CHAPTER 1

The Ideal of Self-Fulfillment

1.1. SELF-FULFILLMENT: PRO AND CON

Self-fulfillment is a traditional ideal that has been exalted in both Western and non-Western cultures. While it continues to exert fascination for philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and ordinary people, it has been construed and evaluated in many different ways, each of which incurs difficulties of explication and justification. But there is a general conception of it which can give an initial idea of why self-fulfillment has so often been highly valued as a primary constituent, or indeed as the inclusive content, of a good, happy human life. According to this conception, self-fulfillment consists in carrying to fruition one's deepest desires or one's worthiest capacities. It is a bringing of oneself to flourishing completion, an unfolding of what is strongest or best in oneself, so that it represents the successful culmination of one's aspirations or potentialities. In this way self-fulfillment betokens a life well lived, a life that is deeply satisfying, fruitful, and worthwhile. It is diametrically opposed not only to such other reflexive relations as self-defeat, self-frustration, self-alienation, and self-destruction, but also to invasions whereby such injuries are inflicted by forces external to the self. The struggle for self-fulfillment has figured centrally in our literary heritage as well as in much of the actual history of human beings.

According to this general conception, other ideals or norms have value only insofar as they serve, directly or indirectly, to further personal self-fulfillment. Morality, religion, aesthetics, and other realms of value may focus on actions and institutions, on artifacts, on nature with its living beings and environmental ecology, and on many other kinds of objects. But insofar as these are values for human beings they come down finally to impacts on the development or fruition of the human self. It is how the human self experiences these objects or relates to them regarding its fulfillment that determines, in the final analysis, whether and how they are good or bad, right or wrong. Because of its concern for what is deepest or best in oneself, self-fulfillment is a maximizing conception; it consists in superlatives of desire and achievement; it subsumes all other values of human life and is the ultimate goal of human striving. So to seek for a good human life is to seek for self-fulfillment.

These strong claims on behalf of self-fulfillment will receive intensive critical scrutiny in various parts of this book. But already at this beginning stage it is important to note that, despite its purported superlativeness and its widespread internalization as a personal ideal, self-fulfillment has suffered a diminution of concern in much of modern moral and political philosophy. Partly as a reaction to the seemingly elitist focus of many ideals of the good life, the dominant concern of modern moral philosophers has been not with the nature and attainment of the good life for individual persons but rather with the interpersonal relations whereby one owes duties to other persons. Many of those duties have implications for the good lives of individuals, but even these have emphasized moderate or even minimal but indispensable needs rather than the superlative fulfillment of aspirations and capacities.

A similar shift has occurred in political philosophy. In ancient times self-fulfillment was a social ideal as well as a personal one. For Plato and Aristotle the ultimate goal of the polis was not only to provide the means whereby persons could fulfill themselves but also to exemplify such fulfillment in its central institutions. The development of the human virtues was to be embodied in the polis's educational system, its arts, and its provisions for social and political comity, all with a view to promoting and exalting self-fulfillment. In the modern era, in contrast, with the vast difference between the nation-state and the polis, the focus of political philosophy has been far less on personal self-fulfillment and far more on guaranteeing the stability of civic order and political liberty, with special attention to minimal needs and rights and to justice as providing for their equal protection. The idea of the state as an educational institution concerned with its members' self-fulfillment and maximal development has largely been given up, although some concern with it can be found in Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx, and more recently in Hegelians like T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and John Dewey. The focus on self-fulfillment has been greatly dimmed not only because the poverty, disorder, and violence of modern life have made concern with it appear less pressing but also because the ideal itself raises serious conceptual and moral problems. To put it bluntly, to many moderns self-fulfillment has seemed a murky and confused concept that should not be invoked by serious-minded analytic philosophers.

Let us look briefly at some of the main conceptual and moral doubts that have been raised concerning both the value and the very feasibility of the ideal of self-fulfillment. The most familiar of these bears on the egoism, the self-absorption and self-aggrandizement which the quest for self-fulfillment is thought to engender. As a superlative object of aspiration, self-fulfillment is considered to focus so exclusively on the self that it leaves no space for other values, including the goods and rights of

other persons.[1] It is also held that the ideal of self-fulfillment is elitist because the maximizing perfectionism it embodies is beyond the reach of most persons, and because they reject the exertions required for achieving it: the *homme moyen sensuel* is contented with secure mediocrity rather than with achievement.

Further objections adduce quantitative and qualitative features of the self that are held to render the ideal of self-fulfillment impractical or obscure. According to thinkers from Hobbes to Freud, the ideal is impractical because, as the realization of aspirations, it can have no finite attainment since aspirations are limitless: as soon as one is realized another is put in its place, so that there are no final ends or desires; rather, there is an unending continuum of aspirations and fulfillments. Hence, the desire for self-fulfillment is ultimately ineffectual. Qualitative features of the self are said to have the same outcome: the human self is multiple; it has parts that are distinguished from one another not only by varying external historical and geographic circumstances but also within itself. As psychologists from Plato to Freud have emphasized, the self's diverse components may conflict with one another, so that there is a problem of which of these divergent selves is to be fulfilled and how the conflicts are to be resolved. It is also maintained that many human aspirations and capacities are evil or otherwise unworthy, so that what is required is not their fulfillment or actualization but rather their frustration or negation. More generally, self-fulfillment is held to be so value-neutral that it can characterize sinners as well as saints.[2] If, on the other hand, self-fulfillment is defined as the actualization of one's "highest" or "best" capacities, this definition is confounded by inveterate conflicts over the criteria of "highest" or "best," so that the exaltation of self-fulfillment is bound to reflect the author's prejudices rather than values on which all rational persons can, let alone must, agree.

I shall try in this book to develop an interpretation of self-fulfillment that can help to overcome these doubts and can serve to justify the high place it has been accorded in conceptions of the human good. To be successful, the interpretation must satisfy two main requirements. First, it must take adequate account of the difficulties that self-fulfillment is held to incur. Second, it must analyze the justified contents of self-fulfillment, show why it is a worthy ideal to aim at, and explain the conditions of its attainment.

In pursuit of this aim my primary focus will not be historical but

[1] See Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

[2] See Henry Sidgwick, *The Ethics of T. H. Green, Herbert Spencer, and J. Martineau* (London: Macmillan, 1902), p. 64; Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 91, 95.

rather dialectical, analytical, and systematic.[3] I shall not for the most part discuss the many different interpretations that self-fulfillment has received from Plato to the contemporary world. Instead, I shall begin from our present informal understandings of the concept and try to clarify them in light of various considerations I regard as cogent. In pursuit of this aim, I shall proceed dialectically: I shall present various familiar hypotheses about what self-fulfillment consists in; I shall indicate difficulties incurred by these hypotheses; and I shall then try to move on to further hypotheses that overcome the previous difficulties. Two main conceptions of self-fulfillment will emerge from this dialectical process, and each in turn will be scrutinized on the basis of relevant criteria. The upshot I shall try to establish is that while each conception incurs difficulties, they can be largely resolved and the high esteem accorded self-fulfillment as a worthy ideal of the good human life can be vindicated.

The general conception of self-fulfillment to which I referred at the outset remains an enduring and exalted ideal that is relevant to moral philosophy concerned with the goodness of human life as well as to political philosophy concerned with the justice of a society that reflects and fosters that goodness. Despite the instabilities and even terrors that plague modern societies, the ideal continues to be of central importance for moral and political philosophy.

1.2. SOME TERMINOLOGICAL DISTINCTIONS

Let us begin with some terminological considerations. "Self-fulfillment" has two near synonyms: "self-realization" and "self-actualization." While these are mainly used, respectively, by philosophers and by humanistic psychologists, "self-fulfillment" occurs much more frequently among ordinary people;[4] and this is one of the reasons favoring its use in the present context. All three of these terms signify not only a kind of reflexive relation but also a favorable development wherein persons achieve goods that are somehow inherent in their "natures," by unfolding certain of their latent powers. In this way each development is both a process of valuable growth and the outcome of that process.

Certain tentative distinctions can, however, be drawn between these terms. In listing them here I shall be using concepts whose fuller import will appear only subsequently; they are intended more as suggestive and provisional than as definitive characterizations of the respective processes.

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[3] For an excellent historical analysis, which focuses mainly on varying conceptions of the self rather than on self-fulfillment, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[4] See, e.g., Yankelovich, *New Rules.*

To begin with, we may note four differences between self-fulfillment and self-realization.[5] First, self-realization may suggest that the self is somehow not fully "real" before the process of realizing it is completed.[6] But the capacities that are developed in self-fulfillment are themselves also real in that they exist as powers inherent in the self. Second, where self-realization seems to pertain primarily to capacity-fulfillment, self-fulfillment also comprises the distinct process of aspiration-fulfillment. In this regard self-fulfillment has a strong desire side as well as a capacity side. Third, where self-realization can be construed as consisting solely in activities that have purposes beyond themselves,[7] self-fulfillment consists at least in part in states or activities that are valued for themselves. This is especially true of self-fulfillment conceived in terms of aspiration. Self-fulfillment is thus a maximalist value, focused on persons' attainment of their strongest and deepest desires. Self-realization, on the other hand, is more moderate in its value status because of its tie to means as against ends. This difference cannot be pressed too far, however, because self-realization may also be viewed as the end for which various activities are undertaken as means. Fourth, some persons may not desire self-realization because its activities may be deemed too arduous. On the other hand, self-fulfillment, at least as fulfillment of aspirations, is desired by all persons even though the means toward attaining it may not themselves be desired.

Turning now to "self-actualization," we may note three differences from self-fulfillment.[8] First, "self-actualization" suggests that the self to begin with is already present as a set of determinate potentialities that await actualization: the potentialities are determinate even if the actuality is not. In self-fulfillment, on the other hand, there may be indeterminacy on both sides: the self is indeterminate in its potentialities as well as in its actuality. The potentialities are indeed real powers, but their contents are diffuse and indeterminate. Thus self-fulfillment leaves more room for creativity than does self-actualization: in fulfilling oneself one creates oneself in that one creates both one's powers (by giving them determinate form) and one's developed states or activities. This development is shaped by one's aspirations, which help to mould one's implicit powers as well as the ends toward which they are directed.

[5] The characterizations of self-realization that I present here are based in part on writings of such British Idealist philosophers as T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and Bernard Bosanquet.

[6] See David L. Norton, *Personal Destinies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 15.

[7] See Jon Elster, "Self-Realization in Work and Politics: The Marxist Conception of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 3, no. 2 (spring 1986), pp. 99–100.

[8] The characterizations of self-actualization that I present here are based largely on the writings of such humanistic psychologists as Abraham H. Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Erich Fromm.

A second distinction bears in a related way on the respective processes. In self-actualization, at least as conceived on a certain "Aristotelian" model (to be further discussed below), the actualization may be automatic, in a way not too different from the natural processes whereby plants grow to fruition. In self-fulfillment, on the other hand, the process is marked by choices made by the self-fulfilling person: she freely chooses which of her indeterminate potentialities she will undertake to develop, in the light of her strongest aspirations. Thus freedom is an important component of self-fulfillment as against self-actualization. Third, in self-actualization the aspect of the self that is held to be actualized or to require actualization consists in various "needs" based largely on desires that stem from problems of adjustment encountered by persons in various of their social relations. In self-fulfillment a similar place is occupied by "aspirations," construed as persons' strongest desires for self-gratification; but there is also a largely independent role for capacities as the objects of self-fulfillment.

Thus while self-fulfillment, like self-realization and self-actualization, is both a process and a product, the process consisting in an unfolding of certain implicit or inherent powers, self-fulfillment differs from the others in that it is an intrinsic value desired for itself, and is marked by choice, creativity, and capacity-development. In what follows, however, when I quote writers who use one of the other expressions, I shall usually not take the trouble to remind the reader of these distinctions. Also, in important respects the features that unite self-fulfillment with self-realization and self-actualization are more significant than the differences.

1.3. SELF-FULFILLMENT AS ACTUALIZATION OF POTENTIALITIES

To come to fuller grips with the ideal of self-fulfillment it will be helpful to develop further a distinction mentioned in the previous section. This distinction reflects one of the most traditional and influential formulations of self-fulfillment: that it consists in the "actualization of one's potentialities."[9] The self is here viewed as a locus of powers or capacities that are primed for growth or development toward an inherent end, which is the good of the self; and self-fulfillment is the process of attaining this development. The good life or the good functioning of a person is held to consist in such actualization of her potentialities.

[9] See Elster, "Self-Realization," who attributes to "the Marxist tradition" the formula that "self-realization is the full and free actualization and externalization of the powers and the attributes of the individual."

A crucially important issue concerns the nature of this development. As it is often interpreted, the human actualization of potentialities is conceived on the same model as the growth of plants and animals, as a kind of semiautomatic process in which latent primitive capacities are unfolded and the organism is brought to maturity and its "natural end," its perfected functioning. It was this model that Marx followed when he wrote that "Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of his own nature."[10] This is also the model upheld by humanistic psychologists when they write that "self-actualization" is "a fundamental characteristic, inherent in human nature, a potentiality given to all or most human beings at birth," so that it "must ultimately be defined as the coming to pass of the fullest humanness, or as the 'Being' of the person."[11] "Self-actualization" is "the tendency of the organism to move in the direction of maturation. . . . It moves in the direction of greater independence or self-responsibility."[12] A person's "natural self relentlessly pushes toward health and growth. Their potentials for self-fulfillment are never lost or destroyed."[13] "Under favorable conditions man's energies are put into the realization of his own potentialities . . . inherent in man are evolutionary constructive forces, which urge him to realize his given potentialities . . . man, by his very nature and of his own accord, strives toward self-realization. . . . You need not, and in fact cannot, teach an acorn to grow into an oak tree, but when given a chance, its intrinsic potentialities will develop. Similarly, the human individual, given a chance, tends to develop his particular human potentialities. He will develop then the unique alive forces of his real self."[14]

[10] Karl Marx, "Results of the Immediate Process of Production," in Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 1044.

[11] Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1962), pp. 138, 145.

[12] Carl R. Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951), p. 488. See also Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 35.

[13] Jerry Greenwald, *Be the Person You Were Meant to Be* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973), p. 12. See also Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1947), p. 20: "All organisms have an inherent tendency to actualize their specific potentialities. The aim of man's life, therefore, is to be understood as the unfolding of his powers according to the laws of his nature."

[14] Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), pp. 15, 17. Horney also says that man "can grow, in the true sense, only if he assumes responsibility for himself" (p. 15). See also Anthony Storr, *The Integrity of the Personality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 27: "I propose to call this final achievement self-realization, by which I mean the fullest possible expression in life of the innate potentialities of the individual, the realization of his own uniqueness as a personality: and I also put forward the hypothesis that, consciously or unconsciously, every man is seeking this goal." For a good critical discussion of the humanistic psychologists, see Don S. Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*

Among the many issues raised by this conception of self-fulfillment or self-actualization as an internally driven development toward optimal human functioning, two are especially important in the present context. First, unless human potentialities are defined in a question-begging way, they include capacities for evil or malfunctioning as well as for good; hence, the actualization of potentialities cannot be used as a general formula for the human good, whether "good" is given either a moral or a nonmoral interpretation. Second, the conception does not, as such, provide a place for ethically important processes like choice, deliberation, and decision, so that its relevance for human ethical development is left obscure.

In this connection it may be helpful to look briefly at Aristotle, who first gave a technical philosophical elucidation of the concepts of potentiality and actuality. It is significant that Aristotle defined *all* motion as "the actualization of the potential as such."[15] For in all motion, including not only locomotion but also qualitative, quantitative, and substantial change, specific potentialities or capacities are in process of being actualized or fulfilled; for example, when a physical body's potentiality for rolling is actualized or exercised, this constitutes its actual motion of rolling.

But Aristotle did not apply this simple formula of the actualization of potentialities to the ethical sphere of the development of the virtues or excellence of character. He drew a sharp distinction between the objects or subject matters of the theoretical sciences of physics and biology, where the formula applies, and the objects or subject matters of the practical sciences of ethics, economics, and politics, where it does not.[16] The subject matters of the theoretical sciences consist in essences or natures that exist and have their basic characteristics quite independent of human control or contrivance.[17] On the other hand, the subject matters of the practical sciences consist in human actions, characters, and institutions that depend upon and vary with the choices, deliberations, and actions of human beings. Accordingly, the theoretical natural sciences trace a sequence of natural movement or development from potentiality to actuality. Each natural species of thing has certain distinctive potenti-

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(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), ch. 4. For discussion of some further bearings of Freudian psychoanalysis on ethics, see Alan Gewirth, "Psychoanalysis and Ethics: Mental or Moral Health?," *Christian Register* 135 (1956), pp. 12–13, 30–31.

[15] *Physics* 3. 1. 201a10. See also *Metaphysics* 11. 9. 1065b16.

[16] See *Metaphysics* 6. 1; 9. 1–9; *Nicomachean Ethics* 6. 3–7.

[17] In view of the immense technological constructs that are applied in modern scientific research it is necessary to note here the distinction between the artificial means used, for example, to bombard electrons and the objective physical realities that such technological contrivances are designed to disclose or discover.

alities or powers of movement or development deriving from its essence or nature and, unless there are impediments, these potentialities are actualized in correspondingly distinctive ways which, for biological entities, constitute their respective goods or ends. Thus, for example, acorns become oak trees, and embryos grow to adulthood.

In the case of the practical sciences, on the other hand, Aristotle held that the movement or development of their subject matters cannot be accounted for by this simple scheme of the actualization of inherent potentialities. Rather, an intermediate concept must be invoked: habit or habituation (*hexis* or *ēthos*), which reflects human choices and conditionings. This is intermediate between potentiality and actuality in that, while the practical subject matters are indeed *based upon* inherent natural potentialities or capacities, as their material causes or necessary conditions, these potentialities can be turned in many different directions so far as concerns the various virtues, vices, and other psychological states that may be developed on the basis of them. For example, humans, like other animals, have natural potentialities to feel various emotions or passions. But these potentialities in humans can be developed in different ways, through varying human choices, so that some persons become cowards, others reckless daredevils, still others heroes, saints, and martyrs, and others still courageous in an intermediate way. Thus Aristotle emphasized that the process of development of the various states of character cannot be accounted for by nature (*physis*), where nature is the efficient and formal cause that drives natural entities along the path from potentiality to actuality. As he put it, if man's moral virtues were generated by nature, then, since "nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature,"[18] it would follow that there are no moral vices. But of course there are. Hence, moral virtues must have a different source or efficient cause than nature or natural potentialities, including human nature, and this source consists in the way in which human passions or emotions are conditioned through choices in one direction rather than in others. Thus it is by habituation that the various states of character are developed, in that there must be a certain kind of training of the emotions, which proceeds not only or mainly by intellectual instruction but rather by discipline, force of example, legislation, and other ways that depend upon human desires and choices. Hence the human goods, including the moral virtues, cannot be derived from or accounted for by man's nature alone; this nature is not the sufficient condition of man's good.[19] From this it follows that self-fulfillment,

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[18] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2. 1. 1103a20.

[19] This distinction is overlooked in Thomas Hurka's discussion of Aristotle; see Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 19–20.

construed as at least part of the human good, is not constituted by or derived from the natural actualization of human potentialities.

This point also bears on the idea that self-fulfillment consists in an unfolding of one's "nature," either generic or individual.[20] The difficulty here is that insofar as your nature is something with which you are born, your self-fulfillment would not be under your control so far as concerns the content that gets fulfilled or is actualized. While if it is under your control, then it is not your "nature" that gets fulfilled. Here again the reply is that our nature gives us diffuse, indeterminate potentialities or tendencies, and we can choose among them which will be fulfilled by the kinds of actions we voluntarily perform. This, of course, raises the question of the criteria for choice, which I will address in detail later.

Despite the immense differences between Aristotelian and modern conceptions of the physical sciences, the distinction he drew between natural and practical modes of development is still sound. It is true that in the *Politics* Aristotle said that "the state exists by nature" and "man is by nature a political animal."[21] But here he used "nature" in a normative sense, not as efficient cause but as final cause: "the nature of a thing is its end," and "the final cause and end of a thing is the best."[22] So the "natural" here signifies a normative selection from among the many potentialities or potential habituations that bear on human development. Being a civilized or "political" animal is not merely the actualization of human potentialities as such; it is their best actualization or development. There remains, then, the contrast between nature and choice or habituation as different kinds of sources or efficient causes of human movement and development. It is thus a mistake to interpret Aristotle's doctrine of the human good along the lines of his "metaphysical biology," as if that good were a "natural end" or telos consisting in the actualization of human potentialities.[23] There is also a parallel contrast between choice and the idea upheld by some Marxists according to which human history is controlled by inexorable social forces in which choice or desire has little or no place.

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[20] See Joel Feinberg, *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 318–19.

[21] *Politics*, 1. 2. 1253a2.

[22] Ibid., 1. 2. 1252b32ff.

[23] For this mistaken interpretation, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 139: "Human beings, like the members of all other species, have a specific nature, and that nature is such that they have certain aims and goals, such that they move by nature towards a specific telos. The good is defined in terms of their specific characteristics. Hence, Aristotle's ethics, expounded as he expounds it, presupposes his metaphysical biology." For a much more extensive and sophisticated interpretation of "natural ends" in Aristotle, see Henry B. Veatch, *Human Rights: Fact or Fancy?* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), ch. 2.

What emerges from these considerations is not that human powers or potentialities do not figure at all in self-fulfillment, but rather that they must be guided or controlled through deliberation and choice, which are functions of desire. Our nature gives us diffuse powers or potentialities; and while some of these may be stronger than others, we can, by the voluntary actions we perform, choose which among them we want to fulfill. So the fulfillment of desires—or, rather, of aspirations as one's deepest or strongest desires—will emerge as at least one kind of self-fulfillment. But their objects cannot be read off from some static "end" of human nature. In what follows, especially as regards what I shall call "capacity-fulfillment," I shall sometimes use the formula of the actualization of potentialities, but this will always be with the understanding of the difference from the non-Aristotelian interpretation of it sketched above.

1.4. TWO MODES OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

On the basis of the distinctions we have just examined, self-fulfillment can be considered in two main ways. One derives from the element of choice, or more generally desire, that figures in the development of character. Because of the superlativeness that pertains to self-fulfillment, it can be referred to as aspiration-fulfillment, where "aspiration" signifies one's deepest or supreme desires. A second construal derives from the element of potentiality or power to which the formula of the actualization of potentialities was addressed. With due recognition for the selectivity and deliberation that are required for the development of character, self-fulfillment can here be referred to as capacity-fulfillment. These construals provide an initial answer to the question of which "self" is intended when we speak of self-fulfillment. As I noted above, philosophers and psychologists from Plato to Freud have distinguished many different "selves" as constituting the human person. But in the present context the self that figures in self-fulfillment may be defined in terms of certain aspirations or capacities. The self is fulfilled when its deepest desires or its best capacities are brought to fruition. These features also indicate in a preliminary way the bases for the superlativeness of self-fulfillment as a supremely valuable condition of the self.

Certain general features of the self cut across the distinction between aspirations and capacities. The self that enters into self-fulfillment is a continuing or enduring embodied entity that is aware of itself as a distinct person, that can anticipate a future for itself, and that has desires on which it can reflect. It can evaluate these desires on the basis of second-order desires that take account of its relevant abilities or capacities. This

taking account may vary in degree from one self to another and from one time to another, and it includes some reference to the desires of other persons. These features of the self will be more fully developed in what follows.

Amid these general features, we can distinguish more specifically between aspiration-fulfillment and capacity-fulfillment by reference to the different basic questions each is designed to answer. The question for aspiration-fulfillment is: What will satisfy my deepest desires? The question for capacity-fulfillment is: How can I make the best of myself? To fulfill oneself by reference to one's aspirations involves that the self is viewed as a center of desiderative force which strives to achieve intended outcomes. To fulfill oneself is to achieve these outcomes and thereby to bring oneself, as thus centered in one's aspirations, to fruition, although, as we shall see, the objects of the aspirations may be things other than oneself. To fulfill oneself by reference to one's capacities involves that the self is viewed as a more or less ordered set of powers, abilities, or potentialities. To fulfill oneself is to bring the best of those powers to as full development as possible, so it involves a normative selection among a person's capacities. The selection aims to single out excellences, virtues, or perfections, and self-fulfillment consists in attaining these. This attainment is a self-fulfillment for the double reason that it is a good, indeed a (or the) highest good, for the person in question, and that it is this person's own capacities that are developed or exercised in attaining and possessing this good. But neither aspiration-fulfillment nor capacity-fulfillment is an automatic process; it involves second-order choices and controls on the part of the self.

The aspirations and capacities on which these two modes of self-fulfillment rest are directly related to two distinct factors or features of the self: its appetitive-conative side on the one hand, and its rational side on the other.[24] As modes of a person's self-fulfillment, both aspirations and capacities serve to define who the person is, but in different ways. The difference is that aspirations and their fulfillment are tied more closely to persons' actual desires, while capacity-fulfillment bears more on making the best of oneself and thus serves as a normative guide to what desires one ought to have, where this 'ought' may (but need not) go beyond persons' actual desires. The two modes of self-fulfillment, accordingly, are associated with, or even equivalent to, two different conceptions of happiness. If happiness is the fulfillment of one's desires or one's deepest

[24] These two kinds of self-fulfillment and features of the self are present but not clearly distinguished in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1, in the sequence from his discussion of happiness as what "we desire for its own sake, everything else being desired for the sake of this" (1. 2. 1094a18) to his discussion of it in terms of "the function of man" as "an activity of soul which follows or implies reason" (1. 7. 1098a7).

desires, then it is equivalent to aspiration-fulfillment. If, on the other hand, happiness consists in the highest development of one's best capacities, then it is equivalent to capacity-fulfillment.[25] In the following chapters we shall examine various qualifications that must be imposed on each of these equivalences; but their putative connection with happiness brings out further why self-fulfillment is so highly valued as a superlative condition of the self.

Aspiration-fulfillment is both a process and a product or outcome. It is a process of development whose outcome or culmination is the successful attainment of the objects of one's deepest desires. These objects may vary from person to person, from one cultural milieu to another, and between different historical epochs. But in all cases they reflect the inherent purposiveness of human action and the freedom or autonomy that is a generic feature of such action. Because of this purposiveness, aspiration-fulfillment, at least as envisaged outcome, is regarded as a great good by all the persons who are able to achieve it or who strive for it.

Where such self-fulfillment is relative to persons' aspirations, in capacity-fulfillment the criterion of self-fulfillment is located rather in the objective goods or values that persons can achieve by developing certain of their inherent capacities. These goods or values have an objective status independent of whether they are aspired to or desired by the persons who are capable of achieving them. Thus, for example, persons like Hitler or Stalin might be held to have achieved aspiration-fulfillment at least on the occasions of their greatest triumphs; but they would not have achieved capacity-fulfillment because the objects of their aspirations, far from being genuine goods, were execrable evils. The criteria for such evaluations in less extreme and obvious cases will be dealt with in detail below.

The two modes of self-fulfillment have had varying relations to the history of thought. We may to some extent tie the distinction to two different traditions of Western philosophy. Aspiration-fulfillment reflects the liberal and individualist tradition of John Stuart Mill's insistence that "free scope" should be given to "different experiments of living,"[26] as well as corresponding emphases in Rousseau and the German Romantics of the nineteenth century. Capacity-fulfillment reflects the perfectionist exaltations of reason found in Plato and Aristotle as well as, variously, in Kant and Hegel and such of their nineteenth-century continuators as T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley.

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[25] For a related but not identical distinction, see Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness," *Philosophical Review* 88 (April 1979), pp. 167–97; John Kekes, *The Examined Life* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1988), chs. 10–11.

[26] *On Liberty*, ch. 3, para. 1.

From these considerations it follows that self-fulfillment in the aspirational and in the capacitative senses, at least in their initial bearings, may be independent of one another. This independence may be further marked by calling them, respectively, "subjective" and "objective" or, again respectively, "relative" and "absolute." But these characterizations should not be pressed too far. Self-fulfillment in the aspirational sense has to take account of objective facts about personal desires and their contents, including facts about the abilities or capacities of the person who seeks to achieve his aspirations and about their envisaged objects. And self-fulfillment in the capacitative sense must take account of persons' choices, both those they actually make and those they ought to make, where this 'ought' has among its criteria persons' deepest desires and strivings. Questions about the motivations for persons' seeking to fulfill their capacities also arise here.

If the questions of aspiration-fulfillment and capacity-fulfillment are indeed distinct, their distinctness may be exemplified in at least two ways. First, one may have capacity-fulfillment without aspiration-fulfillment: one may fulfill one's highest capacities and yet not fulfill one's aspirations because, for example, one feels that one has not measured up to the high standards one upholds for oneself, or because one's aspirations are for something other than high achievement. This does not mean that capacity-fulfillment can dispense entirely with the element of desire or choice; but this may be moderated in the light of what one discovers about the capacities that are within one's reach. Second, one may have aspiration-fulfillment without capacity-fulfillment because one's aspirations are far lower than the high achievements of which one is capable. In this case one may be satisfied with a surpassable level of mediocrity. Persons who are risk-averse or unduly modest may aspire only to be lost in the crowd, with no desire to achieve excellence. A further basis for upholding the distinction between the two modes of self-fulfillment derives from the kinds of criteria that enter into them. The criteria for aspiration-fulfillment are directly personal; they derive from the aspiring person herself; they consist in what she most deeply wants. The criteria for capacity-fulfillment, on the other hand, are in important respects impersonal. For to ascertain what is the best in oneself requires that one select from among one's aspirations or other desires on the basis of appropriate tests for goodness; and these tests (which will be more fully discussed below) may involve looking beyond one's aspirations to more objective considerations both about oneself and about kinds of value. Again, this does not mean that desires or choices are completely overlooked, but they are subjected to relevant critical scrutiny. Moreover, whereas aspirations may vary from person to person, what is best in oneself may reflect standards that apply more generally.

Nevertheless, the separation of aspiration-fulfillment from capacity-fulfillment raises difficulties and dangers. If what is best in you does not correspond to what you most deeply want, then the way may be opened for authoritarian or paternalistic imposition of standards of perfection that take no account of your own desires or wishes. And, conversely, if what you most deeply desire takes no account of what is best in you, of what can bring your best capacities to fruition, then aspiration-fulfillment may result in disappointment and even disaster for you.

Despite these considerations, we might try to equate the two modes of self-fulfillment by the following line of argument. Aspirations are a kind of desire, and when desires get translated into action they become the purposes for which one acts. Now every agent regards his purposes as good—not necessarily as morally good but at least as having sufficient value for him to merit his trying to attain them. Hence one's deepest desires have as their objects what one regards as superlatively good, or best, not only because they have been chosen from among the alternatives that are available to one, but also because they reflect one's deepest desires. So aspirations are for what, from the agent's point of view, is best. And insofar as this best represents a conative development of the agent herself, as what she aims to be, become, or achieve by her own striving, the object of her aspiration is what is best in herself. So, according to this argument, aspiration-fulfillment is the same as capacity-fulfillment.

This conclusion would be warranted only if there were no criteria for what is best in oneself independent of one's deepest desires. But that there are such criteria is suggested by the fact that there are desires that are mistaken, misguided, or self-frustrating. This means that desires, as such, do not necessarily fulfill criteria of adequacy, especially as bearing on capacity-fulfillment. We might, however, try to obtain such criteria by invoking higher-order desires as bases of both aspiration-fulfillment and capacity-fulfillment. For a particular desire to be mistaken would mean that it in some way is opposed to a higher-order desire. Thus it might be said, for example, that everyone supremely desires the good or the best, but some persons are mistaken about the particular desires they seize upon as means to fulfill their higher-order desire for the good. So in this way higher-order desires could be appealed to for providing, from among desires themselves, appropriate criteria for the adequacy or soundness of desires, so that the proposed identification of aspiration-fulfillment with capacity-fulfillment could still be maintained.

This attempt to base capacity-fulfillment on the fulfillment of one's higher-order desires incurs at least three difficulties. First, there is the question of the sense in which one "has" the higher-order desire. If persons are not aware that they have this desire, then in what way can it be

truly attributed to them? Second, even if there are higher-order desires, must they be for the good of the person who has them? It will be recalled that capacity-fulfillment bears on making the best of oneself. But higher-order desires may have other objects, such as the happiness of strangers, the beautification of some city, the discovery of scientific laws, the domination of other persons, and so forth. Hence, this could still leave aspiration-fulfillment and capacity-fulfillment independent of one another, since the former, unlike the latter, could have an impersonal object distinct from making the best of oneself. Third, it makes sense to say that even higher-order desires may be mistaken, unless one puts them at such a high level of generality—such as being for the good or the true—that they seem to be beyond criticism. But such a procedure would be question-begging, and it would still leave open the question of the adequacy of the more specific desires one pursues as means of attaining these highest-level objects. Thus if the "deepest desires" in which aspirations consist are to be practically relevant, they must be given more specific contents that enable them to be motivational as objects of pursuit and that hence go beyond the alleged higher-order desires. So this argument in support of the identity of capacity-fulfillment with aspiration-fulfillment does not succeed. Capacity-fulfillment, while taking sufficient account of desires and aspirations, will have to be explicated in ways that go beyond aspiration-fulfillment.

In the remainder of this book I shall discuss first aspiration-fulfillment and then capacity-fulfillment. While the discussions will be distinct, I shall also be concerned to bring out their main relations both to one another and to the various goods that make each of them especially worthy objects of human striving.