicative of the attraction of the mystery that lies beyond ‘happiness and pleasure, rules and duty, even meaning and virtue’, Vernon takes the professional philosopher as well as the earnest youth back to the question: what is the role of philosophy in the attainment of wellbeing, *and vice versa*? This book led me to wonder whether I am even pursuing philosophical truth in a way that contributes to my wellbeing, and whether my brief moments of wellbeing are influenced by, or even intelligible to, the kind of philosophy I work through.

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