Career Choice*

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“We must . . . fill out our span of life with activities.”
“Work is useful occupation with a purpose.”

[Kant, Lectures on Ethics]¹

I
In what follows I discuss career choice as a moral problem for individuals. As I treat the problem it belongs to the theory of individual responsibility, though I recognize that a full treatment of it would require contributions from the theory of justice for the basic institutions of society. My special interest is in cases of individual decision making about careers in which the values of self-realization and service to others are in competition with one another. I have in mind, for example, cases in which one’s natural gifts are such that one might undertake, on the one hand, a self-realizationist career in which, say, artistic self-development or intellectual interests are pursued for their own sake, or, on the other hand, a service career in, say, the distribution of health care or the administration of an international human-rights organization. It is not necessary for me to specify in detail the “contents” of envisaged careers. The important feature of the cases I have in mind is that one’s choice of a career appears prospectively to require one of these values (self-realization, service to others) to prevail over the other or to be pursued pretty much at the expense of the other.²

Common opinion treats career choice as a paradigm of a matter for individual decision. No one is required to have a career, and our society

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² I do not attempt a full analysis of the idea of self-realization in this article. The ordinary wide understanding of this notion is sufficient for the issues I discuss. Kant perhaps conveys this understanding when he speaks of “broadening and improving [one’s] fortunate natural gifts.” Kant thought of self-realizing as a duty (see Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, sec. 2). I do not discuss whether or not we deserve our “natural gifts.” We might have a duty to “broaden or improve” them whether or not we deserve them. Later in the essay I offer an interpretation of the idea of service to others.

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certainly does not guarantee that those who seek careers will have opportunities to pursue them. Those who resolve to seek a career are supposed to negotiate the problem of choice involved on the basis of their own best estimates of their long-term interests, capacities, and circumstances. They may ask for information about lines of work and their own aptitudes, but no one is to set directions for them or steer them into one field rather than another. Common opinion thus locates career choice in that area of Mill’s “region of liberty” in which we are thought to have “liberty of tastes and pursuits, of framing the plan of life to suit our own character.” It is a thoroughly self-regarding matter. The good society does not assign careers, or even jobs—except perhaps in short-term fashion in an emergency, such as war. Even advising another person to take up this rather than that career—anyhow, outside one’s own family—is to be avoided or kept to a minimum. All this perhaps evinces a certain respect for individuality: it seems natural to think that career choice is linked closely to the individual’s own development and expression of the self and thus to the self-realizationist component in our idea of the morally valuable human life. Self-realization appears to be the main moral value which is supposed to guide the thinking of those who wish to select and pursue careers.

Of course, common opinion allows that service to others may be taken into account in one’s thinking about a career. The lifelong service career of, say, the American social reformer Jane Addams is a legitimate option. But, as I understand the common opinion, such a career is only an option and, even then, only to be taken seriously when the projected service career is itself a self-realizationist career. Jane Addams once wrote that “the one test which the most authoritative and dramatic portrayal of the Day of Judgment offers, is the social test. The stern questions are not in regard to personal and family relations, but did ye visit the poor, the criminal, the sick, and did ye feed the hungry” (emphasis mine). But this appears to go against our ordinary opinion if Addams’s words are interpreted as proposing that career choice be guided by service to others over self-realization when the two conflict.

4. Cf. Mill’s references to Humboldt early in chap. 3 of On Liberty. Self-realization, construed as the “individuality of power and development,” is spoken of as having “intrinsic worth,” or “deserving . . . regard on its own account.”
6. I do not know that Jane Addams herself would have insisted that service to others should prevail over considerations of self-realization in individuals’ deliberations about careers. It appears that she thought that service to others is natural in a sense which implies that one who ignores it over time stifles the personality: “Nothing so deadens the sympathies and shrivels the power of enjoyment, as the persistent keeping away from the great opportunities for helpfulness and a continual ignoring of the starvation struggle which makes up the life of at least half the race” (Jane Addams, “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” Twenty Years at Hull-House [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1910], pp.
The aim of my discussion is not to recommend a specific career or even a general line of work to any nameable individual. The aim is rather to consider how a reasonably competent individual should think about his or her choice of a career and, in particular, how the values of self-realization and service to others should figure in decision making regarding careers. I will mention certain crude facts about today’s world which are deeply troubling and which are also relevant to career choice as a problem of morality for individuals. These facts put before those who are choosing careers in today’s world some hard questions about the moral standing of individual lives: What degree of importance should I attach to the individual life that is, in fact, my life? What degree of importance should I attach to the individual lives that are not, in fact, my life? If the lives of many other people are frustrated and stifled, what difference should that make to my life? In this article I shall explore, and then make an effort to support, a view that may seem extreme, namely, that in today’s world morality requires that service to others be put before self-realization in the matter of career choice.

II

What is a career? For the purposes of this discussion a career may be thought of as a long-term project for an individual life. One’s career may be “in” business, law, teaching, entertainment, professional philanthropy, or something else; whatever it is in, it typically involves work and way of life such that the former has implications for the makeup of the latter. A person may or may not “make money” or “earn a living” from a career, but a person who has a career may very well seem internally related to the work and way of life so that they become a part of his personal identity for practical purposes. A large psychological investment may be involved. One’s thoughts, hopes, aspirations, energy, and sense of worth may be wrapped up in and dominated by the materials and apparatus of one’s career, that is, by its goals, techniques, and standards, and by the conditions of its pursuit in one’s social environment. In a way that is familiar from life (for those who have careers) but difficult to analyze philosophically, one may be, in important part, one’s career. It may be a struggle at times not to reduce oneself to one’s career, or, perhaps, to resist being thus reduced by others.

A career usually imposes certain terms upon its pursuit. For example, it may require a certain specific location or type of location, a certain kind of geography or climate, a certain mix of uses of body and mind, or certain kinds of education and training. Such terms generally force some elements into and others out of a person’s way of life. Careers may not dictate all the elements of one’s way of life so that a career choice is

113–27, p. 116). It is worth adding that Addams was quite aware of the hazards of service to others, including do-goodism that misfires, inappropriate methods of aid, and unjustified paternalism. See “Charitable Effort” (chap. 2) in Democracy and Social Ethics.
the only serious life decision one makes; but careers certainly restrict and focus options in the many subparts of human lives, and it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of career choice among the major decisions persons can make. A large part of the practical answer to the Socratic question of “what kind of life one should live”? may be given in one’s choice of a career.

The central features of a career, for present purposes, are that it involves work which one anticipates doing and staying with over a significant period of time (many years, say), which one expects will regularly consume substantial portions of one’s time and energy, which one anticipates will affect one’s way of life in salient respects, and which one is prepared to be rather positively committed to (rather than, say, resentful of). As one takes up the question of what career one shall have, one thinks of it as calling for a decision about a multiyear project in one’s lifetime.

Persons who are able to take up the problem of career choice I will call “competent individuals.” These are persons who are positioned to self-realize and to contribute to the lives of others, and this implies many things about them. At a minimum they possess intelligence, knowledge, health, energy, talent, and imagination to a degree which is sufficient to support activities involving planning and following through, plus some capacities, skills, and abilities that enable them to contribute to the lives of others. They are also persons for whom future time is in some significant amount “available,” though this does not imply that only young people can be competent individuals. (More than one or even two careers may be possible in a lifetime.)

There is no intention on my part to restrict membership in the class of competent individuals. Even so we must recognize that many human beings are in fact not competent individuals: they are not positioned to realize themselves or to contribute to the lives of others. In some cases their incompetence is temporary and their place among competent individuals is retrievable by medical, social, or political action. In other cases their incompetence may be permanent. Not all human beings are able to take up the problem of career choice. We should note too that some people do not aspire to a career. They do not want to have one. Sometimes this is a matter of the aspiration not occurring in them; perhaps there is no pressure toward a career in family background or social environment, and the idea, as it were, does not cross the mind. In other cases the not-wanting may itself be the result of thought about one’s actual circumstances. The pursuit of a career may seem unrealistic or not worth the apparent trouble of preparation. In still other cases a decision not to pursue a career may rest on a point of principle: for example, one might choose to avoid “channeling” oneself into any relatively fixed combination of work and way of life.8

7. Plato, Gorgias 500c.
8. Marx claimed that one of the cruelest features of capitalist society is that it forces its members into narrow, repetitious modes of activity, and in that way blocks the realization
Should one have a career? Or should one at least aspire to a career? “Career,” as I use the term here, will not carry moral connotations which make the answers to such questions automatically yes. It is imaginable that a person might meander through life without a career and have a richer, more diverse, and more exciting existence than a person with a career. It is also imaginable that a person might pursue a career—a career in crime, say—and be a force for evil. In general, it is as far-fetched to claim a priori that careers per se are evil as it is to claim a priori that careers per se have positive moral value. But even though the idea of career by itself is empty of moral content, it remains that careers can be vehicles through which moral values are realized. After all, the time, energy, and resources one puts into a career (if one pursues one) over a large part of a lifetime can touch many lives, including one’s own, for good or ill. Careers are long-term projects through which, among other things, self-realization and service to others may be achieved.

Even for a competent individual, however, career choice can be a problem only in a society that is to some degree open in respect of opportunities. It need not be very open, but the choices available must be such as to require the weighting and ordering of the values of self-realization and service. Most (but not all) competent individuals in today’s world probably find themselves with enough in the way of opportunity to satisfy this condition, even when they are members of societies with unjust institutions, and even in some cases when they are victims of such institutions. A society’s degree of justice contributes to, though it does not by itself settle, the range of career opportunities available to individuals.9

In this discussion I must set aside the many questions raised by the fact that a society’s structural makeup can “affect” (block, encourage, thwart, promote) career options. The exclusion of these questions constitutes a large restriction of the topic. But for the moment I am concerned to approach career choice as a problem of individual morality. Its treatment as a problem in the theory of justice for the basic institutions of society may be taken up at another time.

III

There is, in fact, great personal risk for competent individuals in the matter of career choice. If the work at the center of one’s career goes

of the many talents and capacities to be found in any human being. For Marx, the ideal social circumstances for human beings would be those in which “nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes”; in those circumstances it would be possible for me “to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Karl Marx, The German Ideology, in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972], p. 124).

9. The more nearly just a society is, the more secure is individual liberty in it. But even if individual liberty is quite secure, a society may be beset by economic troubles, or technological failures, or natural disasters. These facts, clearly, can affect the range of opportunities for careers available to its members.
stale, or fails to sustain interest, or finally goes beyond one’s energies or abilities, the result can be a life lost in a very real sense. If in the midst of a career the usefulness or general purpose of one’s work comes to be in doubt, the result may be a demoralization that renders life “meaningless” or is threatening to self-respect. A career that goes wrong or becomes disappointing may cause regret, deaden energies, and shorten life.\textsuperscript{10} If one is artificially kept out of a career to which one aspires, or pushed out of a career one has underway, one may be outraged. If one trains elaborately for a career involving work one relishes, only to find no opportunities to pursue it, one may be frustrated or feel cheated.

But there are not only self-regarding risks in how the career-choice problem is resolved. As I mentioned above, one may through one’s career touch the lives of others for good or ill. There are certain crude facts about the human condition in today’s world which offend our sense of how life in the modern world ought to be and which it need not be either pretentious or arrogant for individuals to think they can affect (to some extent) through their careers.\textsuperscript{11} For example: (a) there are millions of people in today’s world who suffer destitution in some or many forms,\textsuperscript{12} (b) the levels of life affecting people’s opportunities for self-realization are grossly disparate in today’s world,\textsuperscript{13} (c) efforts to ameliorate the destitution and gross disparity in levels of life through charitable institutions and nation-state programs of “foreign aid” are meager and inadequate.\textsuperscript{14}

10. Arthur Miller’s play, \textit{The Death of a Salesman} (New York: Viking Press, 1949), makes these points vivid.

11. I do not suggest that the facts I now list are somehow “new” or “recent.” And, obviously, my list is not exhaustive of the facts about the human condition which offend our sense of how life in the modern world ought to be.

12. Destitution is extreme deprivation relative to basic human needs. I have in mind people whose lives are stifled through malnutrition, homelessness, or total lack of education. Destitution may be the result of natural or social factors, including political oppression.


14. “. . . The United States has provided more assistance than any other nation—$7.1 billion last year [1980]. . . . But increasingly the money is targeted to support security and political interests rather than to alleviate economic hardships . . . and it is not the poorest nations that receive the bulk of the aid.” In fact, “U.S. aid has been declining in recent years as a percentage of the nation’s wealth. . . . Congressional Budget Office figures show that by 1978, the share had declined to 0.23% of GNP and it has remained there since.” “Only Finland, Italy and Switzerland among the 17 industrial democracies gave less, and Japan’s share was equal to that of the United States. Norway and Sweden were at the top with a 0.90% share.” From an Associated Press report in the \textit{Cleveland Plain Dealer} (October 23, 1981).
It is neither strange nor implausible for an individual to consider such facts when deliberating about the choice of a career. Indeed, such facts may press themselves upon one to the extent that one supposes that one ought to pursue what we may call a service career, that is, a career whose point is to contribute to the amelioration of such facts, and thus to help others become positioned to develop their potential and, in general, realize themselves.

Given such facts about the circumstances of humankind in today's world, is a service career morally required? What of my own aspirations toward self-realization? Suppose I fit the description of the competent individual but estimate that the career which best facilitates self-realization in my own case (relative to my own estimate of my real interests, talents, and capacities) would not, if pursued directly, speak significantly, if at all, to the amelioration of such facts as those listed above. Am I then called upon morally to set aside my own self-realization in order to contribute to others' being positioned to realize themselves? If I were to sacrifice myself in this way and devote myself to service to others in whatever ways among the alternatives available to me seem to be the most effective, would I be meeting a moral requirement—or would I be going beyond what morality requires to do something that to some is admirable, but to others is simply extreme, foolish, or even in some sense wrong?

IV

At this point the exploration of the problem of career choice directs our attention to the question of the moral standing of individual lives. This is a difficult subject, and a variety of views seems possible. I consider only three views, so my discussion is hardly comprehensive. Still, they are important views, and they come naturally to mind in cases in which career choice involves a clash between one's aspirations for one's own self-realization and one's recognition of the need for service to others.

First, a common feature: all the views I discuss are forms of individualism. This is to say that they all centrally value individual lives, and they give great moral weight to individually defined aspirations and projects. These are views which speak in the vocabulary of the “inviolability,” the “irreducible significance,” and the “irreplaceable worth” of individual lives. But the views I have in mind begin to come apart

15. In Twenty Years at Hull-House (“Earliest Impressions,” pp. 1–22, p. 14), Jane Addams records that already at age eight her “mind was busy . . . with the old question eternally suggested by the inequalities of the human lot.”
16. They are also all antipaternalist in their recommendations for the political order.
17. Such views need not uncritically regard just any self-realizationist projects as legitimate. They may recognize other values, and certain qualifications on projects may be imposed. But this is a separate problem which these forms of individualism would address rather than treat as irrelevant, since in general they wish to honor rather than reject the claims of individual self-realization. See H. J. McCloskey, “Liberalism,” Philosophy 49 (1974): 26. See, too, the critique of liberalism in Vinit Haksar, Equality, Liberty, and Perfectionism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
on the question of how and to what extent human lives fit together. Some of our most basic moral attitudes are involved in this question. (a) According to one of them, human beings are, morally, in life together, and the key to understanding our form of moral life is the proper interpretation or reading of this notion of being-in-life-together. My life is bound up with our lives; together—ab initio—we form a community in which, as it may be put, fate is shared.\(^{18}\) (b) The force of a second basic attitude is given in the saying, “you have but one life to live.” The theme here is that human beings are, morally, separate persons and “there are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives.”\(^{19}\) I may arrange with (some) others so that my life becomes bound up with their lives. We may make communities through agreements. But ab initio there is no community at all—only separate individual lives of “irreducible significance.”\(^{20}\)

Entire moral conceptions may be built upon such basic attitudes. Even though both attitudes seem to me similarly deep and equally fixed in ordinary thinking, moral conceptions may be developed which emphasize one of them at the expense of the other, or which make an effort to accommodate both of them in some way. In what follows I call the moral conception which emphasizes the first of them “shared-fate individualism” and the conception which emphasizes the second of them “separate-life individualism.” Insofar as different interpretations of each conception may be possible, the root attitudes seem like suggestive themes on which variations may be played. In any case these basic attitudes are very powerful in their hold on us, even in circumstances in which they come to clash. It is doubtful, I believe, that anyone raised in a form of life like ours, in which both attitudes are emphasized, could be brought to jettison either of them effectively. Accordingly, we may suppose that a moral conception might be developed which starts from one of these basic attitudes and then reaches out to incorporate the other in some way. A conception I call “liberal individualism” proposes to do this: it attempts to accommodate both convictions by arranging them in a certain way so that in certain circumstances the separate-life theme prevails, but in other circumstances the shared-fate theme receives some emphasis as well.

Now, my discussion does not include a comprehensive review of the many different implications of these three conceptions (shared-fate, separate-life, and liberal individualism) for individuals and the political order. I stay with the problem of career choice and illustrate how these conceptions

\(^{18}\) The shared-fate theme is central to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971), though it is not always clear to me how, for Rawls, it is to be interpreted, as I will indicate later.


\(^{20}\) Cf. this passage from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*: “There are particular rights over particular things held by particular persons, and particular rights to reach agreements with others, if you and they together can acquire the means of reaching an agreement. . . . No rights exist in conflict with this substructure of particular rights” (p. 238).
differ in what they suggest for individuals (not for the state) regarding the situation in which the values of self-realization and service to others clash. The interest of doing so is that these forms of individualism yield contrasting accounts of the moral standing of one's own life, relative to the lives of others, in different circumstances. There are three main cases to characterize.

Consider the easiest case first. This is the case in which the human situation in general is such that all human beings are adequately positioned to undertake individually defined self-realizationist projects. This is not, of course, the actual situation, but were it to become so there would be no reason for the recommendations of the three forms of individualism not to coincide: one's deliberations about the selection of a career in such a situation need be guided only by the value of self-realization. In this case destitution and gross disparity in levels of life are not present (perhaps they have been overcome), and, in general, the factors which press us to take seriously the idea that a career of service to others should be chosen over a career of self-realization (when the two conflict) are absent. This is a fully intelligible situation, but it is (ex hypothesi) one in which there is no serious application for concepts which might figure in appeals for the use of one's career time, energy, and resources in behalf of others, such as the concepts of destitution and gross disparity in levels of life.

The second case is that in which (a) not all persons are adequately positioned to realize themselves, but (b) there exists an institutional scheme operating reasonably effectively toward the end of positioning all persons to do so. This is essentially the manner of operation aspired to (in principle) by liberal-welfare nation-states relative to their citizens. But if we think in larger terms and recognize all human beings (including noncitizens) as "equal moral persons," then this would be the situation in which a "world community" is equipped with reasonably effective services speaking to problems of unmet basic need for the entire population of Earth. There may of course be problems of poverty in such a community; a world community may be just as riddled with pockets of destitution and enclaves of affluence as is today's world. But the point is that (ex hypothesi) a set of institutions is in place to speak to these problems and amelioration is gradually taking place. In this community those with means of life above some level may be legally required to maintain the scheme of services—through income and inheritance taxes, say—but such a requirement need not extend to our careers. That is, the desired amelioration is occurring at a rate such that our work and ways of life need not be legally assigned to us.


22. Still broader communities are imaginable, I suppose, depending on what one chooses to include under the concept of "equal moral person" and on what one thinks about creatures (if any) that are found one day in non-Earth locations.
In this second case the three moral conceptions we are considering show certain differences in what they recommend for individuals taking up the problem of career choice, and these differences begin to suggest different views of the moral standing of individual lives. For example, in the circumstances of the second case, separate-life individualism imposes no moral requirement on individuals to choose careers with anything other than self-realization in mind. (It also objects to the world community’s legally requiring support [through taxation] for the redistributive program.) It allows the individual to elect to pursue a service career (as it allows one to support private welfare schemes voluntarily). The point is not that separate-life individualism estimates that the amelioration scheme operating in the world community is adequate to the task of putting all members of the community in a position to realize themselves. It is rather that this form of individualism recognizes no community membership among persons prior to or independent of any bonds individuals create among themselves by agreement or consent. Morally, again, our lives are separate: my life is mine to lead; and as I deliberate about careers I am not already morally constrained by any responsibility for enabling others to realize themselves.23

The conceptions of shared-fate and liberal individualism make a different response to this second case. Under the pressure of the basic shared-fate attitude, these views accept the requirement of support (in the form of taxation) for the worldwide scheme of services. Such a scheme merely reflects what our common membership in a moral community implies when, for example, destitution and gross disparity in levels of life prevent many members of the community from being equipped to realize themselves. Indeed, the point of this scheme, under the shared-fate conviction, is precisely “to secure just background conditions against which the actions of individuals . . . take place,”24 for it is only within such a structure that “individuals . . . are at liberty to advance their

23. In a discussion of abortion, Judith Jarvis Thomson writes that “you have your own life to lead” (p. 20) and that “surely we do not have any . . . ‘special responsibility’ for a person unless we have assumed it, explicitly or implicitly” (p. 21). Also, “. . . nobody is morally required to make large sacrifices, of health, of all other interests and concerns, of all other duties and commitments, for nine years, or even for nine months, in order to keep another person alive” (pp. 17–18); and “. . . it is not morally required of anyone that he give long stretches of his life—nine years or nine months—to sustaining the life of a person who has no special right . . . to demand it” (p. 19). In “A Defense of Abortion,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 1 (1971): 47–66, reprinted in The Rights and Wrongs of Abortion, ed. M. Cohen, T. Nagel, and T. Scanlon (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 3–22 (page references to the reprint). My sketch of separate-life individualism applies the point that large sacrifices are not morally required to the problem of career choice; I do not know that Thomson would agree with this application of the point.

aims.” Without the background scheme, carefully “regulated and corrected,” “the social process will cease to be just, however free and fair particular transactions may look when viewed by themselves” (emphasis mine).

Accordingly, it is natural to suggest that these conceptions find the morally recommended course to be “self-realization cum service to others.” That is, given that there exists an appropriate institutional scheme, individuals are free to put first the claims of self-realization in their own case provided they then pursue their careers in such a way as to help others less well placed to realize themselves.

This way of thinking about career choice seems familiar. The common opinion mentioned at the beginning probably admires this balance of the values of self-realization and service to others even if it does not require it. In any case the formula “self-realization cum service to others” is typically not onerous. Most of the aspirations toward self-realization that people pursue through careers (such as an artistic self-development, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, the development of certain mental or physical powers) permit a service component of some sort. (One may be able at least to teach the thing, or about the thing, that one aspires to or is interested in, to audiences whose lives will be “enriched” thereby.) Nevertheless, in contrast to separate-life individualism, career choice is modestly constrained by service on these conceptions, even though the call for service is posterior to decisions based on self-realization.

In the third case I will touch on, the circumstances of the human condition are more familiar and more troubling. As before, (a) not all persons are in a position to realize themselves, but also (b) there exists no single general institutional scheme, or even collection of smaller schemes, operating toward that end. This is an important case, and it is hardly unreal. It is in fact the characterization which best fits today's world, with its millions of destitute people, its gross disparity in levels of life, and its meager efforts at relief across national boundaries. It is also the case in which the three moral conceptions in question yield three different recommendations for individuals taking up the problem of career choice. This variety is philosophically interesting for its display of different views about the moral standing of individual lives.

Separate-life individualism stays with its same recommendation. My individual life is separate from that of others; it is mine to lead; and I am not—even in these circumstances—under any moral requirement to

25. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 566. Cf. p. 290: “What men want is meaningful work in free association with others, these associations regulating their relations to one another within a framework of just institutions.”

26. Rawls, “The Basic Structure as Subject,” p. 160. Cf. the expansion in Goldman and Kim, eds., p. 53. The relevant contrasting claim is made by Nozick, p. 159: “The system of entitlements is defensible when constituted by the individual aims of individual transactions. No overarching aim is needed, no distributional pattern is required.”
put service to others before self-realization in my choice of a career. I may elect (for whatever reasons) to pursue a service career, or to combine a self-realizationist career with service to others; but I am not required to do either. Now, the moral teaching here is that as I make choices involving significant portions of my life, my life itself is to be thought of as having noncomparative worth. The teaching is not (necessarily) that of an egoism which claims that my life has standing "above" the lives of others, or is somehow "worth more" than the lives of others. It is rather that my life is prized in a way which makes it immune to challenges based upon comparisons with existing lives which are frustrated or stifled (or, for that matter, with lives which are rich and exciting). The fact that others cannot realize themselves does not entail any sacrifice on my part of the pursuit of self-realization. And, of course, my life is not the only life which has this noncomparative worth. All individual lives have worth of this sort. But, again, individual lives are separate, and the standing of one is not affected by facts about the others.

At the other extreme, shared-fate individualism directly reflects, in the circumstances of this third case, the attitude that we are "in life together." The notion that all human beings are equal members of a moral community, and that their lives are bound up together, is reflected in this case in the recommendation that deliberations about careers are to be seriously constrained by the value of service to others. Morality requires, in these circumstances, a service career. If an individual can find some measure of fulfillment of self-realizationist aspirations in his or her service career, that is to be welcomed. But in these unfortunate circumstances service comes first—and stays first—until the conditions of self-realization are satisfied for all equal moral persons. Our common membership in the moral community requires whatever sacrifices of the competent individual's time, energy, and resources may be needed to put all members in a position to realize themselves.27

What does shared-fate individualism thus teach about the moral standing of individual lives? My thought is that it need not be interpreted as teaching either a simple altruistic reversal of egoism which finds others' lives "higher" or "worth more" than one's own life, or a simple noncomparative valuing of "community" which places the collection of individual lives somehow "above" the individual lives themselves. What shared-fate individualism does is to impose a condition of legitimacy upon the individual's pursuit of self-realization, namely, that such pursuit is acceptable only when all members of the moral community can realize themselves. This is no denial of the value of individual lives. It is rather the recognition that in certain circumstances those rankings or valuations of individual

27. Cf. Rawls's remark in A Theory of Justice: "It is only when social conditions do not allow the effective establishment of the basic equal liberties that one can acknowledge their restriction. The denial of equal liberty can be accepted only if it is necessary to enhance the quality of civilization so that in due course the equal freedoms can be enjoyed by all" (p. 542).
lives which give individuals moral carte blanche to realize themselves "no matter what" are moral luxuries of a sort. Even though I have but one life to lead, it does not follow that it is mine (in some private-ownership sense) to do with as I please. From the shared-fate perspective, all individual lives are so important that I cannot plead an entitlement to my life that exempts me from joining in the task of securing the conditions of self-realization for all. Perhaps there are some circumstances in which we can afford the luxury of "self-realization no matter what." But to follow that guide in the circumstances envisaged would be to deny the value of many—perhaps most—individual lives.

Liberal individualism stays with the same recommendation that it makes in the second case. The pressure of the shared-fate attitude is felt to the extent that self-realization is to be accompanied by service. But the pressure does not carry beyond this point. We are not morally required to sacrifice self-realization to the cause of service to others—though here too, as in the case of separate-life individualism, such a sacrifice is permitted.

What should we understand to be the teaching of liberal individualism about the moral standing of individual lives? The answer is not immediately clear to me. There is a look of uneasy compromise about liberal individualism. It certainly recognizes the hold on us of both the notion that human beings are "in life together" and the notion that "one has but one life to lead," and it accommodates these two convictions so that the latter prevails unqualified in the first case we considered and then becomes qualified by the former (so that self-realizationist careers must be accompanied by service to others) in the second and third cases. This suggests, I think, that for liberal individualism the notion that "one has but one life to lead" is ultimately the more important of the two basic convictions that concern us. But how such a claim is to be supported is not plain. In particular, why the liberal individualist stays with the recommendation "self-realization cum service to others" as we move from the second case to the third is unclear.

If the circumstances of humankind in today's world are those of the third case characterized above, then the three broad perspectives I distinguished yield different guidelines for the deliberations of individuals about career choice. (a) Separate-life individualism teaches a straightforward self-realizationist ethic in connection with career choice in these (or any) circumstances. One may, of course, pursue a service career if that appears to be the most efficient way of fulfilling one's aspirations for self-realization. Or one may pursue a service career rather than a self-realizing career for special reasons, such as the pressure of compassion or family tradition. But morality does not require a service career, even in today's world. (b) Shared-fate individualism teaches a straightforward service ethic, though it does not begrudge one the achievement of self-realization if one's service career should happen (in the fortunate case) to provide it. This
perspective puts one in a community with others in which equal membership is taken so seriously that when it fails to obtain then all members who can contribute to its obtaining must do so. There is, on this view, a legitimacy condition imposed upon the pursuit of self-realization in my own case, namely, that all members of the moral community be in a position to realize themselves. (c) Liberal individualism attempts to occupy a middle ground of sorts: in the circumstances of today's world it "mixes" the ethics of self-realization and service so that individuals are to put their self-realizationist aspirations first in their thinking about careers, but then see to it that they implement their careers in ways that are of at least some service to others.

At this point the natural question is, Which (if any) of these three perspectives is to be generally recommended, and why? Now, I am not able to respond to this question in a way that seems fully adequate, even to me. I am inclined to think—against what I take to be the common opinion—that morality requires the shared-fate perspective in the matter of career choice in today's world. But there are difficulties in making such an assertion with confidence. In this section I make certain observations that are relevant to the problem of selecting among these perspectives but which also indicate some of what makes the selection problem so difficult.

1. In the first place, I believe that the serious alternatives in the problem of selection are those of liberal individualism and shared-fate individualism. When we keep the circumstances of today's world in mind, separate-life individualism too easily permits callousness. Perhaps the account I have given is already enough to suggest how this is so. Separate-life individualism is of course not an unintelligible view, and it might have behind it certain claims about persons' rights that are theoretically interesting in themselves and for what they suggest for the assignment of powers to the state. But when the separate-life perspective is examined for what it recommends for individual responsibility (not for the powers of the state), its net effect is a claim of lack of connection among human lives that, in principle, allows the individual an extraordinary indifference toward others. This perspective is certainly not itself a view that fosters in persons the forms of moral thought and feeling in which the good of others is a serious matter.28 My own thought is that no person raised in the form of moral life I am concerned with, in which both the basic attitudes I mentioned earlier are central, could in clear conscience maintain that, morally, relief for life's victims in today's world is at the whim of whatever "special reasons" (if any!) competent individuals may have. We think, rather, that such relief is a moral burden which falls upon members

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28. Rawls has remarked that the "reasonableness" of moral conceptions is "settled by their content: that is, by the kind of society their principles direct us to strive for, and by the kind of person they encourage us to be" (in "The Independence of Moral Theory," Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 48 [1974–75]: 5–22, p. 15).
of the moral community who are competent to discharge it. A view which glosses our situation in a way that such relief is not a moral burden at all will seem, at best, sophistical.

2. But to reject separate-life individualism is hardly to settle the selection problem posed by the alternatives of liberal versus shared-fate individualism. Neither of these perspectives glosses away the moral burden for competent individuals raised by the facts of destitution and gross disparity in levels of life in today's world. But the choice between them involves a dilemma.

On the one side, if we suppose that morality requires that the shared-fate perspective guide career choice in today's world, and thus that we are to put service to others before self-realization in our own case, this makes us risk our lives in a way that may be too much for us, or many of us, to bear. That is, acceptance of the shared-fate perspective risks making "excessive demands on human nature." One can, after all, imagine the case in which the person who pursues the service career that is morally required incurs great costs in the form of the frustration of aspirations linked to self-realization. This may not happen, of course. One can also imagine the case in which one undertakes a service career involving the use of talents and capacities other than those one would have developed in a self-realizationist career, and, after a time, one experiences a certain interest and satisfaction in one's work, and no real regret over self-realization forgone. One may become "caught up" in one's service career. Or one may not. In advance, it seems, one cannot calculate how these matters will turn out, and the risk of personal frustration of a most important kind is built into the acceptance of the shared-fate perspective for career choice.

On the other side, if one accepts liberal individualism, then an important risk of another kind arises. For in this case it is not at all clear that the job of making self-realization available to all members of the moral community could ever really get done. The magnitude of the problems of destitution and gross disparity in levels of life may very well require, as it were, a "crash program"—at least a concerted effort—by competent individuals over a generation or more. It may well be that, in relation to the aim of achieving effective equal membership throughout the moral community, liberal individualism is not demanding enough. (Indeed, it hardly seems demanding at all.) Again, I do not see how, in

30. It has been suggested to me that health may require that one be caught up in one's work to some extent.
31. Shared-fate individualism views the period covered by the crash program in affirmative-action terms, i.e., as a transitional period in which a sacrifice is demanded in order that we may reach a point at which effective equal membership in the moral community is realized.
advance, an individual can estimate with any confidence the impact of his career on this prospect. The acceptance of the liberal perspective for career choice thus risks leaving the problems of destitution and gross disparity in levels of life unaddressed or merely half-addressed.

3. Consider further the choice between liberal individualism and shared-fate individualism. Suppose (as I believe) that morality requires the shared-fate perspective as a guide for individuals choosing and pursuing careers in today’s world. In that case we worry that morality imposes demands upon us that, if not impossible, may still be excessive. For it makes us risk the great unhappiness of frustrated self-realization. But this notion of “possibly excessive demands” is itself very problematic. A demand that is excessive for one person may not be for another; the standards of what is “excessive” may in some contexts be too lenient and in other contexts too stringent; something may be an excessive demand upon individuals in one set of circumstances, but still be required by morality in another set of circumstances. In the matter of career choice we may grant that the demand that service prevail over self-realization would be excessive when all members of society are more or less well placed to realize themselves, or (perhaps) when an institutional scheme is in place and operating reasonably effectively toward that end. But it is not at all clear to me that that demand is excessive when relatively few are able to realize themselves, relatively many suffer destitution in some or many of its desperate forms, and no effective general ameliorating scheme is in place at all. It is not implausible to think that morality may, in extreme situations, make demands upon persons that would be excessive in nonextreme circumstances. If this is so, then in adopting the liberal-individualist perspective, and thus choosing a career under the guide “self-realize cum service to others,” we may in effect be settling for a form of deliberating about career choice that is less stringent than the form we ought to adopt in the extreme circumstances of today’s world. We end up resolving to self-realize (and hoping to serve) rather than resolving to serve (and hoping to self-realize). To do this is perhaps not flat-out

32. In *Utilitarianism* (chap. 5), John Stuart Mill wrote: “It is part of the notion of duty in every one of its forms that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfill it.” We might ask, If morality requires the shared-fate perspective, must the state enforce the requirement? Not necessarily. It might be unwise or impractical for the state to enforce such a requirement. But that does not prevent its being a requirement of morality for individuals. There are other sources of compulsion, including conscience and integrity. Cf. Brian Barry's remark: “. . . We can agree that it should not be legally required to give blood or contribute to the common good without agreeing that people should not feel bad about failing to do so” (in “And Who Is My Neighbor?” review of *Right and Wrong*, by Charles Fried, *Yale Law Journal* 88 [1979]: 629–58, p. 655). For a discussion of the difficulties in implementing the idea that persons' talents should be “pooled,” i.e., treated as part of a common fund in which all share equally, see Anthony T. Kronman, “Talent Pooling,” in *Nomos XXIII: Human Rights*, ed. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York: New York University Press, 1981), pp. 58–79.
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immoral. But it may not be the moral thing to do either. It may be, in the end, a compromise with morality—a settling for what is, at best, “the easy way out.”

VI

The discussion above is incomplete in many ways. Several objections come to mind. I close with a brief response to only the following two objections. First, it might be objected that I have not really proved that morality requires the shared-fate perspective, and that insofar as this is so the claim that the familiar liberal-individualist perspective on career choice is a “compromise with morality” is premature. And second, it might be objected that the view I wish to recommend—namely, career choice under the shared-fate perspective, whereby we are to put service to others before self-realization—is simply outrageous. Surely morality does not require, or even urge, that we risk sacrificing our lives for others.

33. At the risk of controversy, let me offer a tentative note about the bearing of general moral theories on the problem of selecting among the perspectives I have distinguished. It might seem that if one were, say, a convinced utilitarian or libertarian, or perhaps a Kantian or Marxist, then one could employ one’s general theory as an independent argument favoring one of the perspectives over the others. I find, however, that the theories I just mentioned seem either indeterminate or question begging regarding the selection problem. (a) Utilitarianism, for example, is indeterminate in the sense that, if one cannot make plausible estimates about the general frustration or satisfaction attending a service career or self-realizationist career, or about the service that one’s self-realizationist career would provide, then it is not clear how the appeal to utility can help individuals select among the perspectives in question. It may also be that utilitarianism fails to recognize the morally relevant way in which one’s projects (including one’s career) help constitute one’s personal identity for practical purposes and thus brings to the career-choice problem a view of moral agency that is inadequate from the outset. (Cf. Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in Utilitarianism, For and Against, ed. J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams [London: Cambridge University Press, 1973], pp. 77–150, esp. sec. 5, “Integrity,” and “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in The Identities of Persons, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976]). (b) The libertarian and Marxist general theories seem question begging on the selection problem insofar as they (as commonly understood) assume the priority of one of the basic attitudes I mentioned (the shared-fate attitude for the Marxist, the separate-life attitude for the libertarian) over the other, and thus provide no independent argument for selecting among the perspectives. (c) The Kantian texts (as I understand them) appear to regard both self-realization and service to others as duties but not to choose between them or show how to choose between them when they conflict.

34. Sidgwick appears to suggest that such a sacrifice would be irrational: “... The distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and ... consequently I am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the existence of other individuals. ... Even if a man admits the self-evidence of the principle of Rational Benevolence, he may still hold that his own happiness is an end which it is irrational for him to sacrifice to any other ...” (The Methods of Ethics, 7th ed. [1907; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1966], p. 498). This passage perhaps suggests support for what I am calling liberal individualism. But how it is to be argued that one should regard one’s happiness as “an end
occasional investments of time and energy, et cetera. But the view I favor turns the “supererogatory” into “duty,” and that is unacceptably extreme.\(^{35}\) One would not, and should not, advise one’s son, daughter, or close friend—someone one cares about—to put service over self-realization in deliberations about career. And if a view is such that one would not and should not put it into moral advice to one’s child or close friend, then it cannot be right.

My response to the first of these objections is to grant its point, but then to suggest that the view I favor is anyhow not at a striking disadvantage in respect of “proof” relative to the other views I have sketched. I certainly have not “derived” the claim that the shared-fate perspective is morality’s guide to career choice in today’s world from prior propositions which “everyone agrees with” or from principles which are open to independent justification. But I do not see that a derivation of either of those sorts is available for separate-life or liberal individualism either. Somehow one must determine how one values individual lives, and this determination will be reflected in many of one’s beliefs about the course of individual responsibility in different circumstances. The great interest of the career-choice problem is that it isolates the hard question, Am I to be in life for myself primarily, or for others primarily? and then presses it upon us in a sharp fashion by directing our attention to the troubling facts of the human condition today.

There are of course different strategies for expressing, if not “proving,” the shared-fate way of answering the hard question. For example, one might express the shared-fate answer by first recognizing a duty correlative to the rights of people generally to subsistence or to well-being,\(^ {36}\) and then construing those rights as so important that they prevail over the rights of individuals to pursue self-realization when the two sets of rights conflict. Alternatively, one might express this answer via a theoretical construction whereby, say, hypothetical, specially credentialed rational agents in a morally privileged choosing position select the shared-fate perspective to govern career choice for (real) individuals.\(^ {37}\) But these

which it is irrational for one to sacrifice to any other” is unclear to me. The fact that “the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental” does not by itself yield that claim.


\(^{37}\) A reference to the Rawlsian form of contractualism. But I do not know how far Rawls would agree with my endorsement of the shared-fate perspective for career choice. In general, Rawls views the “choice of principles for individuals” as posterior to the selection of principles for institutions (A Theory of Justice, p. 334). This means, I think, that the
strategies, again, do not prove the answer I favor; they only express it in ways of greater or less theoretical interest.

Regarding the second objection, I must say that I have no neat set of criteria indicating when a course of action goes “beyond the call of duty.” Nevertheless, in the form of moral life I am investigating, when it is considered apart from what it requires or permits in different sets of circumstances, there is as much pressure behind the shared-fate orientation as there is behind the separate-life orientation. When one asks the hard question formulated above with the circumstances of today's world in mind, I do not see that it could be clearly wrong, or especially “heroic,” to answer, “I must, in these circumstances, be in life for others primarily.” A person who answers in this way of course reflects a moral sensibility which is significantly different from that of a person who answers in the separate-life or liberal manner. But if, under the pressure of attention to the crude facts about the human condition, the main elements in our form of moral life become so arranged that the shared-fate attitude dominates the person, I cannot see that this is a mistaken, extreme, sentimental, or otherwise weird result. The elements within our form of moral life that support the shared-fate orientation are as familiar as those that support the other kinds of orientation, and the risks involved in not following the shared-fate view are obviously as serious as those involved in not following the other views.

These remarks perhaps already convey my response to the last part of the second objection I mentioned. Of course it would be difficult to advise one’s son, daughter, or close friend that morality requires, in today's world, that one make the choice of a career under the shared-fate perspective. One does not propose lightly that one's child or friend incur the risk of frustrated self-realization. But today's world is nevertheless what it is: our circumstances are those in which the human condition is needlessly riddled with destitution, gross disparity in levels of life, and meager efforts at relief; and these circumstances could, through our

framework provided by the basic structure of society affects what is to count as "excessive risk or loss" to individuals. But what are the principles for individuals when no general basic structure is operating (but one could be operating) to ameliorate the life-prospects of the worst-off—as is the situation for individuals in the “world community” today? In that case the passage from Rawls's text which I quoted in n. 27 above seems at least to suggest what I am calling the shared-fate perspective.

38. A moral-psychological account of this matter might emphasize what could be called “the problem of living with oneself.” In An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals Hume writes that a “requisite to happiness” is one's ability to make “a satisfactory review of one's conduct” (sec. 9, pt. 2). W. D. Falk speaks of our "stake in the kind of self-preservation which requires that one should be able to bear before oneself the survey of one's own actions" ("Morality, Self, and Others," in Morality and the Language of Conduct, ed. Hector-Neri Castaneda and George Nakhnikian [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963], pp. 25–67, pp. 63–64). Some might find the human condition in today's world to be such that they could not bear to put their own self-realization before relief for the destitution of others. It would seem too much like cheating.
efforts, be changed for the better. I do not see that our form of moral life teaches that we are to ignore these circumstances, or be indifferent to them, or pretend that they are other than what they are, in the context of career choice. And these circumstances are those in which the shared-fate advice is plausible and fitting. It is not the advice that is extreme, but rather our circumstances that are unfortunate. One might say that the other forms of advice seem to be for other circumstances.