

Quality of Life and Motorcycles¹

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Abstract: I argue that there's an important aesthetic element in the conception of life quality. Motorcycles generally and very heavy ones in particular are mostly beautiful machines and riding them is, in those lucky moments every biker knows of, a euphoric experience with beauty as one of its most important objects. I conclude that the riding and maintenance of a motor cycle normally add to the quality of life.

What is it for me to lead a life that has value *for me*? This is a central ethical question: what is personal value or quality of life? Some people believe we live in an age of self-interest in which personal questions have priority over moral ones. We are more interested in securing our own well-being than striving for traditional ethical values such as global justice, solidarity, and so on. I believe this description is both correct and incorrect. An undisguised self-interested and self-centred way of living is nothing extreme today; and nothing we are ashamed of normally. Spending time and money on exclusive motorcycles might be considered as an example of this self-centrism. On the other hand, parallel with this there are also strong moral forces in our society (particularly among young people) challenging self-centred lifestyles.

I don't believe we have a right to lead our own life the best way we can as long as we don't directly cause harm to others. And even if we did have such a liberty right I'd argue that we should engage in other things than merely in the exercise of this right. So I don't want to plead for self-centrism. But I believe we ought to reflect on what makes our life worth living in any case. Partly for moral reasons, since our own and other beings' quality of life will play

¹ I wrote this in 2004. Since then I have discovered the pleasures of being a car owner.

a role in any conception of morality. But I also think that Socrates was correct when he claimed that reflecting on these things will *in itself* make quality. When he claimed that “the unreflected life is not worth living” he might be exaggerating; but I believe that he had a point.

Riding My Motorcycle and My Good

So questions concerning personal value in general have a high degree of philosophical legitimacy. Nevertheless, I focus on the narrower question: Can riding my motorcycle be part of my personal good? In other words, in what way, if any, does the fact that I’m a biker affect my quality of life? I’m not striving for a general verdict on the fact that motorcycles for many years have been my primary means of transportation; but I want to philosophize over whether my dreams as a young boy about getting a bike were rational and how the pleasures of riding a bike compare to other pleasures, such as reading poetry and giving lectures in philosophy. In considering this specific question concerning motor cycles I make a short survey of the three traditional quality-of-life theories. I argue that there’s a very important aesthetic element in the conception of life quality. I’m not convinced that this element ought to be seen as something isolated from the traditional theories, but make no point of this. I conclude that for all I know the riding and maintenance of a motor cycle normally add to the quality of life. One important reason for this is the aesthetics of motor cycles and biking. Motorcycles generally and very heavy ones in particular are mostly beautiful machines and riding them is, in those lucky moments every biker knows of, a euphoric experience with beauty as one of its most important objects.

Talking about aesthetics in this way may sound snobbish. But the beauty of life and various elements of life is not a luxury need. It’s what most humans beings all over the world are struggling for. The choice about where to stay and what profession or trade to go in for is

guided by aesthetics. Being with your beloved child is (when at best) primarily an aesthetical experience. Not getting on well together with certain people or at certain places is, I believe, very much a (negative) aesthetical experience. I'm talking about a fundamental human attitude to life and its various elements and not some elitist attitude allowed just a few lucky ones.

But is not the aesthetics of biking and motorcycles more created than fundamental? Possibly, but can an attitude or need can be created out of nothing? There might be a big difference between my own longing for the first ride in the spring time and some disabled person's longing to be able to leave her apartment and see the trees and listen to the singing birds. But I don't consider this difference to be fundamental. Both desires employ the same human capacity; the created and fundamental aesthetical needs and attitudes have a common existential root.

Faring Well and Leading a Good Life

This emphasis on the aesthetics will also have certain terminological or conceptual consequences. In the philosophical literature questions about the personal good are often put in terms of welfare or well-being. In my view these terms are too narrow. In particular the term "welfare" suggests that the important thing from the personal perspective is to strive for a life in which you're faring well and are well off. I don't think this is a general enough question to ask, since I believe there ought to be a logical space for the possibility of leading a life that's valuable for you (which doesn't necessarily mean that it's also valuable *in your eyes*) but in which you're not prospering or faring well. If we make room for the aesthetical component it's possible that you may lead a life full of efforts, sufferings and even failures, which has value for you in terms of how you handle them. One example that comes to my mind is Andrée, who led a Polar expedition by balloon in 1897 that turned out to be a

complete failure. The expedition landed on the Polar ice after a few days and the three men all died on the walk back to the mainland. Andrée's way of coping with the situation (which appears from his diary) and even, I'd say, the magnificent failure in itself has a kind of elevation, which I'd regard as aesthetical. I also believe, although this is not essential, that Andrée himself would agree with me. However, this aesthetical dimension adds to the personal value of Andrée's life. Faring well is not the end of the matter and therefore the term "life quality" will be better qualified to cover the multidimensional character of these questions.

Many philosophers will happily accept that we apply an aesthetical perspective to our lives, but claim that although we may regard Andrée's destiny as an aesthetical value that enhances the value of his life, it doesn't necessarily add to the *personal value* of his life. At most the aesthetical dimension has an impersonal value, just like any other beautiful object in nature, which other people possibly may profit from (and which may be transformed into a personal value, if the person in question enjoys it). What I'm claiming is that life beauty, even when it contains tragic components, may also have a personal value, although I've no other proof of this than the fact that we may envy people for their tragic and elevated destinies even when we realize that in a sense we are much better off than they were. I may for purely selfish reasons regret the fact that my life in the aesthetical respect is poor and meagre (compared, for instance, to Andrée's) although I'm comparatively well off. This will give you reason to believe that aesthetics is to be included among the personal values.

In the same way, I believe we may argue that being a biker might be considered valuable (in terms of its aesthetics) compared to some other alternative, even when it wouldn't, all things considered, make you better off than the alternative would. You may realize that having a car would be cheaper, more practical, more convenient and would even make you happier. Nevertheless you prefer being a biker, for the primary reason that there's an

aesthetical value that will be actualized in that kind of life that will be lost in for instance a car owner's life.

For someone who is not familiar with these kinds of thoughts, they'll probably not make sense. But for someone with a romantic disposition they may well make sense. Possibly, one part of mankind chooses their way of living exclusively based on expectations of what will make them fare as well as possible at the smallest possible cost; they are so to speak maximizers of welfare. But another part has other strivings as well and may prefer a way of living even when it has a price in terms of welfare. I can see no other reason why people choose to devote their life to politics, morality, philosophy, art, poetry, adventures and so on. I believe there's an important element of unconditional valuing in these cases – I may prefer being an artist even when it will not promote my well-being and I might even prefer being one in a situation where I regret my choice. So I may have romantic reasons for choosing a certain way of living and I guess there's enough romance surrounding motorcycles and biking for this analysis to be applicable.

Travelling close to nature, the sun, the wind, the rain and the smell of grass and flowers can have a special beauty that other alternative (and possibly more comfortable) ways of travelling lack. In sum, biking both *is* (or may be) beautiful and brings you closer to beauty.

I now want to turn to some of the traditional theories of life quality and ask how they may help to analyse and judge the value of biking and motorcycles.

Seeking Pleasure and Happiness

According to hedonism the finally valuable things in life are experiences with a positive tone. In one type of classic hedonism the important positive experience is best labelled as pleasure. Without arguments I'd say that pleasure as a sensation has the following characteristics: it has bodily localization, originates in at least one of the five senses, is the opposite of pain and its

existence does not directly depend on beliefs.

I assume that biking may be a valuable activity in a fairly uncomplicated sense in this theory. Biking involves pure sensations, some of which are already mentioned: the hot and cool wind meeting your face, the special feeling of gripping the smooth handle and comfortable sitting position and the rumbling sound of a heavy engine that caresses your ears.

At the same time, I doubt this analysis will fully catch the aesthetical element discussed before. But will it ever be possible to hear a pleasurable sound without finding it in some sense *beautiful* and will not the pleasure of listening to something beautiful be hard to localize? If there's an aesthetical element involved in listening to the sound of your working motorcycle engine, I consequently doubt that narrow hedonism described above will do justice to its value.

In a wider form of hedonism the valuable experience is an emotion, that's to say, a feeling with an intentional object. Whereas a sensation is a localizable feeling, like for instance, the pleasure you feel in your hand when you put it on a tepid engine (or pain if the engine is too hot), an emotion is directed toward an object and founded on beliefs. You experience the emotion of happiness or at least gladness when you believe you're going to take a ride on a beautiful summer day. The object of this emotion is the ride you're going to take and it's founded on your belief that that you're going to take it.

I don't think these forms of hedonism are exhaustive. Fred Feldman has proposed that the essential building block in hedonism is propositional pleasure,² which can be seen as one intermediate form. Furthermore, I doubt that an emotion will always be founded on a belief, just like you may doubt that there's always such a thing as an object of an emotion. I believe there are states of happiness and excitement which may be caused by no particular beliefs and which have no particular object. And I'd say that the pleasures of biking are often of this kind,

² *Utilitarianism, hedonism, and desert*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

that is, some kind of indefinable excitement or sense of feeling good. But I will not focus on the possible intermediate forms and exceptions.

We'll probably need a wider version of hedonism in order to do justice to the aesthetical element involved in, for instance, the pleasures of biking. The smell of new-mown hay on a summer evening ride will certainly involve smelling sensations, but you'll never catch the profoundness of the experience by analysing it as sensations exclusively. And you'll not catch its value by placing it in these sensations. What happens to myself in these situations is first of course that I realize that it's the hay I smell. Then I may think that new-mown hay is an essential component of the most beautiful season and landscape I know of. I feel gladness that this landscape with fields, cows and little farms still exists, and on top of the complex feeling there may be a simple joy of living. It's this whole complex that makes up the value and I claim that the sense of beauty has a decisive role in it.

I think we may turn this into a general point: you can hardly do justice to the value of an experience unless you have a sense of its complexity. The pleasure of putting your hand on the tepid engine in order to warm your frozen fingers is made up of sensations, thoughts, presentiments, and without a sense of the mystery or poetry of life I don't think we can fully understand it.

If emotions have a role to play in biking pleasures one may ask what consequence this will have for their trustworthiness. When we talk about a sensation we might say that even if it's fairly unsophisticated and superficial compared to the emotion, at least it is what it is. If you have a sensation and value it for being one, no one can take away this value from you. All sensations have the same authenticity, so to speak; they are what they seem to be, since they've no cognitive foundation. An emotion, on the other hand, has a cognitive foundation in virtue of being built on a belief. This will make it possible for an emotion to be irrational, namely when it's built on a false belief. If I'm glad that my son Josef enjoys our rides even

when the weather is bad and the rain is beating against his face, then my gladness is irrational if he in fact hates it. It's possible to claim that such irrational emotions are not to be included in my personal good. In other words, I'm not better off when I'm glad that Josef shares my fascination for riding a motorcycle in foul weather.

Satisfying Preferences

John Stuart Mill has famously argued that some pleasures are more valuable than others and that the quality of a pleasure has relevance for its desirability. Roughly speaking, a higher value is to be assigned to the pleasures of the intellect than to those of mere sensation. Mill has traditionally been considered as hedonist, but his view of the relationship between pleasure and desire as well as his criterion of how to decide when one pleasure is superior to another brings his theory close to preferentialism, that's to say, a theory according to which quality of life is to be understood in terms of preference satisfaction. According to Mill, mental pleasures are more valuable than bodily ones, since "those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs the higher faculties".³ What Mills seems to be saying is that rational preferences settle questions of comparable value.

Peter Singer has argued for a similar thesis from a preference utilitarian perspective:

In general it does seem that the more highly developed the conscious life of the being, the greater the degree of self-awareness and rationality and the broader the range of possible experiences, the more one would prefer that kind of life, if one were choosing between it and a being at a lower level of awareness.⁴

³ *Utilitarianism*, Dent: London and Melbourne, 1972, p. 9.

⁴ *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 107.

Singer claims that the life of a normal human being is more valuable than that of a normal animal, in virtue of, among other things, their intellectual capabilities. This can easily be transformed into a question of the comparable value of various human experiences: is an activity valuable in relation to the degree in which your rational capacity and capacity for self-awareness is involved? Is driving your bike a less valuable activity than for instance writing an essay about it, due to the fact that less sophisticated human faculties probably are involved in the former activity?

I want to divide this question into two parts, starting out with asking whether we'd normally say that the experience of driving a bike takes place at a *lower level of consciousness* than do more intellectually advanced experiences. Are you in some quantitative sense *more conscious* when you write an essay with pleasure compared to when you drive your bike with pleasure? My frank answer is "No"; the experiences associated with riding my motorbike are to my knowledge in general *more intense* than the experiences associated with writing; I normally get more overwhelmed by the biking experiences than by the writing ones. So I'm not convinced that the traditional elements in personhood directly communicate with *degree* of consciousness, unless by this term we refer to a certain quality of consciousness or possibly a somewhat greater range of experiences. Therefore, I may well admit that the experiences of small children and animals which require less intellectual sophistication may nevertheless be considered *more conscious* than experiences of grown-ups, which require more intellectual sophistication.

Secondly, leaving aside questions of degree of consciousness, the more important question concerns whether of two experiences of roughly the same intensity, of which one requires high intellectual sophistication whereas the other requires no such thing, we'd say that the first experience, other things being equal, is more valuable than the second. I personally wouldn't give an affirmative answer to this question. I prefer having the intense experience of

a love affair with a person to having the intense intellectual pleasure of making an advanced psychological analysis of the emotions involved in love affairs; in general I prefer having these kinds of non-intellectual emotions themselves to having the intellectual pleasure of analysing them.

It seems that we don't generally prefer the intellectual feelings to the non-intellectual ones. But it's also fairly obvious that the contrary generalization is questionable as well: we don't prefer the non-intellectual feelings to the intellectual ones as a general thesis. For example, I prefer (in the sense that I value more) the pleasure of writing this essay to the equally intense pleasure of daydreaming on my sofa (instead of writing). In other words, from the fact that being involved in a love affair may seem more valuable than being involved in an intellectual activity we cannot conclude anything about the value of biking. Certain *kinds* of non-intellectual experiences and activities can be more valuable than certain *kinds* of intellectual experiences and activities.

This possibility will bring us to the next, and last, quality-of-life theory.

Perfecting Life

Suppose we claim that certain ways of living add to the personal value of a person's life independently of both her hedonic experiences and preferences. I'll label a theory for this alternative "perfectionism", well aware of the problems with this.

First, traditionally perfectionism is understood as a theory in which a human being ought to perfect her own life or flourish in the sense of developing her human essence or potential. If being rational is to be included in this essence (which Aristotle believed), we may have to return to the last section's discussion, since then the *practical* result of preferentialism and perfectionism may coincide. The theories would still diverge, since the reason why an intellectual feeling is more valuable than a purely sensational one, according to

preferentialism, is that you prefer it (or would do so under ideal conditions). In perfectionism, the explanation is that the capability of having such feelings is to be included in a definition of what it is to be a human being.

Second, there are positions which don't fit into any of the theories mentioned so far. For instance, Derek Parfit discusses what he calls an "objective list theory", a substantive evaluative theory which presents a list of human goods and bads which represent values for us "whether or not we want to have the good things, or avoid the bad things". Such a list may include

moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty. The bad things might include being betrayed, manipulated, slandered, deceived, being deprived of liberty or dignity, and enjoying either sadistic pleasure, or aesthetic pleasure in what is in fact ugly.⁵

Most of the examples make these lists overlap with the theories we have already discussed, but some examples diverge, for instance being a morally good person and aware of true beauty. It should come as no surprise that I want to add a slight modification of the last example, namely leading a kind of life that has an aesthetical quality, whether or not you're aware of the fact that you lead such a life.

This talk about life aesthetics doesn't presuppose value objectivism (and neither does it exclude it). You need not believe that values exist independently of your valuing in order to claim that you lead a valuable life without recognizing it as such. I may for instance believe that true life beauty is to love and be loved by those one loves, without realizing that this is actually the case in my own life. I may be loved (and I may even love) without knowing it and in one sense I'm therefore unknowingly part of something beautiful also in my own eyes.

Furthermore, my position doesn't presuppose value objectivism in the sense of value

⁵ *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 499.

universalism either, that is, it does not mean that we all should strive for the same things. It may well be that life aesthetics is a relative or contextually dependent thing: what might be a beautiful life for you might perhaps not be so for me, depending on the sort of persons we are. For instance, living as a recluse may fit one kind of personality but not another. Driving your motorbike from Sweden to China may be a fine thing to do in one kind of life but not in another.

Biking is emotions as well, not least feelings of freedom, but I believe the aesthetical value is special in so far as it affects more or less all other values. The feelings of freedom in biking may be more valuable in virtue of the aesthetics of biking. I may prefer the feelings of freedom of driving my bike to the feelings of freedom of some other activity just because of the aesthetical qualities involved. And I also believe this can be illustrated by a modification of one of my previous examples. I claimed that I prefer actually having a love affair to being able to give the feelings involved in such situations a profound analysis (even if by chance the intensity of the feelings in these activities were comparable). But why is that? My spontaneous answer is that there's more beauty in the one situation than in the other. That's also the reason why I'd hesitate about what to say of another possible choice, say between on the one hand having a love affair without being able to write a beautiful poem about love and on the other hand being able to express feelings of love in poetry but not being able to experience them in reality. In my mind the second combination has a tragic beauty that may well constitute a reason to choose it instead of the first one.

The aesthetical value is special also in the sense that it's tempting to reduce at least some other personal (and non-personal) values to it. Take moral values for instance (which Parfit includes among the personal ones). Morally fine actions as well as morally valuable character traits are often regarded as beautiful and can be seen in the light of aesthetics. The same may be true of the personal value of authenticity, which may even be regarded as an aesthetical

category all by it self.

Therefore, if riding my motorbike has a personal value for me in part because of the fact that it contributes to the aesthetical perfection of my life, this is not a negligible fact about my life. It might be a sign of luxury to have access to the life of a western biker, but I refuse to regard the aesthetical dimension in our lives as being in itself an expensive superfluity. Quite the contrary – I believe that life aesthetics is existentially central.



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