

Achievement, welfare and consequentialism

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In 'Utilitarianism and accomplishment' (2000: 264-67) Roger Crisp argues that any attempt to defend utilitarianism by moving from a hedonist account of well-being to one that allows a significant role for accomplishment thereby admits a 'Trojan Horse' (267).¹ To abandon hedonism in favour of a conception of well-being that incorporates achievement is to take the first step down a slippery slope toward the collapse of the other two pillars of utilitarian morality: welfarism and consequentialism. We shall argue that Crisp's arguments do not support these conclusions.

We begin with welfarism. Crisp defines it thus: 'Well-being is the only value. Everything good must be good *for* some being or beings' (264). The first part of this definition is potentially misleading, since it makes it sound as if welfarism adopts a monistic account of value, in which well-being is the only good thing. But well-being, as Crisp notes, when discussing hedonism, is best understood as consisting in a balance of good things over bad in one's life. So understood, welfarism is silent on the issue of what things are good; it places a structural restriction on what kinds of things can be good: they must be things that are good *for* beings. It is a separate task to supply the content to fit this structure by determining what things are good, and welfarists differ in their answers: hedonists traditionally assert that pleasure alone is good; others add further items such as knowledge and virtue.

Why is the thought that a person's well-being depends importantly on what they accomplish a threat to welfarism? An accomplishment is judged both by its outcome or product and by the manner of the performance itself. But an activity or outcome is only an achievement if it is worthwhile, and whether it is worthwhile will depend on whether it exhibits what Crisp asserts to be 'non-welfarist values' (266), such as beauty, grace, importance, or style - excellences which welfarism, in Crisp's view, cannot accommodate because they cannot be 'cashed out in welfarist terms', or 'reduced to the value of well-being' (266).

Here Crisp rests his case, but it is worth trying to get clearer about the difficulties in order to see if the welfarist can meet them. Take Crisp's example of Niels Bohr, whose work on the structure of the atom was a considerable achievement. Part of Bohr's achievement was that he advanced our knowledge, and knowledge is a value a welfarist can accommodate. She could hold that knowledge is intrinsically good for its possessor. But Crisp's point is that not all advances in knowledge are equally significant, the more significant they are the greater the achievement. So one who counts the blades of grass on a lawn has achieved little or nothing. Can the welfarist offer an account of what makes one advance in knowledge more important than another?

The welfarist can make one of two responses, to each of which there are objections. The first is to say that the importance of knowledge is measured by its contribution to other aspects of well-being - Bohr's discovery, it might be claimed, led on to inventions that improved health and increased pleasure. There are a number of difficulties with this response. First, it is doubtfully true. Bohr's discovery paved the way to the discovery of nuclear weapons. Second, and more importantly, it makes the value of knowledge instrumental. Knowledge is good only in so far as it leads to other desirable things, such as health or pleasure. But the welfarist was trying to capture the thought that (significant) knowledge is good in itself, and not simply as a means to

¹ All otherwise unattributed page references are to Crisp's paper.

other goods. The second response the welfarist can make is to say that what makes a piece of knowledge important is to be judged by standards internal to our conception of the value of knowledge. Knowledge is significant, perhaps, if its object is significant. Bohr's discovery was especially valuable because it uncovered the fundamental workings of the universe.

But this claim seems to pose a problem for the welfarist. For we might ask: why is it particularly valuable to discover the ultimate structure of things rather than to count blades of grass? If you are a welfarist it seems that in order to show Bohr's knowledge to be more valuable than the grass-counter's you need first to show that the former furthers well-being more than the latter. But how so? To argue here that Bohr's knowledge furthers well-being more than the grass-counter's by adverting to the fact that Bohr's discovery was an achievement results in an explanatory circle: Bohr's discovery added to well-being because it is an achievement; yet it is an achievement because it added to well-being.

The welfarist might try to escape by claiming that Bohr's discovery added to well-being not because it was an achievement but for some other reason. We have already ruled out, however, an appeal to an instrumental reason here. Thus the welfarist's position would be more plausible if she could take the other option, and deny that what makes Bohr's discovery an achievement is that it added to well-being. But can she do this?

Recall that the welfarist claim about the good is a structural one - it is that all goods must be goods *with a certain form*. They must be good for someone; they are good only if they make some being's life go better. The formal theory offers no substantive account of what well-being comprises. That is determined by what things are in fact good and bad for beings. The theory does not state that what determines whether some action or outcome instantiates some particular value is the bearing of that action or outcome on human welfare. It is not that we have some prior conception of well-being which we then use to determine whether Bohr's discovery is revealing and significant, or whether Babe Ruth's performance is athletic, stylish, and graceful. Rather, if Bohr's discovery and Ruth's playing exhibit the relevant qualities to a high degree, measured by whatever are the appropriate criteria, then their lives exhibit great goods, which are, according to the theory, great goods for them and various others. In determining what constitutes an achievement we just *are*, in part, determining what it is for a life to go well.²

The welfarist seems, then, to have a response to Crisp's main concern. But she faces another, well-known and much discussed, problem about certain of the goods by which we measure achievement, such as beauty. Beauty is a good, but is it so only in virtue of being good for beings? There is a long-standing debate as to whether there can be beauty without sentience. It is clear on which side of this debate the welfarist must come down. She must either deny that anything can be beautiful in a world without sentient beings, or deny that beauty is valuable except insofar as its existence has an impact on the welfare of some being. Whether the welfarist

² There are parallels here with two interpretations of Aristotle. On the first, Aristotle has some prior conception of the good for humans and the virtues are then judged as excellent insofar as they are conducive to that end. On the second, championed by McDowell (1995), in determining which qualities of character are excellences we are determining what the good life for humans is.

can ultimately defend such a conception of beauty is debatable, but her view is not obviously false or incoherent.

Crisp's second main claim is that the incorporation of achievement into the account of welfare is incompatible with consequentialism, because it brings with it various notions, such as 'non-welfarist values ... agent-causation, and the intrinsic evaluation of actions' which, while 'perfectly at home in non-consequentialist moral theories' (267), do not, Crisp thinks, sit comfortably in consequentialism. Crisp's conclusion is unwarranted, as we shall now show. A great strength of consequentialism is its capacity to accommodate various notions that might seem more at home in the opposition camp and make them its own.

Crisp raises two difficulties for consequentialism which would result from adopting an achievement conception of welfare. The first concerns the fact that performance-assessments focus on the intrinsic value of an action, and not just on its outcome. It was the way Babe Ruth struck a baseball, as well as the results, for which we admire him. But this poses no problem for act-consequentialism which defines a right action as one which brings about the best possible state of affairs. *If* actions can have intrinsic value, then consequentialism can capture that value in its calculations. What determines which action is right is the total amount of value produced by that action - including any intrinsic value the act may have.³

The second difficulty Crisp raises concerns agent-causation. He states that '[a]ccording to consequentialism, all that matters is that the best possible future state of affairs or history of the world happens: it does not matter who brings it about, or how' (266). Citing Williams's famous example of Jim and the Indians (1973: 98-100), Crisp claims that a consequentialist can 'put no weight on the notion of agent-causation'; he must think that the 'fact that it is Jim who will have to shoot to bring about the best state of affairs is irrelevant' (266). Outcome-assessments of accomplishment also, Crisp claims, rely on the idea of agent-causation; an agent's accomplishment in bringing about some good only adds to his well-being because *he* brought it about. The moral is that agent-causation is a non-consequentialist interloper with which good consequentialists should have no truck.

There are two crucial errors in this line of reasoning. First, it is false that, from a consequentialist perspective, it does not matter who brings about a certain result, or how. For how the result is brought about, or by whom, may affect the value, and consequentialism must be able to capture all the values there are. It follows that the notion of agent-causation can have a perfectly valid place in consequentialist reasoning. The consequentialist can allow that human agency is relevant to value. As Nagel points out (1986: 179), a consequentialist could hold that the state of affairs in which a harm is brought about by an agent is worse than the state of affairs where a similar harm comes about in the course of nature.⁴ The consequentialist can even allow that whether an outcome is brought about by the agent *herself* or by others can affect value. For reasons of autonomy, we might think it better that people do certain things for themselves, rather than have things done for them. What consequentialism cannot allow is the thought that the agent

³ 'Consequentialism' is thus a rather misleading name for the theory, but we are stuck with it. The point we make here has been much discussed in recent literature. It is forcefully made by Parfit (1984: 26) and by many other writers, including ourselves, in 1991 and 1993.

⁴ Nagel does not himself endorse this claim.

has the right, or even the duty, just in virtue of its being her agency that is involved, not to perform a certain kind of act herself, even though this will result in someone else performing a worse act. This underlies the consequentialist objection to Jim refusing to shoot the Indian.

Parfit's distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative theories or rules (1984: 27) yields a more precise account of the conditions under which the consequentialist can legitimately appeal to agent-causation. Agent-neutral rules or theories give agents a common aim; agent-relative ones give each agent a different aim. What act-consequentialism denies is that agent-relative rules - which may include rules forbidding the agent to cause some state of affairs - have any place in determining which actions are right. But reference to agent-causation is acceptable (assuming that it is relevant to value) in an agent-neutral rule.

We can make this clearer using a formalisation we have developed elsewhere (1991, 1993). The thought that we should encourage people to help themselves can be captured thus in an agent-neutral rule:

(1) (AN) $\forall x(xS[\forall y(y \text{ looks after } y)])$

(where 'S' abbreviates 'should, *pro tanto*, ensure to the best of her ability that').

This rule tells each of us to bring it about that everyone (including oneself) is, as far as possible, self-reliant. According to this rule it is better that each person helps *herself* rather than that others do things for her, but the rule itself is quite suitable for consequentialism. In particular, in the unlikely or perverse case where she could do more to foster self-help in others by being more dependent herself, it instructs her not to help herself but to be dependent. Compare this to its agent-relative counterpart:

(2) (AR) $\forall x(xS[x \text{ looks after } x])$

(2) is clearly not a rule acceptable to consequentialism; it requires the agent to look after herself even when she could do more good by not doing so. In particular, it would forbid her to abandon self-reliance even when, by so doing, she could better foster it in others. A consequentialist thought that self-reliance is good is captured by (1) not (2).

Turn now to Jim and the Indians. The rule which Jim is inclined to follow is:

(3) (AR) $\forall x(xS[\forall y(x \text{ does not (directly) kill } y)])$

which forbids him to kill one Indian even to save nineteen. The rule the consequentialist would have him follow is:

(4) (AN) $\forall x(xS[\forall y\forall z(y \text{ does not (directly) kill } z)])$.

(4) involves agent-causation. It forbids people to bring about the deaths of others by their own direct agency, and would normally require the agent not to do any killing himself. But Jim is in a perverse circumstance where by killing one himself he can prevent nineteen being killed by the agency of another. (4) clearly enjoins him to kill.

Crisp's second error, which stems from the first, is to suppose that accomplishment involves the notion of agent-causation in a way uncongenial to consequentialism. Crisp points

out, correctly, that '[t]he contribution of Michelangelo's accomplishment to his well-being depends on the fact that it was *he* who painted the Sistine ceiling' (266-67). If well-being depends in part on the achievement of great things by an agent's own activity then consequentialism will tell us, *inter alia*, to promote such achievement. We have seen that consequentialism has no difficulty in accommodating agent-causation, provided that it is captured in agent-neutral rules. Thus, of the following pair, we would expect consequentialism to adopt the first.

- (5) (AN) $\forall x(xS[\forall y(y \text{ brings about excellent products by } y\text{'s own agency}))]$
(6) (AR) $\forall x(xS[x \text{ brings about excellent products by } x\text{'s own agency}]])$

(5) enjoins all to bring it about that each fosters her own form of excellence. Since (5) is an agent-neutral rule, and so apt for a consequentialist theory, it enjoins you to desist achieving in the perverse case where you can do more to promote achievement thereby. Curiously, Crisp makes this point himself, but seems to think that it counts against the incorporation of achievement in a consequentialist theory. He points out that if Michelangelo had had an even more brilliant pupil whom he had allowed to paint the Sistine ceiling, then it would have been the pupil, and not Michelangelo, who would have been credited with the achievement. Michelangelo would not have added to *his own* accomplishment. Quite so, but quite irrelevant as an objection to allowing achievement to figure as a value in consequentialism. Consequentialism, in the form of (5), does not tell you to maximise *your own* achievement (as (6) does), but to maximise achievement in general. If Michelangelo could have increased the amount of achievement in the world by encouraging his pupil to paint the ceiling then, everything else equal, he would have acted rightly, according to consequentialism, to forego one of his greatest achievements so that his pupil could accomplish something even greater.

Abandoning hedonism and introducing achievement into one's account of well-being undermines neither welfarism nor consequentialism. From the utilitarian perspective this is good news, since hedonism is not the right account of well-being. Since any plausible consequentialism must incorporate the value of well-being, this is also good news from the consequentialist perspective. From the deontological perspective occupied by the authors of this paper it would have been nice if Crisp's argument were sound, since we would then only have had to show that well-being incorporates accomplishment in order to defeat consequentialism. But consequentialism is more flexible, more resilient and more accommodating than Crisp allows.

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