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## Review Article

# Drawn to the Good? Brewer on Dialectical Activity

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### Abstract

In *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Talbot Brewer defends an Aristotelian-inspired understanding of the good life, in which living the good life is conceived of in terms of engaging in a unified dialectical activity. In this essay, I explore the assumptions at work in Brewer's understanding of dialectical activity and raise some concerns about whether or not we have reason to embrace them. I argue that his conception of human nature and that towards which we are drawn stands in tension with empirical research on motivation. Given this tension, I conclude that it is implausible to construe living the good life as a unified dialectical activity.

### Keywords

Motivation, Dialectical Activity, Agency, Goodness

Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 344 pages. ISBN: 9780199557882 (hbk). Hardback: \$80.00.

Talbot Brewer's *The Retrieval of Ethics* is an insightful study of human agency and its relationship to morality. Perhaps the most central of the many worthy facets of his discussion is the notion of a "dialectical activity." Put briefly, dialectical activity consists in activity engaged in for its own sake that has a "self-unveiling character" revealed through successive engagement in it (p. 37). Brewer believes that through engaging in dialectical activity we develop a deep understanding and appreciation of the goods internal to that activity; over the course of this process we come to realize the human good itself. According to Brewer, much of the problems with moral philosophy from the modern period onward can be traced in some way to a failure to appreciate the existence, nature, and significance of dialectical activity. Brewer's hope is that by redressing these failures, we can begin to think about morality in a way that hasn't

been done since the time of Aristotle. His suggestions are radical and rich; they inspire an elevated picture of human nature as comprised of inquisitive seekers of the good, collaborating with one another instinctively and naturally to develop an ongoing, active appreciation of the good. The notion of dialectical activity laying at the basis of this picture, however, is embedded with assumptions about human nature and how it stands in relation to the good that are controversial and, for many, counter-intuitive. In this essay, I explore the assumptions at work in Brewer's understanding of dialectical activity and raise some concerns about whether or not we have reason to embrace them, and whether, in light of these concerns, an alternative conception of the good life is warranted.

### **Dialectical Activity**

According to Brewer, a dialectical activity is a kind of activity that peaks and stimulates one's interests; it is intrinsically valuable, and the goods internal to the activity reveal themselves to the participant, who through repeated engagement in the activity develops an increasingly refined understanding of those goods. A central feature of dialectical activity is that it begets a dialectical process that proceeds indefinitely:

[Each] successive engagement yields a further stretch of understanding of the goods internal to the activity, hence of what would count as a proper engagement in it. If the activity's constitutive goods are complex and elusive enough, this dialectical process can be reiterated indefinitely, with each successive engagement yielding a clearer grasp of the activity's proper form and preparing the way for a still more adequate and hence more revealing engagement in it (p. 37).

Brewer's favored examples of dialectical activities are philosophy, friendship, and living the good life. While we might think that these sorts of activities are relatively rare, serving as the highlights breaking up our ordinary ways of existing, Brewer stresses that engagement in dialectical activity is common, the "stuff of everyday life" (p. 87). A walk in the woods can stimulate a dialectical process just as much as a dialogue with Socrates. In each instance, we find ourselves engaged in an activity we take to be intrinsically valuable, which leads to a deepened understanding of the intrinsic value, which then leads us to alter and fine-tune our engagement in it, which then leads to an even deeper understanding of the intrinsic value, and so on.

The conception of value attached to Brewer's understanding of dialectical activity departs from most contemporary understandings of an activity's value. Contemporary classifications of an activity's value tend to dichotomize

activities between those that are instrumentally and intrinsically valuable. Although dialectical activities fall under the latter, and Brewer suggests that it may even be the case that all intrinsically valuable activities are dialectical (p. 39), describing them solely in terms of their value is misleading and would lead one to overlook one of Brewer's most insightful contributions, which is that engagement in dialectical activities has a unique phenomenology and one that, at its heart, taps into the human good itself. It is the emphasis on the dialectical structure of certain activities, rather than their intrinsic value, that delivers the distinctive quality to dialectical activities.

What I find most intriguing about dialectical activities is the picture Brewer paints of the effects these activities have upon the participant, who begins her engagement of the activity with only a vague and ill-formed appreciation of it, yet who through repeated engagement develops an ever-deepening understanding of the goods specific to the activity that correlates with an equal sense of intrigue in the activity. Brewer writes that an agent "throws herself into dialectical activities on the strength of an as-yet-indistinct intimation of their intrinsic value" (p. 37), and that it is only after this initial engagement that she "sees more clearly what [she] was really after, or what [she] really wanted, when [she] threw [herself] into them" (p. 38).

Given this description of the effects participation in dialectical activities has upon the participant, it is tempting to see dialectical activities partly as processes of self-discovery. But Brewer's main thesis is that dialectical activities provide a *methodology* for appreciating and realizing the goods intrinsic to the activity itself, goods whose value is independent of our appreciation of them. This thesis works in conjunction with another of Brewer's central aims, which is to develop a conception of agency that stands in contrast with modern conceptions of the agent. Modern conceptions embrace what Brewer calls a "world-making conception" of agency, whereby an agent's desires are understood exclusively as desires to bring about some state of affairs (p. 12). Brewer worries that the world-making conception, and its propositional account of desires, can neither explain nor accommodate the evaluative dimensions of our desires and the extent to which reflection on desires enables us "not just to predict each other's bodily motions, but to understand each other by grasping the point or value that we see in what we do" (p. 24). In its place, Brewer defends an "evaluative outlook" conception of desires, which understands desires to include representations of reasons or values (p. 25). Brewer argues convincingly that the evaluative outlook conception of desire is the only one capable of explaining dialectical activities—activities we engage in not to produce any state of affairs, or to "satisfy" any desire, but simply because we find those activities appealing (p. 45).

When I think about the plausibility of Brewer's portrayal of dialectical activity, I'm torn. I think we have all had the experience of finding ourselves in a dialectical process of discovery: we go for a walk in the woods and stumble upon the first, perfect green buds of spring. We begin to appreciate the cycle of nature, and then find more evidence of it—perhaps we see a stray crocus bravely emerging amongst the pile of dead leaves. We start to walk mindfully, attentive to our surroundings, refining our engagement with nature and developing a deeper appreciation of it. Brewer's discussion of dialectical activities is powerful insofar as it taps into and captures this experience, and I agree with Brewer that the existence of dialectical activities calls for a revised understanding of agency. Yet for several reasons, I hesitate to grant dialectical activities the centrality to human life that Brewer's theory grants it. Brewer believes the good life, which he clearly expects will be a recognizably ethical one, consists in ongoing engagement in interconnected dialectical activities. He writes: "The human good lies in the actualization of the capacity for self-directed activity, and not a disconnected series of actions but sustained activities and relationships that build upon each other, attaining progressively greater depth and maturity of time and lending direction and unity to a life" (p. 305). I worry about framing our practical thinking (broadly construed) in terms of dialectical activities; I worry that by attributing to dialectical activities such a central role in human life, Brewer ends up embracing an unsustainable picture of human nature and its relation to the good.

In the following sections, I explore Brewer's understanding of how human nature is drawn to the good, and the view of human nature to which it commits him. I conclude by arguing that while most of us are drawn to many things, the good life just isn't one of them. This does not entail that we are destined towards a vicious life, but it does entail that, in our efforts to live a good life, we cannot rely on our attraction to the good.

### **Being Drawn to the Good**

On Brewer's account, we can begin the dialectical process with only a "vague intimation" (p. 85) of an activities' intrinsic goodness. That vague intimation ends up playing significant roles in the dialectical process. It plays a motivational role, motivating our initial and continued engagement through what Brewer describes as a phenomenon whereby we are "moved by a vivid appreciation of a species of goodness" (p. 48). It also plays a normative role, serving to focus and justify one's engagement. While these are roles we might think require a comprehensive understanding of goodness, Brewer believes they can

be satisfied by only an incomplete and ill-formed grasp of goodness. What seems to be doing much of the real work here is a faith in an activity's intrinsic value, and, I would add, in one's capacity to identify that value. Brewer describes this faith as "faithfulness to an intimated value that is itself internal to—even if only imperfectly realized by—one's unfolding activity" (p. 86).

This talk of faithfulness to an as yet not fully understood value is reminiscent of historical discussions of our attraction to God to which Brewer traces the origins of dialectical activity. Brewer focuses explicitly on the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, a Platonist and mystical theologian, whose work on our attraction to God influenced Augustine's writing on the same subject. According to Brewer, Gregory believes our attraction to God, and longing to know God, is something that can be never satisfied given the unknowable nature of God; nonetheless, the unrequited attraction and longing "continually induces those possessed by [the longing] to bring its object more clearly into view" (p. 56). Brewer argues that this understanding of our attraction to God shows that all of our desires are not propositional ones, i.e. not simply desires to bring about a certain state of affairs. Rather, it affirms the existence of a different species of desires, which consists simply "in a mesmerizing attraction to a good wholly present" (p. 57).

This kind of attraction, as we have seen, seems requisite to engaging in dialectical activity. To begin engagement in such activities we have to find some pull in the activity. Where we begin with only a vague intimation of the goods internal to the activity, however, we have to be moved by an appreciation of a value we do not yet grasp. Additionally, we have to see this value as playing a normative role that both justifies and explains our activities. This picture is indeed the stuff of "mystical discussions of the longing that attracts humans to the highest good" (p. 56), but is it really "the stuff of everyday life" (p. 87) as Brewer also claims? The problem is this: claims about attraction to an activity's goodness depend for their validity on corresponding claims about human nature and what we are drawn towards. These claims, in turn, require an explanation and substantiation that Brewer's discussion—for all of its rich and deeply nuanced moral psychology—takes for granted.

Is human nature so constituted to find this kind of intrigue and attraction in the activities of everyday life? To answer, let us consider some of Brewer's examples of dialectical activity. One example that he explores throughout the book is philosophical activity. In describing the philosopher "in the midst of explaining an inchoate line of thought," he writes:

In such cases, one does not yet have in mind a fully determinate thought for which one is attempting to find the right words. There must be such cases if it is possible for philosophical dialectic to be a form of active inquiry—that is, a path

to increased insight rather than merely a means of communicating already achieved insights. In such cases, one has the sense of trying to wrest the thought that has inspired one's interest from a partially veiled obscurity and to bring it into words that vindicate one's incipient excitement about it (p. 87).

Another of Brewer's favored examples is the interaction between a parent and child. Consider a parent trying to engage in a conversation with a withdrawn teenager and striving to develop an "ethically laudable parent-child relation[ship]" (p. 92). The parent may, reasonably, not know exactly how to engage with her child; she may be "quite uncertain what the conversation would have to be like in order for it to be a fit constituent of such a relationship" (p. 92). Brewer writes that even amongst such uncertainty:

[O]ne might have a vague sense of what a genuinely good parent—child relationship would be like. This sense might be sufficient to provide guidance for one's first and still halting efforts to talk and to listen. As the conversation unfolds, it might become clearer what is called for ... It seems possible, then, for the conversation to have all the attributes of a dialectical activity, and to involve the distinctive sort of practical thinking that carries forward such activities (p. 93).

These are excellent examples of dialectical activities and ones which most of us can appreciate. But notice they are each instances in which it is clear that the reason why engagement in them leads to dialectical activity has much to do with the specific nature of the agent involved, and not solely the goods internal to that activity. Some of us are pulled to engage in philosophical activity and can move successfully from a dim instinct to a clearly developed insight; but many more are not. Many lack even the dim instinct; still many others lack the ability to engage in the dialectical activity requisite to turning the dim instinct into the clearly developed insight. Those able to engage in dialectical philosophical activity have a special aptitude for it, just as the blues singer—singing is another of Brewer's favored examples of dialectic activity—has an aptitude for finding the right pitch. Parenting as well requires an aptitude, one that has obvious biological roots. Parents are indeed drawn to their children and, absent mitigating factors, drawn to engage with them in a way that is conducive to their well-being, even when they may not understand fully the goodness involved in parenting.

What unites these examples (philosophizing, singing, parenting) seems to be that they tap into an individual's natural aptitude to be predisposed to see and appreciate some goodness in the activity and to engage in that activity independently of any clear, definite comprehension of its value. If so, then part and parcel of what makes any given activity a dialectical activity has to do with the aptitude of the agent engaging in them and not solely with the objective value of the goods intrinsic to the activities. In order for Brewer's project

of defining the good life in terms of a series of interconnected dialectical activities to be successful, then it must be the case that we are drawn to the good and, by extension, to an ethical life, in the same way philosophers are drawn to philosophy and parents are drawn to their children.

Brewer seems to think this is entirely plausible and not a claim in need of substantive defense. Where he does discuss our aptitude towards the good it is largely through reference to Aristotelian views on *eudaimonia* and practical thinking. For instance, he draws on Aristotle's view that the virtuous do the right thing with pleasure, a phenomenon that Brewer takes to indicate our capacity to develop an active appreciation of the good. While granting that there are likely exceptions to this view, he writes that:

The virtuous will generally have a vivid sense of the intrinsic value of the human relations that their virtuous actions partly constitute, and this sense will generally be sufficient to complete their virtuous activities with pleasure. Since the sort of pleasure manifests a full understanding of, and wholehearted commitment to, the relevant ethical values, it is not hard to see why it redounds to the credit of the virtuous that they take pleasure in their virtuous activity (p. 131).

Brewer believes that through engaging in dialectical activity we come to develop a “mature sense of what there is reason to do,” and that “if this process were to run its course with respect to all facets of practical reflection, one's characteristic pleasures, emotions, and desires might be expected to come into harmony with one's considered judgments” (p. 131).

Among the many assumptions about human nature that seem to be at work here, the following are fundamental to Brewer's overall project: First, there is the assumption that there are many activities towards which we are drawn on the basis of only a “vague intimation” of the goods intrinsic to them. Second, there is the assumption that those dialectical activities towards which we are drawn will also be those that comprise a unified, recognizably ethical life. I am skeptical that these assumptions—particularly the second one—hold widely enough to be embraced as theses about human nature, at least in the Aristotelian-inspired manner Brewer portrays.

### **An Empirically Adequate Picture of Human Nature?**

In order for Brewer's analysis of the good life to be a psychologically plausible one, it must be the case that individuals are drawn towards virtuous activities prior to the development of any substantive cognitive appreciation of their value, for it is only through engaging in dialectical activities that this appreciation develops. Are we like this? Do we find virtuous activities on their own

appealing independent of our considered judgments about their value? Empirical research, and in particular research on motivation, can help to answer these questions. Empirical psychology identifies two main forms of motivation: intrinsic motivation, which arises when an individual engages in an act because she finds it appealing on its own, and extrinsic motivation, which arises when an individual engages in an act for the sake of factors external to the activity such as any reward attached to it.

States of intrinsic motivation occur when agents engage in an activity for its own sake, in the absence of operational separable consequences.<sup>1</sup> Learning (under the right circumstances) is a classic example of intrinsic motivation: it arises when students work not for the sake of a grade, but for the sake of learning; when the material studied taps into the student's natural curiosity. The student may not necessarily find the experience "fun" or even pleasant, but she is moved nonetheless. When intrinsically motivated, agents engage in the activities out of this kind of interest, because they respond to the activity itself. They are not acting solely from a desire to attain a particular end, a contrast that correlates nicely and lends empirical support to Brewer's rejection of the world-making conception of agency.

One form of intrinsic motivation that particularly seems to capture the dialectical process specific to dialectical activities is "flow". Flow experiences tap into an individual's propensity to seek out complex and challenging activities that test one's capacities.<sup>2</sup> Accounts of flow do not make specific reference to an on-going development of an appreciation of the goods internal to activities, as does Brewer's account of dialectical activity, yet such a development seems compatible with the experience of flow, where there exists a clear emphasis on the exercise, development, and fulfillment of one's capacities.<sup>3</sup>

I think research on human motivation does find a promising analogue for dialectical activity in flow and other philosophers have suggested as much.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Work by Deci & Ryan has been instrumental in raising attention to the phenomenon of intrinsic motivation. For overviews, see: R.M. Ryan and E.L. Deci, "Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions," *Contemporary educational psychology* 25, no. 1 (2000): 54-67; E.L. Deci and R.M. Ryan, *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior* (Springer, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience* (Harper & Row New York, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> One feature of flow experience that does not make an explicit appearance in Brewer's understanding of dialectical activities is that in flow experiences the person experiencing flow becomes caught up in the experience to the extent that she loses her sense of self.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Annas argues that flow offers a compelling analogue to Aristotle's understanding of the phenomenology of virtuous agency that informs Brewer's account. While, as will become clear, I disagree that flow is a good model for virtuous activity in general, I agree with Annas' claim that



There is thus some empirical support for the existence of the phenomenon that Brewer believes arises through engagement in dialectical activities and so some empirical support for believing that human nature does have an aptitude for engaging in dialectical activities. Yet, this research also suggests reasons for concern regarding characterizing the good life in general through appeals to states of intrinsic motivation. Research on flow in particular shows that flow experiences are limited to a relatively narrow class of activities, primarily ones that present challenges, and involve both skill and the investment of psychic energy. Flow experiences are found through engaging in rock-climbing, surgery, artistic performances, religious rituals, and so forth. *These* are the kinds of activities that draw us in. The most likely explanation of why they provide optimal flow experiences appeals to their structure: they occur in a “goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear cues as to how well one is performing.”<sup>5</sup>

Certainly many of the examples Brewer uses to illustrate dialectical activities plausibly generate flow experiences: philosophy, singing, even parenting. Research on flow activities, however, would not support Brewer’s postulation that “the most comprehensive dialectical activity in which human beings engage is the activity of living a good life” (p. 49), where the good life is taken to be “sustained activities and relationships that build upon each other” (p. 305). The reasons are two-fold, and both center on the discrepancy between the nature of activities that lead to a flow experience and the nature of activities that comprise a good life. Even if we embrace Brewer’s robust understanding of the good life as involving a pursuit of an appreciation of the good through “active experiments in living” (p. 49), the phenomenology of stumbling through life and trying to live well is remarkably different from the phenomenology of scaling a cliff, or performing arthroscopic surgery.

First, flow activities are discrete, separate activities; the motivation they stimulate occurs only when an agent engages in the activity and, even then, occurs in a “narrow window of time.”<sup>6</sup> This limitation on our capacity to be intrinsically motivated tells us that while it is possible to find ourselves moved by interests and/or an appreciation of the goods specific to an activity when we are engaged in it, it is difficult to *sustain* this motivation during the activity and even more so across discrete activities, a task which seems to be necessary

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this is the view that Aristotle seems to have had in mind. See: J. Annas, “The phenomenology of virtue,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2008): 21–34.

<sup>5</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 58. The window is extremely narrow: the example Csikszentmihalyi references here is five minutes.

to develop the kind of unity Brewer attributes to the good life. To the extent that the activities comprising a good life are unified, people at best will be able to appreciate that unity only *after* developing a sophisticated appreciation of the goods intrinsic to life, in which case they cannot experience the good life as a dialectical activity through which this appreciation develops.

Second, it is not at all obvious that the series of activities involved in the good life are dialectical activities. Brewer partially grants this when he acknowledges that it is not possible to take pleasure in all virtuous activities, such as in cases where one must turn a family member into the police (p. 131). But his discussion assumes nonetheless that we will be drawn to virtuous activities such as this one, that we will be riveted by our developing appreciation of the good specific to them. Research on intrinsic motivation, however, shows that we are so riveted only when activities have certain characteristic features: when they present discrete, tangible challenges whose appeal, and so capacity to peak and sustain one's interest, is clear. The act of turning one's family member into the police is simply not like this; it lacks the characteristic features of activities that generate intrinsic motivation. The somewhat regrettable fact is that whether or not an act is one we would consider morally right is tangential to its capacity to motivate us intrinsically.<sup>7</sup> There are indeed many occasions where flow experiences can be had at the cost of virtue, such as the "joy of battle and butchery" experienced by warriors.<sup>8</sup> Brewer's hope that the dialectical activities towards which we will be drawn will track those of a recognizable ethical life is simply that: hope.

Unless we revise dramatically our understanding of the good life as being an ethical one, we must conclude that it is implausible to construe living the good life as a unified dialectical activity. Human nature may be drawn towards many activities that are dialectical in nature, but these are not necessarily the ones that make up a good life, and certainly not a unified good life. We are simply not drawn to the good in the way Brewer envisions.

This discussion of empirical psychology has been preliminary and full treatment of this concern regarding the extension of dialectical activity to living the good life as a whole warrants a more comprehensive investigation into the dynamics of dialectical activity. My limited goal in raising this literature has been to show that empirical research supports the skepticism I, and likely

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<sup>7</sup> On a related point, Brewer's example also seems a clear example of something that we require a sophisticated, clear understanding of the good involved *prior* to doing: we do it, with pain in our hearts, only because we know that it is the right thing.

<sup>8</sup> Csikszentmihalyi draws explicit attention to this discrepancy, citing a number of cultures where flow experiences seem to be had at the cost of virtue (*Flow*, 81.).

others, share regarding the assumptions about human nature invoked in Brewer's discussion of dialectical activity. While we each have an aptitude to engage in some forms of dialectical activity, it is not clear that we are by nature disposed to the good in the way Brewer's theory requires.<sup>9</sup> Although Brewer maintains that "the human good consists in a lifetime of intrinsically valuable activities" (p. 127), our discussion suggests that if we were to pursue a life of intrinsically valuable activities, this life would lack both the unity and the virtue that Brewer attributes to the human good.

We have seen that Brewer's theory depends upon several questionable assumptions about human nature. While I think he is successful in demonstrating our capacity to engage in dialectical activity, his construal of the good life in terms of dialectical activity depends upon a view of human nature that exceeds what we have good reason to endorse.

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<sup>9</sup> One aspect of Brewer's book that I have not explored here is his well-developed account of the value of friendship, and how through the development of "character friendships" we are able to formulate and refine our understandings of the good. He argues that character friendships can "provide the sort of external, objectivity-tracking formative and corrective mechanism for our characteristic affects that isolated practical reflection alone is unable to provide" (p. 270). That Brewer has in mind this sort of corrective mechanism does not mitigate the concern developed in this section, however, for his theory still requires that we have the initial insight and attraction to the good that lies at the basis of these character friendships; my concern is with his assumptions regarding this initial insight and attraction.

