

What is it for a Life to go Well (or Badly)?: Some Critical Comments on Wayne Sumner's Theory of Welfare

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Abstract In an effort to construct a plausible theory of experience-based welfare, Wayne Sumner imposes two requirements on the relevant kind of experience: the information requirement and the autonomy requirement. I argue that both requirements are problematic. First, I argue (very briefly) that a well-known case like 'the deceived businessman' need not support the information requirement as Sumner believes. Second, I introduce a case designed to cast further doubt on the information requirement. Third, I attend to a shortcoming in Sumner's theory of welfare, namely that it is unclear which of later and informed assessments are to be treated as authoritative when it comes to the evaluation of a person's welfare. Finally, I suggest that, in combination with 'welfarism' (to which Sumner subscribes, and which has it that welfare is all that matters from a moral viewpoint), the information requirement entail morally troublesome conclusions: e.g. the conclusion that, from a moral point of view, we should, other things being equal, only to be concerned with the alternative that makes one person slightly better off in respect of welfare instead of also being morally concerned with the alternative that makes one person very happy.

Keywords Autonomy · Information · Theory of welfare · Wayne Sumner · Welfare · Welfarism · Well-being

1 Introduction

Any plausible moral theory or public policy will either assume or imply that the welfare of individuals matters morally. It would be absurd to deny that our moral assessment of acts and policies depends, at least in part, or indirectly, on their effect on the welfare of individuals. But what is individual welfare? What does it mean to say that a life goes well (or badly) for an individual? This paper is a critical discussion of

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Wayne Sumner's answer to this question. According to Sumner welfare consist of *authentic happiness*.¹

The theory I shall defend does not simply identify well-being with happiness; additionally, it requires that a subjects' endorsement of her conditions of her life, or her experiences of them as satisfying or fulfilling, be authentic. The conditions for authenticity, in turn are twofold; information and autonomy. Welfare therefore consists in authentic happiness (Sumner 1996, p. 139).

In Sect. 2, I shall describe the two requirements that Sumner places on authenticity: information and autonomy; I shall also seek to convey the motivation for these requirements. In Sect. 3, I discuss some challenges to his theory.

I offer the present critical assessment because, since Sumner presented his theory of welfare in *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, his position has attracted surprisingly little comment in the literature.² This is hard to explain. Sumner is an established, highly regarded moral philosopher, and one of the relatively few philosophers who have treated the concept of welfare at book length.³ Furthermore, his theory is original and involves subtle responses to well-known problems for standard theories of welfare such as welfare hedonism and the preference account. 'Welfare hedonism' is the view that welfare consists solely in the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain experienced by an individual.⁴

2 Sumner's Requirements for Welfare: Experience, Information and Autonomy

2.1 Experience and Information

First of all we should note that Sumner's theory can be called a *subjective* theory of welfare, in the sense that for a state of affairs to make me better off (or worse off) it has to enter into my experience (Sumner 1996, pp. 139, 172).⁵ In accepting this *experience requirement* (ER), Sumner enters the company of some other theories, including welfare hedonism (Sumner 2000, p. 19). But what separates his theory from these alternatives is that, in order to count as welfare, an experience needs, for Sumner, not only to be pleasurable but also *authentic*. For welfare hedonists ER functions as a necessary and sufficient condition for welfare. For Sumner it is only a necessary condition.

¹ Sumner has not changed his views on these matters since his 1996 book. See Sumner (2000, 2004 p. 44) and (2006).

² Reviews of Sumner's book, including Sobel (1998) and Eggleston (1999), have appeared. Neither Sobel nor Eggleston critically comments on Sumner's own theory of welfare. In his review, Vallentyne (1999) devotes about one page to some critical points about Sumner's theory of welfare. The objections I try to sketch in this critical note are not influenced by Vallentyne.

³ Griffin (1986), Bykvist (1998), Brülde (1998), Feldman (2004) and Egonsson (2007) are also members of this exclusive club.

⁴ For different versions of hedonism (e.g. psychological hedonism and ethical hedonism), see Kagan (1998, p. 31). For different versions of welfare hedonism, see Feldman (2004), Crisp (2006) and Tännsjö (1998).

⁵ Sometimes the label 'subjective theory of welfare' is also used to cover preference theories of welfare (see Sumner 1996, p. 113), although some preference theories do not incorporate ER, i.e. do not make experience a necessary condition of welfare: e.g. see Griffin (1986) for the latter claim. And sometimes the variety of welfare hedonism at issue is not classified as a subjective theory but instead as an objective theory: e.g. see Brülde (2007a) for this claim.

Let us turn to the *information requirement* (IR). Sumner imposes this requirement because he believes that welfare hedonism is vulnerable to challenges based on several types of counter-example. One of these is the well-known case of:

The Deceived Businessman

Imagine a man who, at the end of his life, thinks he has achieved everything he wanted in life: his wife and family love him, he is a respected member of the community, and he has founded a successful business. Or so he thinks. In reality he has been completely deceived: his wife cheated on him, his daughter and son were only nice to him so that they would be able to borrow the car, and other members of the community pretended to respect him for the sake of the charitable contributions he sometimes made. For some time his business partner has been embezzling funds from the company, which will soon go bankrupt.⁶

Taken at face value, welfare hedonism would imply that the life of the deceived businessman has gone very well—indeed better than most lives—in respect of welfare. However, to Sumner this assessment is unconvincing (Sumner 1996, p. 98), and many observers would probably agree that this life is not the kind of life that the businessman would really want, or that we would want for ourselves or for our loved ones. So welfare hedonism must be wrong. The worry, one might say, is that the businessman's own evaluation of his life does not reflect the way his life *really* is.⁷

So Sumner is motivated to formulate a theory of welfare that (i) accepts ER as a necessary condition, but (ii) does not generate the supposedly wrong answer in cases like that of the deceived businessman. As we already know, Sumner's theory places two kinds of restriction on the scope of experiences constitutive of welfare. One of these is the information requirement. Sumner does not give a short definition of this requirement. However, the following quotation points up some of its central features:

...what we are seeking is an adequate subjective theory of welfare, one on which the subject's point of view on her life is authoritative for determining when the life is going well for *her*. By connecting welfare with happiness we have interpreted that point of view as an endorsement or affirmation of the conditions of her life. When that endorsement is based on a clear view of those conditions, we have no grounds for questioning its authority: in this respect, the individual is sovereign over her well-being... But when it is based, ... on a misreading of those conditions then its authority is open to question, since it is unclear whether or not she is endorsing her life *as it really is*. Where someone is deceived or deluded about her circumstances, in sectors of her life which clearly matter to her, the question is whether the affirmation she professes is genuine or authentic. In order for a subject's endorsement of her life to accurately reflect her own priorities, her point of view—in order for it to be truly hers—it must be authentic, which in turns requires that it be informed (Sumner 1996, p.160).

From this passage and others⁸, it would appear that IR amounts to this:

⁶ See Kagan (1998, pp. 34–35), for an example like this.

⁷ For a philosopher who believes that bitter truth is preferable to comfortable delusion when it comes to theories of welfare see Griffin (1986, p. 9).

⁸ For e.g. it is clear that the information and autonomy requirements are regarded by Sumner as *necessary* requirements for welfare: "For the happiness theory, the minimal wherewithal for having welfare is being a subject who is capable of being satisfied or unsatisfied by the conditions of one's life. In the case of paradigm human subjects with complex cognitive capacities, more is necessary as well: their judgements about the quality of their lives must be authentic". (Sumner 1996, p. 178)

The information requirement: In order for a person P to have welfare, it is necessary that the experiences P has in sectors of her life (which clearly matters to her) are not based on false beliefs.

In other words, whatever happiness you experience, it must not be caused by false beliefs if it is to count as welfare for you. It is clear from the quotation that the subject need not be informed about everything concerning her life in order to make a proper assessment of her welfare. The information need only concern “sectors of her life which clearly matter to her”. But given this description of what kinds of information are relevant, we must also ask: how well informed must an autonomous person be if her experience of happiness is to count as welfare? According to Sumner a person is well informed when no new information will make her evaluate her life *differently* (i.e. better or worse) than she would in a situation in which she did not have the information (*ibid.*, p. 160).⁹

What, exactly, is Sumner’s response to the case of the deceived businessman? Did the businessman acquire welfare? According to IR, the obvious answer is that he did not have welfare because he was uninformed—assuming, of course, that the businessman is autonomous and thus satisfies another of Sumner’s requirements for welfare. However, if the businessman is informed about the deception and now seeks to make a retrospective evaluation of his life during the deception, it is, according to Sumner, an open question whether he now believes that he had welfare then. As Sumner says: “When we reassess our lives in retrospect, and from a superior epistemic vantage point, *there is no right answer to the question of what our reaction should be*—that is surely up to us” (Sumner 1996, p. 159).

So, if the businessman is informed about the way in which he has been deceived, there are, according to Sumner, two obvious ways in which he can evaluate his life (*ibid.*, pp. 160–161). One possibility is that he will re-evaluate the life he had during the deception and claim: “I believed that my life was going well, but I can see now that it was all an illusion or a farce played out by unscrupulous actors. Therefore, I now believe that my life did not go well”. If this is the businessman’s response, it will follow that he did not, given IR, enjoy welfare when he was deceived. Another possibility is that, in re-evaluating his life, he will simply confirm his earlier evaluation. He might say: “Well they cheated me, but my life was great anyway”. So whether or not the businessman had welfare, and indeed how much he had, depends on the way in which he *decides* to evaluate his life when he is properly informed about it.

However, what is more important, Sumner seems here to introduce a condition for judging welfare in retrospect, for he make it clear that the businessman who has become aware of his own deception can *decide* to assess the period of deception either as one containing welfare or as one containing no welfare at all. So it is not only *authentic experiences* that count when it comes to the estimation of welfare in *retrospect*, but also what the person in question *decides when informed now about the past*. So in order to get a clearer view of Sumner’s theory, we have to add:

The condition for judging welfare in retrospect: If P assess his life in retrospect and is informed, now, about matters in the past that he did not know about in the past, P can *decide now* whether or not he had welfare *then*.

⁹ See Egonsson (2007, pp. 38–42), for a critical discussion of IR focusing on what it is be ‘well-informed’ and in particular how one becomes so.

Note that this condition is a requirement not for possessing welfare, but *evaluating* it in certain situations. In situations in which an autonomous person's own evaluation of his or her own welfare is not based on false beliefs, that person has welfare if he believes that that is what he has (or had); and in such cases there is no need for the above-mentioned condition.

But, let me now turn to the autonomy requirement, before embarking on critical discussion of Sumner's theory.

2.2 Autonomy

Sumner endorses the *autonomy requirement* (AR) in response to objections to welfare hedonism differing from the one just described. Some philosophers reject welfare hedonism because it generates the verdict that a slave might experience a life containing as much, or more, welfare than a free person with a high level of welfare. According to Sumner (and others, such as Sen 1987, pp. 45–46) we should deny that such experiences count as welfare. Sumner formulates his point like this:

Why are we reluctant to take at face value the life satisfaction reported by the hopeless beggar, the precarious landless labourer, the dominated housewife, the hardened unemployed or the over-exhausted coolie? Presumably because we suspect that the standards which their self-assessments reflect have been artificially lowered or distorted by processes of indoctrination or exploitation... [T]he problem is not that their values are objectively mistaken but that they have never had the opportunity to form their own values at all. They do not lack enlightenment [information] ... they lack autonomy. Let us say, then, that (self-assessed) happiness or life satisfaction counts as well-being [i.e. welfare] only when it is autonomous (Sumner 1996, pp. 166–167).

It would appear from this passage that the autonomy requirement amounts to something like this:

The autonomy requirement (AR): In order for a person P to have welfare, it is necessary that the experiences P has in sectors of her life that really matter to her are not the product of, for example, coercion, indoctrination or exploitation.

In other words, self-assessments of happiness accurately report welfare *only* when there is good reason to believe that they have *not* been influenced by such things as coercion or indoctrination. Undue influence of this sort can be exerted on the subject during the process in which she is *forming* her values. Once the subject has done that, it can be exerted on her ambition, or effort, *to live according to these values*. Sumner does not fully develop AR: he does not, for example, specify what he takes to be the best account of the nature of autonomy. However, he believes that when such a theory is worked out, the implication for his theory of welfare will be clear (p. 171).

The autonomy requirement points towards the answer philosophers like Sumner and Sen want in cases like that of the hopeless beggar—namely, that such people's self-assessments are not really their own and therefore do not give an accurate measure of welfare. In other words, their self-assessments of their lives should not be taken as genuine records of their welfare. However, where there is no evidence that the subject in question is non-autonomous, and where the subject is also suitably informed, we should treat the subject's experiences of her own life as an authoritative guide to her level of welfare (ibid., p. 171).

It is important to note that IR and AR can be taken as necessary requirements for welfare if, and only if, the individuals in question *are capable* of being informed or of being autonomous. Suppose we accept that small children and animals are not autonomous. It is clear from Sumner's text that they would still be welfare subjects:

For the happiness theory [i.e. Sumner's theory of welfare as authentic happiness], the minimal wherewithal for having welfare is being a subject who is capable of being satisfied or unsatisfied by the conditions of one's life. In the case of paradigm human subjects with complex cognitive capacities, more is necessary as well: their judgments about the quality of their lives must be authentic. Where these more sophisticated skills are absent, the *sine qua non* is the baseline ability to experience one's life, in the living of it, as agreeable or disagreeable. The most primitive form of this ability is the capacity for enjoyment and suffering, or for pleasure and pain. If we call this capacity sentience then we may say that on the happiness theory the class of core welfare subjects is populated by all sentient creatures (ibid., p. 178).

In essence, then, Sumner's theory of welfare seems to amount to the following. ER is a necessary condition for welfare no matter what kind of individual you are (animal, child or adult). However, if, besides the capacity to experience such things as pleasure or pain, you have the capacity to be informed and/or to be autonomous (as animals and young children arguably do not), IR and AR are necessary conditions for welfare.

Together, these three conditions seem to give a sufficient condition for welfare. If you, as an autonomous and well informed person, experience pleasure, you enjoy or accrue positive welfare. On the other hand, if you, as an autonomous and well informed person, experience pain, you enjoy or accrue negative welfare. But as has already been hinted, something is missing from this picture. When it comes to a retrospective evaluation of situations like that of the deceived businessman, the businessman can, when he is informed about the deception, *decide* that his life involved welfare even when he was being deceived.

3 Some Challenges to Sumner's Theory

Let us now turn to a critical discussion of Sumner's requirements. I begin by presenting a problem with Sumner's use of the case of the deceived businessman. Then I present a case designed to show that IR is not obviously plausible. Following this, I want to spell out a shortcoming with Sumner's theory that is raised by IR. Finally, I present a problem arising from the fact that Sumner combines his theory of welfare with welfarism. The latter is the view that only welfare matters from a moral point of view.

One may be less than fully convinced that the case of the deceived businessman shows welfare hedonism to be wrong. In this paragraph, I deploy some of Fred Feldman's ideas (Feldman 2004, pp. 41–43) in order to query the implications of this well-known counterexample to welfare hedonism—and, say, be prepared to swap lives with the businessman, or at least accept that he has a good life—might be that people have difficulty *imagining* that such a life can be great.¹⁰ If everybody were deceiving us, we would *usually* find out: we would probably find out by accident, or because people in real life are not that good at acting, or because we are suspicious by nature. At any rate, when we find out, we will be pained to learn that

¹⁰ The same kind of reasoning can be used to weaken the 'happy slave' objection to welfare hedonism by pointing to difficulties in imagining what the life of a happy slave would be like.

our family and colleagues have deceived us for years, especially if we had readily made the assumption that they loved us. And such a life would certainly be miserable. But the businessman does not know anything about the deception. He only experiences pleasure in his life, so from his perspective, it does not seem right to claim that his life do not contain welfare. The central point here is that some people's intuitions concerning the strength of the case may be coloured by issues that have little or nothing to do with welfare, but testify to a lack of imagination. Even if people's intuitions are not distorted by such a lack of imagination, they may, as we shall see, be distorted by other facts.

As I see it, the apparent force of the case may also derive from the fact that we do not know anything about what *preferences* the businessman has regarding the information that could make him reevaluate his life. Let us imagine a case in which the businessman does not *want* to be informed about certain important parts of his life—e.g. because he does not *want* to put his present, pleasant experiences at risk (they might cease to be available in light of new information). If this were the case, I guess more people would be reluctant to deny that the life of the businessman contains welfare when it comes to important parts of his life.

Second, I want to present a case designed to throw doubt on the idea that IR is a necessary condition for welfare. I am well aware of the fact that people have different intuitions when confronted with examples like that of the deceived businessman and the one that I will present in the following. So in this area I believe that we should not expect a knock-down argument involving, say, a compelling counter-example. My hope is merely that the following case can at least point in a certain direction and make us sceptical of IR.

Examples designed to show that an individual cannot have positive welfare at the time he is deceived or mistaken about reality are plentiful.¹¹ Recall the deceived businessman. But note that it would also follow from Sumner's theory, that an individual cannot have *negative* welfare in a period during which he is deceived, or through his own failing mistaken, about reality. Let me give one example that might turn your intuitions away from Sumner's theory.

The fear and discomfort of a fake threat

You are on your way to a shop. Suddenly, a person stops right in front of you and points a gun to your head. He says that he will kill you when he has counted to 10. He begins to count and you have never felt worse in your life. When he reaches 10 you think that's it. But instead the person walks away without firing the gun. What you did not know was that the gun was not a real gun but a toy one. If you had been aware of this fact, you would not have been so miserable and you would just have run away when the gun was pointed at your head. So you were not informed about facts that would have made you experience this important situation differently.

According to Sumner we cannot say that you had negative welfare at the time when the person pointed the gun at your head. To know that—you need to be informed about the relevant facts. You will then be able to decide whether or not you had negative welfare during the hold up. But it seems unconvincing to claim that, at that moment at which you experienced some of the worst moments of your life, you did not experience negative welfare. Furthermore, if you will *never* know these vital facts, you will never know if you had negative welfare during the hold up. In fact, it appears that none of us know if our lives, right now, contain welfare. Again, this is not an adequate use of the word 'welfare'. Recall that Sumner says "... the best theory about the nature of welfare is the one which is most faithful to our ordinary concept and our ordinary experience".

¹¹ Of course, once he is informed about the deception the businessman can decide that his life during the deception contained positive welfare.

Third, IR faces what I shall call a *shortcoming concerning assessment authority over time*. Let us, using Sumner's distinction between happiness (pleasant experiences) and welfare, assume the following: between t1 and t2 (that is, over period A) you enjoy intense happiness in a certain part of your life,¹² but your evaluation is non-authentic (because you lack information about parts of your life that really matter to you). In this situation, following Sumner, we must deny that you are experiencing genuine welfare—although you believe that you are. Assume also, that between t2 and t3 (period B) you enjoy a great deal of welfare and thus are able to evaluate your life in an authentic way (you are well informed and autonomous). Furthermore, in period B you have got hold of some information X which makes it clear to you that you *did not have welfare* in period A. Assume, furthermore, that from t3 to t4 (period C) you again enjoy a great deal of welfare and thus are able to evaluate your life in an authentic way. In that period you are also well aware of the information X concerning period A. However, because you are older and have other values, you believe, during period C, that you *did have welfare* in period A. And so it could go on—switching between the claims: 'In A I did not have welfare', 'In A I did have welfare', 'In A I did not have welfare', and so on.

I see at least one problem with this. If we accept Sumner's requirements, which of the *authentic* assessments made in B and C is authoritative? Sumner's theory of welfare does not explicitly answer that question. This is *not* to say that we should abandon IR because of this observation. My point is just that IR needs to be specified so that it allows us to compare welfare assessments over time where all the requirements for welfare are satisfied. On one interpretation Sumner could say that in B your assessment of A is authoritative compared to your assessment in A. And in C your assessment of A is authoritative compared to your assessment in A and B. So the welfare for you in period A can change *relative* to your evaluations of period A in periods B and C.

Finally, taken together, Sumner's theory of welfare and his commitment in *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics* to welfarism generate moral problems. In what follows I will present some cases in order to make this point clear. But before that, let me say a few words about welfarism. Welfarism is a view about *the value of welfare* whereas Sumner's theory of welfare is a view about *the nature of welfare*. Welfarism says that welfare is *all* that matters from a moral viewpoint. In other words, according to welfarism welfare is the only moral factor we should be concerned about when determining what acts are morally right. Utilitarians are well-known adherents of welfarism, as they typically believe that the only factor that matters morally, is the maximisation of welfare. Let me begin with the following case:

The Visit to the Hospital

By making a visit to the hospital, you can benefit just one of two people you know, A or B, as you only have time to visit one of them. A and B are equally well off in respect of welfare before your visit. They are both terminally ill and both will die in about three months. If you visit A, you will make him very happy. However, you do not like A, and if you visit him it will be because you would be critical of yourself if you did not. If you visit A, you will *not* tell A that you do not like him, and it is clear that A will believe you are visiting him because you like him. It is also clear that *if* A knew that you were only visiting him to avoid a bad conscience and was aware that you did not like him at all A would claim that your visit did not bring him welfare. So, if you visit A, you will deceive him, but he will be very happy. If, on the other

¹² For stylistic reasons, when I subsequently refer to period A I leave out the phrase 'in a certain part of your life'.

hand you visit B, he will enjoy your visit somewhat, but it will only make him slightly better off in terms of welfare, because he already knows that you do not like him and that you visit him for the sake of your own conscience. So, visiting B does not involve deception and makes B slightly better off in terms of welfare.

Now IR, combined with Sumner's commitment to welfarism,¹³ suggests that, from a moral point of view and assuming that things are otherwise comparable or equal, you should only take B into account. This is because, under these commitments, B is the only person whose welfare will be changed by your visit. Person A will be very happy if you visit him; but he will not accumulate welfare, because what makes him happy is the result of a deception that would, if it were revealed, make him evaluate your visit negatively. Sumner's combined views imply that, other things being equal, one ought only to be concerned with the alternative that makes one person slightly better off in respect of welfare instead of also being morally concerned with the alternative that makes one person very happy. That does not seem right.

To deal with this case, one could hold that increases in welfare count, from a moral point of view, for *more* than comparable increases in happiness, but that increases in happiness (although it is not welfare) always have *some* moral weight. However, it is clear that if Sumner followed this strategy he would be in a position, in cases like the hospital case, to say that one should also take into account the happiness of person B; for he could then say that, from a moral point of view, we should indeed make an effort to increase happiness. However, if this is Sumner's strategy we need a rationale for attaching less *moral* value to uninformed and non-autonomous happiness than we attach to informed and autonomous happiness; and it seems to me that any rationale for this asymmetry is doomed to fit poorly with Sumner's thinking. For either he has to give up his *welfarism* and argue that happiness caused by false beliefs (though not identical to welfare) is a moral relevant factor *next* to welfare.¹⁴ So welfare is not all that matters morally. Or he has to give up his *theory of welfare* and argue that happiness to a person caused by false beliefs do contribute to the welfare of that person. One could here argue that an amount of authentic happiness count for more welfare than a comparable and equal amount of unauthentic happiness, but that unauthentic happiness, in a non-instrumental sense, do make some contribution to welfare.¹⁵ But if one accepts this suggestion, one would also have to give up the view that the information and autonomy requirements are necessary requirements for welfare.

It is, of course, true that the problem here with these moral challenges need not be Sumner's theory of welfare. The problem may be welfarism. However, my objections point, at least, to an indirect problem with Sumner's theory of welfare *and* an internal problem with Sumner's overall view of the nature and value of welfare.

4 Conclusion

Sumner's theory of welfare delivers what appear to be the right answers in certain cases that are often used as counterexamples to theories of welfare in which the experience requirement functions as a necessary and sufficient condition for welfare. However, in his

¹³ Sumner (1996) defends both welfarism and his theory of welfare.

¹⁴ A moral factor it that which determines the moral value of an act. For this definition of a moral factor see Kagan (1998).

¹⁵ This possibility is mentioned by Sumner (1996, p. 161) and by Brülde (2007b, p. 36).

effort to construct a plausible account of experience-based welfare, Sumner imposes two requirements on experience that can certainly be queried.

In this paper I have tried to explain why a well-known case like that of the deceived businessman need not support the information requirement in the way that Sumner believes it does. I have also introduced a case that makes the information requirement seem less attractive and attended to what I allege is a shortcoming in Sumner's theory of welfare (namely, that it is unclear which of later and informed assessments are authoritative when it comes to the evaluation of a person's welfare over time). Finally, I have attempted to show that, in combination with welfarism, Sumner's requirements imply, implausibly that we e.g. should, other things being equal, only to be concerned with the alternative that makes one person slightly better off in respect of welfare instead of also being morally concerned with the alternative that makes one person very happy.

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