Self-fulfillment Eudaimonism and the Image of God

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> To him that overcometh will I give … a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.
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> — Revelation 2:17

> The true name is one which expresses the character, the nature, the being, the *meaning* of the person who bears it. It is the man's own symbol—his soul's picture, in a word—the sign which belongs to him and to no one else.
>
> — George MacDonald

Eudaimonic theories of well-being are popular among Christian theists;[1] they also tend to establish closer ties between well-being and the meaning or purpose of life than paradigm subjective theories like desire satisfactionism and hedonism. In its general form, welfare eudaimonism identifies well-being with the fulfillment of one's nature.

[1] This is especially true of Thomists see Finnis ([1980] 2011); Murphy (2001); Hayes (2021).

Beyond this, most eudaimonists are objectivists about well-being. They understand "fulfilling one's nature" in terms of species-level norms—to fare well is to flourish as a member of one's *kind*. In this presentation, I examine a subjective version of eudaimonism, which I will call *self-fulfillment eudaimonism*, and suggest a way of integrating it with Christian theism. I'll begin by comparing objective, kind-based, eudaimonisms to self-fulfillment eudaimonism and end with an application to the Christian doctrine that human persons are made in the image of God.

1. Welfare Eudaimonisms

1.1 Flourishing as the Kind of Thing You Are

Richard Kraut's Aristotelian account of well-being in *What Is Good and Why* (Kraut 2007) is a good example of traditional kind-based eudaimonisms.

He calls his account *developmentalism* and gives the following characterization of well-being:

> Plants, animals, and human beings … [flourish] by developing properly and fully, that is, by growing, maturing, making full use of the potentialities, capacities, and faculties that (under favorable conditions) they naturally have at an early stage of their existence. Anything that impedes that development or the exercise of those mature faculties—disease, the sapping of vigor and strength, injuries, the loss of organs—is bad for them. (131)

He also emphasises the role of *kinds* for his theory.

> If *S* is flourishing, there is always some kind to which *S* belongs, and *S* is flourishing as a member of that kind. … [W]hat is good for human beings is to flourish as human beings (just as what is good for the member

> of some other biological species is to flourish as a member of that species). (131–2n1)

Unfortunately, kind-based theories run into trouble when assessing the well-being of atypical members of a species. To see why, let's consider a thought experiment by Alexander Pruss and Hilary Yancey (2019).

Betazoids, an alien species from the series Star Trek, are identical to humans in all but one respect—betazoids are telepathic. Hannah and Bridget are Federation engineers leading remarkably similar and fulfilling lives. Neither is telepathic. However, Hannah is a human and Bridget is a betazoid. Furthermore, Bridget has no desire to be telepathic and does not know that she is a betazoid.

When we extend Kraut's developmentalism to cover betazoids, we run into a problem. Given Bridget's impairment, the theory clearly entails that Hannah is faring better than Bridget; after all, Bridget is a member of the betazoid species but lacks a characteristic betazoid capacity (telepathy). Intutions may vary, but this appears to be the wrong conclusion. As Pruss and Yancey point out, "all the goods that Hannah has—with the possible exception of the minor good overall health—Bridget has as well. … [H]er impairment, it turns out, has little to no effect on Bridget's well-being" (Pruss and Yancey 2019, 10).

One reason for thinking Bridget's impairment has no effect on her well-being is that, for Bridget, the exercise and development of telepathy fail to meet an important constraint on well-being: the anti-alienation (or resonance) constraint. Roughly speaking, the anti-alienation constraint is a necessary condition stating that for something to be basically good for a person, it must have a connection to that person's proattitudes or positive affect (Railton 1986; Rosati 1996; Dorsey 2017; Fanciullo 2025; Kelley 2025; Fortier 2025).

Well-being theorists who sympathize with kind-based eudaimonisms like Kraut's but also accept this anti-alienation constraint have developed hybrid views of well-being. William

Lauinger's *Desire Perfectionism* is a good example of this. Lauginer's theory combines traditional kind-based eudaimonism with a desire-satisfaction theory of well-being.

> Something (anything) is intrinsically prudentially beneficial for some (any) human if and only if, and because, (a) this thing is either a basic good or a state of affairs that instantiates a basic good for this human, where the basic goods are items such as knowledge, friendship, health, and accomplishment and where the basic goods are being conceived of as perfectionist goods and not as components of well-being, and (b) this human intrinsically desires this thing (or, if this human does not intrinsically desire this thing, then it is at least true that this thing is, for this person, an instance of a basic good that this human intrinsically desires). (Lauinger 2021, 245)

Lauinger's theory solves the problem. Given that Bridget has no desire to be telepathic, her impairment makes no difference to her well-being. However, he has also moved outside of the basic eudaimonic framework.

I now turn to self-fulfillment eudaimonism, which will provide a eudaimonic alternative for addressing Bridget's case.

1.2 Flourishing as the You You Are

Dan Haybron (forthcoming, 2023) has recently introduced a theory of well-being he calls Millian eudaimonism, named for J. S. Mill's views on individuality and self-expression in *On Liberty*. Haybron does not subscribe to Millian eudaimonism himself—he integrates Millian eudaimonism with felt-quality hedonism to produce what he calls a Millian hybrid theory, but one could reject the hedonic aspects of the theory and allow Millian eudaimonism to stand alone.

Millian eudaimonism may be understood in contrast to Kraut's developmentalism. First, it is subjective, or subject-

dependent, while Kraut's theory is objective, or subject-transcendent. Haybron defines subject dependence as follows:

> what's good for you must depend entirely on the particularities of what you are *like*, however idiosyncratic or atypical: it must depend wholly on what your wants, likes, values, hedonic or emotional propensities, or physical makeup are like. (forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.4)

He also defines subject-dependence in direct contrast with the kind-based approach and treats them as mutually exclusive categories:

> the constituents of an agent's well-being are ultimately determined wholly by the particulars of the individual's make-up *qua* individual (vs. *qua* group or class member). (2008, 156–57)

Given this distinction, we can divide eudaimonic theories into two groups: subject-transcendent or kind-based eudaimonisms, and subject-dependent, or what I am calling, self-fulfillment eudaimonisms.[2]

Millian eudaimonism also relies on a different nature-fulfillment ideal than Kraut's developmentalism. Haybron divides eudaimonism's nature-fulfillment ideal into two sub-ideals: capacity-fulfillment (or actualization) and goal-fulfillment (or success). (See Haybron, forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.3; 2023, 110–12; cf. Bradford 2021; Kauppinen 2025.) Developmentalism is capacity-fulfillment *par excellence*: I flourish or fare well when I develop and exercise my fundamental capacities. Millian eudaimonism relies on the goal-fulfillment ideal: I flourish or fare well by succeeding in the goals enatiled by or perhaps embedded in my nature.

Haybron elaborates the goal-fulfillment ideal as follows:

[2] This distinction comes from Haybron (2008) but the terminology comes from Hall and Tiberius (2015) and is later adopted by Haybron (forthcoming).

> We can understand goals quite broadly, as something we may not always recognize in prospect but may rather discover only in retrospect: one way to have something as a goal is to be prone to meet it with joy, even if it never occurred to you to want it. Put another way, if you wanted to instill certain goals, such as companionship, into an organism, you might give it desires for those things; but you could also give it the propensity to be made happy by them, or unhappy by their absence. In fact, given that desires are often formed in ignorance of what their fulfillment would be like, the organism's evaluative response tendencies—what makes it happy or unhappy, brings it pleasure or pain—might be the most reliable metric of what its most important goals are. People get all manner of weird ideas about what's worth pursuing, but the things that make them happy tend to be less subject to whimsy. (forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.3)

Millian eudaimonism applies this goal-fulfillment ideal at the individual level. This means that one flourishes only by succeeding in the goals that flow from one's individual nature or self. However, it is worth noting that the goal-fulfillment ideal can also operate at the kind-level.

For instance, Michael Hayes, who adopts a Thomistic version of eudaimonism, expresses the goal-fulfillment ideal when he emphasizes the role of "natural inclinations" or "natural appetites" in Aquinas's account of well-being.

> Following Cicero, Aquinas argues that the "natural inclinations" or "natural appetites" of humans incline us towards the constitutive components of human happiness [i.e., well-being]. The constitutive components of human happiness are grounded in our nature as human beings; certain things (or families of things) categorically "perfect" or "complete" these natural appetites. For example, humans—by their animal nature—

> have an intrinsic desire for health and its components. By their rational nature, humans have an intrinsic desire for knowledge. These goods "perfect" aspects of our human nature—the body and mind, respectively. And it is precisely for this reason that we are inclined towards them.

Let's now return to Bridget the betazoid. A Millian eudaimonist is able to make sense of the well-being parity between Bridget and Hannah. We intuitively assign the same level of well-being to Bridget and Hannah because of the similarity of their natures as individuals or selves. Moreover, we can imagine that similarities in their personalities lead to similar avenues for self-fulfillment, avenues indifferent to Bridget's impairment qua betazoid.

To round off my discussion of the various types of eudaimonism, I would like to draw attention to the eudaimonic theory Antti Kauppinen (2025) calls *Telic Perfectionism.* Kauppinen's theory relies on an interpretation of nature fulfillment that combines the capacity-fulfillment and goal-fulfillment ideals. He calls this "the telic interpretation of flourishing and unflourishing."

> Flourishing consists in successfully realizing the formal aims implicit in the functioning of our fundamental capacities to a sufficient degree. Unflourishing in some respect consists in frustrating a formal aim, or realizing it to an insufficient degree. (219)

Beyond this, Kauppinen affirms what he calls the subjective nature thesis,

> Our fundamental capacities in the sense relevant for well-being are those whose functioning defines who we are. In the adult human case, they include at least the practical and theoretical rationality and the capacity for valenced experience. (222)

Care must be taken when assessing this last element. In a footnote to the last quotation, Kauppinen tells us: "There may be other capacities that fundamentally define us as the *kind of subjects* we are, for example, there is a good case to be made for our capacity to relate to other subjects as subjects and not just as worldly objects" (222n6). Using the subject-dependent criterion given earlier, Kauppinen's account will be a version of self-fulfillment eudaimonism if and only if the capacities involved are specified and assessed at an individual level and not the kind level. The point may be put as follows: there is a difference between flourishing as a self and flourishing as yourself. Self-fulfillment eudaimonism assesses one's well-being with the latter standard. Self-fulfilment eudaimonism defines basic or final prudental goodness in terms of flourishing as the you you are.

2. Self-Fulfillment Eudaimonism and the Image of God

Having established what I hope is a sufficient picture of self-fulfillment eudaimonism, I move on to my suggestion for integrating it with Christian theism. Consider the following quote from Eleonore Stump: "On Christian doctrine, human beings are created by God with a nature, which is or includes an image of God" (2022, 121). If we add eudaimonism to this, then imaging God will be an important part or perhaps the whole of a person's flourishing. For example, now quoting from Stump again:

> On the metaphysics Aquinas affirms, that nature [i.e., human nature] is picked out as distinct from other created things by a species-specific potentiality, namely, the differentia in the definition of human beings, which is the capacity for reason. On this interpretation of Aquinas's account, actions in accordance with reason actualize the species-specific potentiality of human beings. By converting this species-specific potentiality of a human being into actuality, an agent's

> operation in accordance with reason increases the extent to which the agent has being as a human being; and so such operation also increases the extent to which the agent has perfection as a human being. Consequently, to the extent to which this capacity is actualized, the image of God is perfected in human beings. The perfection of this image and the perfect actualization of the species-specific potentiality in the nature of human beings is the complete happiness for human beings. (121–2)

On Stump's own theory of well-being (and on her interpretation of Aquinas), the species-specific potentiality is the capacity for loving union with God, and actualization of this capacity composes what she calls personal thriving—one of three conditions she thinks necessary for human flourishing. The other two are having one's heart's desire and having one's heart converge with one's thriving. Curiously, she calls the condition that results from meeting all three conditions having one's *true self*. While it would be fascinating to explore Stump's theory and its relationship to self-fulfillment eudaimonism, I will be moving in a different direction this morning.

Reflecting on the works of C. S. Lewis, Robert Garcia has identified what he calls Lewis's Mere Resonator Theory.

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> Each person has an essential capacity to image God in a specific way and no other creature has the capacity to image God in that way. (Garcia 2025)

In support of this reading, Garcia cites passages like the following from Lewis's *Problem of Pain*:

> Be sure that the ins and outs of your individuality are no mystery to [God]; and one day they will no longer be a mystery to you. The mould in which a key is made would be a strange thing, if you had never seen a key:

> and the key itself a strange thing if you had never seen a lock. Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions. For it is not humanity in the abstract that is to be saved, but you—you, the individual reader, John Stubbs or Janet Smith. … Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it—made for it stitch by stitch as a glove is made for a hand. (Lewis [1940] 2009, 96–97)

Garcia also cites a curious passage in Lewis's address titled *Membership*

> The very word *membership* is of Christian origin, but has been taken over by the world and emptied of all meaning. In any book on logic you may see the expression "members of a class." It must be most emphatically stated that the items or particulars included in a homogeneous class are almost the reverse of what St. Paul meant by *members*. By *members* … he meant what we should call *organs*, things essentially different from, and complementary to, one another: things differing not only in structure and function but also in dignity. … They are not interchangeable. Each person is almost a species in himself. … Its unity is a unity of unlikes, almost of incommensurables. (Lewis [1949] 2009, 163–65)

Throughout the address, Lewis applies his thinking not only to the Church (qua body of Christ) but to human personality generally.

Garcia is interested in Lewis's work to help support the following claim.

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> Each person is supremely and irreplaceably valuable (where each person's value is unique and each person's uniqueness is valuable).

While his goal is to ground irreplaceably supreme value in the image of God, my purpose is different. I would like to propose that Lewis's Mere Resonator Theory provides the foundation needed for integrating self-fulfillment eudaimonism with Christian theism. Specifically, it provides a meaningful way to identify not only our nature as humans with *the* image of God but also each person's nature with a unique image of God. While we may find some overlap between natures, each person will flourish just as much by fulfilling the peculiarities of their nature as they do by fulfilling the common elements. Moreover, returning to Haybron's definition of self-fulfillment eudaimonism, what is good for you will "depend entirely on the particularities of what you are *like*, however idiosyncratic or atypical" (forthcoming, ch. 3, sec. 4.4).

I'd like to close with a quote from George MacDonald, who likely inspired the thoughts from Lewis I shared earlier.

> Not only … has each man his individual relation to God, but each man has his peculiar relation to God. He is to God a peculiar being, made after his own fashion, and that of no one else; for when he is perfected he shall receive the new name which no one else can understand. Hence he can worship God as no man else can worship him—understand God as no man else can understand him. This or that man may understand God more, may understand God better than he, but no other man can understand God as he understands him. … As the fir-tree lifts up itself with a far different need from the need of the palm-tree, so does each man stand before God, and lift up a different humanity to the common Father. And for each God has a different response. With every man he has a secret—the secret

> of the new name. In every man there is a loneliness, an inner chamber of peculiar life into which God only can enter. … From this it follows that there is a chamber … in God himself, into which none can enter but the one, the individual, the peculiar man—out of which chamber that man has to bring revelation and strength for his brethren. This is that for which he was made—to reveal the secret things of the Father. (Macdonald 1867, 110–12)

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