

**Authoritarian Tennis Parents:
Are Their Children Really Any Worse Off?**

The latest story to make headlines about a tennis child prodigy is almost unbelievable. To be sure, there have been a long line of players labeled as the “next great champion” before they entered puberty. The accuracy of these predictions has, of course, been mixed. Tracy Austin *did* become a lasting champion. Andrea Jaeger (and countless others you’ve never heard of) did not. Child prodigies, by definition, are identified at an early age. But the latest case of Jan Silva has even Tracy Austin shaking her head in disbelief.

Here are the quick details about Jan, who was born in November, 2001. He showed such aptitude as a—well—toddler that he was attracting media attention by the age of three. At the ripe old age of *four*, his parents quit their jobs and moved the whole family (Jan has two siblings) from Sacramento to France so that Jan could attend the prestigious Mouratoglou Tennis Academy. The Academy provides Jan with a cadre of coaches and physio advisors; and his scholarship to the Academy covers the family’s living expenses—reportedly to the tune of \$140,000 a year. The Academy’s founder, Patrick Mouratoglou, estimates that, all told, he’ll probably invest 2 to 3 million dollars in Jan’s career. If you think your own involvement in competitive sports as a youth gave you an understanding of *pressure*, you may want to think again.

To be fair, the Silva family seems like a well-adjusted group. I don’t think you’ll see Jan as a teenager having to issue restraining orders against aggressively domineering parents. (Think Mary Pierce and Jelena Dokic). Still, there is a sense in which we might

wonder if Jan's future—even if it turns out fine—has been unduly “mapped out” for him. Even though Jan (and presumably most other tennis prodigies) enjoys playing tennis, does someone in his circumstances really have much of a psychologically viable *choice* whether to continue down the path he is on?

If you have any uneasiness about Jan's situation, let me ask you this question: What exactly is wrong with mapping out a child's future? Perhaps your answer will be that it just seems intuitively obvious that a person's well-being would be harmed in the long run if he were not allowed to make autonomous decisions about his own future. But is that really the case? When so-called “tennis parents” channel their children's energies into an exacting tennis regimen from a very early age, does this actually undermine a child's well-being in any way?

To answer such a question definitively, we will need to examine the general issue of what makes anyone's life “go well” for him or her. Philosophers have a long history of debating this very question. True to form, they have frequently disagreed as to how we should measure the quality of a person's life. Three main perspectives on well-being have developed over time, and there are insights to be gained from each of them. In what follows, we will explore what is correct and incorrect about these classic theories of human well-being:

- (1) Perfectionist theories
- (2) Mental-state theories
- (3) Desire-satisfaction theories

And when we finally see the truth about what makes for a “good life”, we will find—somewhat surprisingly—that tennis parents might not actually deserve the tarnished reputation they’re often given.

Perfectionist Theories

(If only he were more like Rod Laver!)

The first philosopher to provide a comprehensive theory of what it means to lead a “good life” was Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE). Aristotle started with the assumption that any creature will flourish when it performs those functions for which it is uniquely equipped. For example, a beaver will thrive when it is cutting down trees with its teeth and building dams. It won’t thrive if forced to graze in open fields like a gazelle. So, what activities are humans uniquely designed to pursue? Aristotle remarks that humans are unique within the animal kingdom in their ability to *reason*. More specifically, they are able to use reason to navigate between behavioral extremes and achieve the kind of “balance” of life which Aristotle considers virtuous. For example, humans can recognize the opposite extremes of cowardice and foolhardiness; and they can chart a middle course of prudence. When a person therefore uses reason to achieve a constant and proper balance between opposing extremes, he or she achieves a “good life.”

Aristotle’s theory is *perfectionist* in character in the sense that it presents a specified ideal for humans. The goodness or value of a person’s life then becomes a measure of the extent to which his or her life exemplifies the specified ideal. This approach is

analogous to measuring tennis players on the basis of how they stack up against “the perfect player.” So, we take Rod Laver, who could play every shot in the book and could dominate opponents on every surface. And we judge how good a given tennis player is by measuring the extent to which he or she approximates the total skill-level of Rod Laver.

I think the perfectionist approach to human well-being is correct in its basic insight. However, the key question is: *Which* ideal really does constitute the height of human flourishing? Aristotle’s answer to this question is decidedly flawed. His starting point is that a creature’s *uniqueness* allows us to identify how that creature will maximally flourish. But this assumption seems just plain false. Whether some *other* creature does or does not have the faculty of reason is surely irrelevant to whether *our own* flourishing is best achieved by developing our faculty of reason. Further, some unique human attributes seem clearly to *undermine* our well-being. If we humans have, for instance, a unique capacity to engage in self-destructive behavior as a way of making others feel guilty for not returning our romantic feelings, surely we will not want to conclude that we will genuinely flourish only if we develop this capacity. In the end, then, Aristotle’s uniqueness criterion does not provide a proper way of determining what makes us flourish.

As we look for a better criterion, we will not want to identify anything too specific. Given the wide range of human personalities, it would be far-fetched to think that humans flourish only when they are as free with their emotions as John McEnroe or as self-controlled as Pete Sampras. People have different gifts and talents, and a pattern of

activities that brings happiness to one person may not lead to happiness for another person.

There is, though, a general feature about humans that I think holds the key to every person's well-being. Humans are very much *relational* creatures. We need love from infancy; and we crave human touch and fellowship. Indeed, a person who is continually left in complete isolation from others will literally go insane. Consider also how trips to the therapist's office seem inevitably to stem from some *relationship*—with family, friends, or one's wider community—which is unhealthy. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a case where a person would be less than joyful if absolutely all the relationships in her life were flourishing wonderfully. So, it seems at first glance that there really may be something to the idea that healthy relationships hold the key to having a good life.

The critic has two ways of arguing against this idea that human well-being hinges on the status of our relationships. He could argue that healthy relationships aren't always *necessary* for a person to flourish, or he could argue that healthy relationships aren't *sufficient* to guarantee that a person will flourish. Are relationships necessary if we are to flourish? The critic might argue that people can flourish in a number of ways that have nothing to do with relationships. We watch a romantic movie on television, and we feel warmly pleased. We sample an award-winning chef's custard tart, and we feel happily indulged. We observe Bud Collins wearing a bizarre pair of trousers, and we feel greatly amused. The critic might point to these examples as proof that there are indeed *other* things we enjoy besides healthy relationships with others.

In response to the critic's argument, though, I would suggest that we in fact *don't* enjoy these things outside of the context of ongoing, healthy relationships. A

wonderfully acted movie will fail to inspire us if we're feeling alienated from those we love. A wonderfully prepared meal will not be enjoyed if it's eaten amid strife. Even a Bud Collins outfit will fail to amuse the person in the throes of depression. On the other hand, when we're enjoying other people's company, even an inane B-movie can be an occasion of great fun and laughter. And for honeymooners enjoying their first dinner together as a married couple, even basic fare will seem like a feast of delights. So, rather than viewing movies and meals and comic moments as *sources* of human happiness, perhaps we should view them as *occasions* which allow us to reap the benefits stemming from our healthy relationships with others. In the end, healthy relationships *do* seem to be necessary for us to flourish.

Even if healthy relationships with others are necessary for human flourishing, the critic might still claim that they are not *sufficient* to ensure a good life. After all, people participating in healthy relationships can still experience the pain we associate with tennis elbow or blisters on our feet. Indeed, professional tennis players have had to retire from matches on account of the discomfort from such things. And doesn't this show, so the critic might insist, that *other* conditions are needed—such as physical health—if we are to flourish?

In response to the critic, two points can be made. First, people in physical pain typically are at least capable of having moments when the physical trauma to their bodies does not prevent them from being happy. For example, a hospital patient recuperating from painful surgery may, upon seeing the door to her room swing open (possibly heralding the visit of another friend), experience the pleasant feelings we associate with anticipating good news. People talk sometimes in terms of “forgetting” that they are in

pain. And if this is possible for a moment, then in principle it seems possible for longer periods—assuming deeper relationships with others which foster much greater comfort, or assuming a greater mental ability to focus our full attention on our relationships irrespective of our surroundings and circumstances. In short, in truly ideal human relationships it might well be the case that outside factors like physical trauma are rendered inconsequential as determinants of a person’s well-being.

Even if this line of response to the critic fails to be fully convincing, we can offer a second response in support of the claim that healthy relationships are sufficient to ensure a flourishing life. In cases where harm to our physical bodies does rob us of the benefits that would otherwise come from relating to others, this fact does nothing to refute our earlier claim about the *source* of our well-being. Physical health is not itself a source of well-being. As we saw before, one can be free from physical injury and can even have access to a well-acted movie or a gourmet meal, and one can still be absolutely miserable. The source of our well-being is, once again, healthy relationships with others—even if further conditions must be met in order for us to enjoy the benefits of these healthy relationships.

It is interesting to look more deeply into why healthy relationships with others provide us with positive experiences. There is a certain feeling that comes with our positive encounters with others. Perhaps the term “connecting” best captures this feeling. People often describe their special relationships with a spouse or with a best friend in terms of there being a “special connection” to the other person. Equally, we can feel a connection to a stranger who hears our life story and seems to understand us. There is an enormous healing quality to the connections we make with others, which seems to be further

evidence that our well-being as humans really does ultimately hinge on the status of our relationships. My suggestion is that we should view a life of continual, positive experiences of “connecting” with others as the ideal of a good life. The extent to which we approximate this ideal is the extent to which our lives go well for us.

Let us finish this section by returning to our example of the tennis prodigy who is pushed to succeed from a young age by demanding tennis parents. Although the young person will not be given the freedom to begin plotting his own career path, such autonomy of choice isn't a part of the perfectionist theory of well-being we have outlined. In fact, it seems clear that some people's lives do *not* go well when they are given lots of self-directing choices. For example, too many choices can create great anxiety for some people, or it can lead to compulsive second-guessing. Even professional tennis players can sometimes be wracked with indecision and self-doubt, as evidenced by the lost look in a player's eyes as she searches the crowd for a coach or relative, seemingly hoping for some sign of direction. So, it would be far-fetched to think that continual autonomous choice leads to the height of human flourishing for all people.

Admittedly, some people *do* possess strong desires to make choices for themselves. We will consider this point later when we explore desire-satisfaction theories of well-being. But for now, we can conclude this section by noting that, whatever insights perfectionist theories give us into the common source of flourishing for all people, these insights do not help make the case that autonomous choices are somehow vital for a person's well-being. If authoritarian tennis parents really do undermine their children's well-being, we will have to look elsewhere for reasons which support this conclusion.

Mental-State Theories

(Am I a Wimbledon champion if I think I am?)

The theory of human well-being we outlined in the previous section is a kind of mental-state theory. Mental-state theories see our flourishing as entirely a matter of the mental experiences we have. Given that the feeling of “connecting” with others is clearly a type of mental phenomenon, it warrants the description of a mental-state theory.

The best-known proponent of mental-state theories was the Victorian philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873), who defended a version of hedonism. The term “hedonism” has become associated in everyday language with debauchery and sensual overindulgence. But in philosophy circles the term simply refers to the idea that pleasure—as opposed to pain—is the only ultimate good for us. Playing tennis, taking walks in the park, and reading a well-written book help us to flourish only inasmuch as they produce in us a balance of pleasure over pain.

Some hedonists do not make any distinctions among the *types* of pleasure we might enjoy. They see pleasure as a single kind of mental state, regardless of the differences that exist among the various activities that produce it. Mill’s own brand of hedonism distinguished “higher” from “lower” pleasures, with the former being for Mill more lasting and therefore more key for our long-term happiness. The theory of well-being we have outlined so far identifies the mental experience of connecting with others as the key to our flourishing. And if we want to think of the feeling of connecting as a kind of pleasure, then this theory would qualify as a particular version of hedonism.

Mental-state theories of well-being are fairly unpopular with philosophers these days. Much of the ongoing criticism of these theories centers on a famous thought experiment put forward by Robert Nozick (1938 – 2002):

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?¹

Nozick goes on to point out, correctly, that people desire *to do* things—not simply to *believe* they are doing things. So, a tennis prodigy practicing on the courts desires someday to *be* a Wimbledon champion—not simply to *believe* someday that he is a Wimbledon champion. If we were to hook someone up to Nozick's experience machine and program the machine to give him the mental experiences of seeming to win Wimbledon he would *think* his life was going really well. For that matter, we could give him the mental experiences of seeming to have lots of great friends and to marry the girl of his dreams. But Nozick argues that life in an experience machine is surely not a good life.

A number of philosophers view Nozick's line of argument as decisively undermining mental-state theories of well-being. But this conclusion is misplaced. It relies on the assumption that the mental-state proponent cannot accept Nozick's point that we desire a range of things outside our own mental states. The Oxford moral philosopher James

Griffin (1933 –) is among those modern-day philosophers who share this assumption. Notice the way in which he criticizes three well-known mental-state proponents for affirming that things have value, or utility, for us only if they involve our mental experiences:

Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick all saw utility as having to enter our experience. But we desire things other than states of mind: I might sometimes prefer, say, bitter truth to comforting delusion.²

In response to philosophers like Nozick and Griffin, I do not wish to deny that people desire things other than their own favorable mental sensations. A tennis professional may desire to hear the “tough truths” about her weaknesses rather than the comforting affirmations continually coming from her entourage. What I *do* wish to deny is that this point has any direct bearing on whether one’s well-being is solely a matter of having favorable mental experiences. There simply is nothing in the claim that “my well-being is enhanced only through my own mental experiences” that commits me to the further idea that the *objects* of my desires are merely my own experiences. Put another way, a mental-state theorist need not claim that it is the thought of having enjoyable mental states that *motivates* us whenever we act. A mental-state theorist simply claims that, as a matter of fact, our welfare *is* enhanced solely by our own mental states. It is a failure to recognize this point that has seemingly led so many philosophers to insist (wrongly) that Nozick’s experience machine provides decisive reason to reject mental-state theories of well-being.

Interestingly, Henry Sidgwick (1838 – 1900), who was one of the mental-state proponents we saw Griffin criticize earlier, noted how people can often best enhance their own well-being by focusing their attention on things *other* than their own well-being. Sidgwick commented,

The pleasures of thought and study can only be enjoyed in the highest degree by those who have an ardour of curiosity which carries the mind temporarily away from self and its sensations. In all kinds of Art, again, the exercise of the creative faculty is attended by intense and exquisite pleasures: but it would seem that in order to get them, one must forget them: the genuine artist at work seems to have a predominant and temporarily absorbing desire for the realisation of his ideal of beauty.³

What Sidgwick is saying is that pleasant mental experiences often occur only when we “lose” ourselves in some pursuit. When you’re playing a point in tennis, you should be telling yourself, “Get to the next shot. Get to the next shot.” When you focus intently on the game itself—people sometimes call it “getting in the zone”—you’ll receive a lot of enjoyment. However, if you were to focus simply on your own *experiences* of enjoyment, saying to yourself “Enjoy the moment more! Enjoy the moment more!!” while you’re playing, your game of tennis isn’t going to be nearly as fun. Sidgwick called this the “paradox of hedonism.” Mental-state theorists of well-being acknowledge that we often can, and should, concentrate on achieving things outside our own mental experiences. But this acknowledgement does not detract from their theory that well-being is indeed a matter of what mental experiences we end up having.

Let us finish this section by again returning to the question of whether authoritarian tennis parents restrict their children's freedom in a way that undermines the well-being of their children. Autonomous choices focus on *actions* one can perform, but they are not themselves mental states. Admittedly, when one makes an autonomous choice there is a certain feeling that comes with it; we might describe this feeling as a "sense of being in control." But this kind of feeling surely does not hold the key to our flourishing. The feeling of "connecting" remains a far better explanation of why people's lives do or do not go well for them.

Now, what *would* have a profound impact on our well-being is a scenario where a lack of choice prevented a child prodigy from "connecting" with others. Admittedly, this scenario *might* occur when tennis parents are too authoritarian in dictating a child's practice routine, weekly schedule, and so forth. If children develop resentment or long term co-dependence or for any other reason fail to develop the capacity to connect positively to the people around them, they will fall far short of the human ideal of well-being (which involves continually connecting with others). Accordingly, their lives will not go well for them. So, it seems appropriate to caution tennis parents against creating an environment where their children have difficulty forming healthy connections with others. But of course this is a caution we would want to give to *any* parent. There is nothing inherent in mapping out a child's schedule—or indeed in planning the long-term career direction of a child—that *itself* precludes a child from connecting with the people around him as he grows up. In the case of Jan Silva, I don't think we have any reason to doubt his dad when he says, "Yes, Jani's life is organized, but he's having fun with it."⁴ Many people have, after all, developed positive relationships (and positive lives) while

growing up with authoritarian parents. And so, whatever misgivings we might have about the personality or motivations of an authoritarian tennis parent, the actions of such a parent do not automatically compromise his or her child's well-being. Or at least we haven't come across good evidence to the contrary so far in our investigation.

Desire-Satisfaction Theories

(Just give the child prodigy what he wants!)

At this point someone might insist that surely *every* child desires, at some level, freedom from parental control. Hence, every child of an overbearing tennis parent will have at least *some* feelings of frustration or resentment at the lack of opportunity to make autonomous decisions. As much as Jan Silva enjoys playing tennis, there are still times when he doesn't have a real desire to do tennis drills. His father, while remarking that Jan "is always smiling and laughing on court,"⁵ also admits to occasionally resorting to ice-cream bribes in order to overcome Jan's resistance to finishing a practice session.⁶

The idea of a potentially frustrated child provides a useful way to introduce our third and final general theory of human well-being. Desire-satisfaction theories view well-being as essentially a matter of having our desires fulfilled. If my life unfolds as I desire it to, then my life goes well for me; if it doesn't, then my life does not go well. It's as simple as that. If this theory gives us the truth about our well-being, then authoritarian tennis parents *are* undermining their children's flourishing every time they insist on one more

practice session that their children really don't want to undertake. But does the desire-satisfaction theory really describe what a "good life" looks like?

Let us compare the desire-satisfaction theory with the mental-state theory I defended in the previous section. I noted in that section that, even though our well-being rises and falls with our mental states, we admittedly do desire things other than simply to experience pleasant mental states. We can agree here with James Griffin's comment, "If either I could accomplish something with my life but not know it, or believe that I had but not really have, I should prefer the first."⁷ Probably many people will share his sentiments. That is, probably most of us will desire *to accomplish* certain things with our lives—not just *believe* that we are accomplishing these things. However, let us press the question of what actually enhances our welfare. Surely, it is the *belief* that we are accomplishing certain things. Suppose that I have as a goal for my life the writing of a tennis instruction book which details ways in which inner city youth can use tennis to obtain college scholarships and in general better their lives. If I am successful in doing this, but am *completely unaware* that my book has been of any help to anyone, in what sense is *my* well-being enhanced? I may believe my efforts to have been completely in vain; and as I think of all the people I (mistakenly) believe are still in need of help, I will experience the same sadness and melancholy that, we suppose, motivated me to write the book in the first place! I cannot see how *my* well-being is enhanced *by the mere fact* that I have accomplished what I desired to accomplish.

To enforce the point, we might suppose that my goal is *not* accomplished. Let's say, for example, that my publisher never actually publishes my manuscript. Nevertheless, if I *believe* that my book is helping others (and we can suppose my perverse publisher

shows me fake letters from people thanking me for my “help”) then I will experience delight, fulfillment, and so forth. Surely when we are considering *my* well-being—i.e., what is good *for me*—the sole consideration directly relevant is whether I have an *experience of believing* that I have helped others. The actual accomplishment of my goal only leads to an increase in my welfare on the condition that I form true beliefs about this accomplishment.

We might be tempted to think at this point that desire-satisfaction theories are at least correct on the point that it is the perceived achievement *of our existing desires* that makes a person’s life go well for her. However, even this would be too great a concession to make to desire-satisfaction theories. If a person’s desires come to fulfillment, there is no guarantee whatsoever that she will end up contented, happy, or in any way enjoying her life. A quick glance at the biographies of sports stars, rock stars and actors shows pretty clearly that achieving one’s childhood dreams provides no immunity from discontentment and depression. Hence, the well-known adage: “Be careful what you wish for.” This adage stems from the fact that there will inevitably be some gap between what we *think* will make our lives go well for us and what *really will* makes our lives go well for us.

In an attempt to overcome this gap between our true flourishing and our *beliefs* about where our true flourishing lies, some desire-satisfaction advocates have sought to amend their theory. On the amended desire-satisfaction theory, it is not the fulfillment of just *any* desire a person has which will make the person truly flourish. Instead, it is the fulfillment of the desires of the *well informed* person that will lead to that person’s

flourishing. Simply put, our lives go well for us when our desires are fulfilled, *provided* we are wise enough to know what really will bring us contentment and happiness.

The problem with this amendment is that it renders the desire-satisfaction theory utterly vacuous. To see why, let us think about the thought processes of the “well-informed” person. What criteria will such a person use in determining whether some particular desire, if fulfilled, *really will* make his life go well for him? Presumably, the answer will be that the person foresees that he will be happy, contented, and so forth. But happiness and contentment are clearly mental states. So, the well-informed person ends up assuming that mental states are what make a person’s life go better or worse. This is the thesis of *mental-state theories*; and it is precisely this thesis that desire-satisfaction theorists were originally seeking to refute! So in the end, desire-satisfaction theories seem fatally flawed. If the theory proposes that well-being is a matter of having one’s desires fulfilled, then the theory is clearly wrong, given the frequent “gap” that exists between what *actually will* make people happy and what they desire or *think* will make them happy. If the theory is amended so as to close this gap, then we end up moving away from the original desire-satisfaction thesis which posits that fulfilled desires make people flourish; we instead end up measuring well-being in the same way that mental-state theorists measure it.

Despite the acute shortcomings of desire-satisfaction theories, they do serve as a useful reminder that a child prodigy’s desires play a part in his ability to relate positively to others and thereby flourish. Although the level of fulfilled desires won’t single-handedly *determine* whether a child’s life goes well for him or not, continually unfulfilled desires do tend to produce frustration, resentment, and other attitudes which hinder

positive, fulfilling relationships. We can of course acknowledge that an authoritarian tennis parent—like any parent—may at times have a better idea than the child as to “what is really good for him”. Children often lack the ability to see that short-term sacrifices can lead to overall, long-term benefits. But there are limits to this. A parent cannot continually drag a child kicking and screaming to the practice court in the name of “what is really good for him.” At some point, the child’s frustrated desires will begin to undermine his positive, long-term relationships with the people around him. Desire-satisfaction theories, for all their shortcomings, at least remind us of this fact.

Opportunities Missed

(Why can’t they just let the child have a normal childhood?!)

So far we have not found any reason for thinking that authoritarian tennis parents actually compromise their children’s well-being. Certainly, we have identified *cautions* for parents. Children’s well-being can *potentially* be undermined if they are pushed to the point of resentment or for whatever reason fail to form the kind of meaningful connections with others on which their well-being ultimately hinges. But from the mere fact that a child’s daily schedule and long-term career path are mapped out by parents, it doesn’t automatically follow that the child’s well-being is undermined.

Still, we may have nagging feelings that child prodigies like Jan Silva are simply missing out on the “normal” activities of childhood. “We’re only children once,” someone might say, “and once your childhood is gone, you can never get it back.” That

sentiment is perhaps understandable, though it's not immediately obvious exactly what objection is being raised. Perhaps the concern is that, even if the child is happy and enjoying some level of a good life, the child is missing something which other children enjoy and which would make his life even *better*. On closer analysis, though, this objection turns out to be fairly unpersuasive.

Even if we suppose that a particular tennis child prodigy *would* enjoy his relationships—and his life in general—a bit more if he were able to make a few more autonomous decisions for himself, what exactly follows from this? What I mean is that there is *any number* of things that could potentially make a child's life go a bit better for him. What child is given the truly optimal ratio of play time versus work time each day? What child is given the exact number of calories each day for optimal physical development? What child is given the optimal amount of fish oils to aid in concentration and brain development? The list here is endless as to the ways in which a child's life *could* be improved. No matter how well a child's life is going at any particular time, there is always scope for it to go better.

Surely it would be unfair to insist that a tennis parent—or any parent—provide a life of flourishing for his or her child that is *maximal* in a strict sense. Instead, we think that parents should make a reasonably strong, concerted effort to ensure that their children are happy. No, we do not think parents should prioritize their own personal interests to the extent that they *rarely* have time to read a story to their children or to share a meal with them. And, with instances of child neglect still a real problem in our society, perhaps the time is right for a national campaign to educate and motivate parents to nurture more actively their children's development. But the point is that we rightly allow *some* leeway

to parents to balance the various demands on their time and attention that children, careers, charity work and hobbies bring. The strict, maximal flourishing of a child is a noble goal; but it is not the *only* goal which a parent may rightly see as important. As long as parents are actively working to ensure that a child's life is in general going very well for him, we do not regard the parents as irresponsible if they do not seek to improve the child's well-being in every conceivable way and at the expense of anything else in life. So, from the mere fact that the child of tennis parents may have flourished a *bit* more if his life had been different, it does not automatically follow that the parents have acted outside the range of behaviors we deem acceptable for all parents.

Some readers may still find themselves unable to shake nagging thoughts about the "lost childhood" of tennis prodigies. Perhaps it just seems intuitive that a child, even if he is enjoying his life, should not be missing out on what *other* children are enjoying—for example, a less-structured routine where there is freedom to choose between activities each day. But at this point we would do well to remember the flaw in Aristotle's theory of well-being. We can think back to his emphasis on the *unique* ability of humans to reason. In analyzing Aristotle, though, we saw that the question of how someone *else* flourishes does not directly determine how *I* truly flourish. Similarly, we can say here that the question of how *other* children are flourishing is not directly relevant to the question of whether some particular child is or is not flourishing. If it is a fact that a tennis child prodigy is flourishing in a certain way, then this fact remains the same regardless of how other children are or are not flourishing. Of course, it would be another matter if, in some particular case, a child prodigy were thrust into the grown-up world so that he was hindered in his ability to form healthy relationships with peer groups

as he grew into adulthood. Clearly, his life would not be going well for him. But from the mere fact that most children are forming relationships and flourishing in a certain way, it does not follow that a child prodigy is worse off if he forms relationships and flourishes in a different context.

So, our final conclusion is that overbearing tennis parents aren't necessarily compromising their children's well-being in any objectionable way. Children's decisions to "plot their own course" are not part of any ideal state of human flourishing which we must approximate if our lives are to go well. The mental feelings associated with making autonomous decisions are not—unlike the feelings of "connecting" with others—the source of human happiness. And even when children desire to make more decisions for themselves, there is no automatic correlation between fulfilled desires and ultimate happiness. Of course, there may be reason to object to the *personalities* and *motivations* of certain authoritarian tennis parents we ourselves have met. But that's a whole other issue! We cannot object to the mere fact that tennis parents control their children's schedules more than other parents do. For this mere fact does not automatically cause their children's lives to go any worse for them.

In case the reader is wondering, no, I'm not myself a tennis parent. My four-year-old daughter recently attended her first tennis camp. But my wife has made it clear that we will *ask*, not forcefully suggest, if she would like to continue taking lessons. Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi have a daughter the same age as mine. I wonder if she's been to a tennis camp. Talk about the pressure of expectations!

¹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 42.

² James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 13.

³ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 49.

⁴ Tom Perrotta, "Wunderkinds: The Future of the Tennis Prodigy," *Tennis.com: The Official Site of Tennis Magazine*, Dec. 12, 2007.

⁵ Mark Hodgkinson, "Jan Silva: the Roger Federer of the Future," *Telegraph* Nov. 31, 2007.

⁶ *NBC's Today Show*, Aug. 3, 2007.

⁷ Griffin, 19