

Fitting Attitudes and Solitary Goods

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that Bykvist's recent challenges to the fitting attitude account of value (FA) can be successfully met. The challenge from solitary goods claims that FA cannot account for the value of states of affairs which necessarily rule out the presence of favouring subjects. I point out the modal reasons why FA can account for solitary goods by appealing to contemplative attitudes. Bykvist's second challenge, the 'distance problem', questions the ability of FA to match facts about the intensity of fitting attitudes and facts about value, particularly in the case of solitary goods. I argue that this challenge can be met by including the notion of a veil of ignorance in the formulation of FA, and understanding its role as bracketing the relevance of certain facts when determining the fittingness of attitudes to states of affairs.

1. The problem of solitary goods

Kristen Bykvist (2009) has recently presented an ingenious criticism of the fitting attitude account of value (FA). According to the version of FA Bykvist discusses, something is good if and only if it is fitting to favour it if one were to contemplate it. The much discussed wrong kind of reasons problem points to cases in which it is fitting to favour something which is clearly not good. Bykvist's strategy is the opposite: he points to cases in which something is good (or bad) and yet it is not the case that it

is fitting to favour (or disfavour) it.¹ These are cases where a good (or bad) state of affairs includes in itself the absence of favouring subjects ('solitary goods'), for instance the state: there being happy egrets but no favourers (p. 5).²

Bykvist runs slightly different arguments for different candidate attitudes for 'favouring'. Some favouring attitudes entail that the favoured state of affairs obtains, other favouring attitudes do not. Favouring attitudes of the first kind include intentionally bringing about p and taking truth-entailing pleasure in p. Bykvist points to solitary goods which are logically impossible to favour this way, and which therefore it cannot be fitting to favour this way. His examples are:

There being happy egrets but no past, present, or future agents (p. 5).

There being happy egrets but no one who takes pleasure in anything (p. 9).

To intentionally bring it about that there are happy egrets but no agents (i.e. beings capable of intentionally bringing something about) is an impossible state of affairs. Likewise, to take pleasure in there being happy egrets but no one who takes pleasure in anything is an impossible state of affairs if such pleasure-taking entails the obtaining of its object. Therefore, these cannot be fitting attitudes for such solitary goods.

Favouring attitudes that do not entail that the favoured state of affairs obtains include merely pursuing p, being disposed to choose p, taking belief-entailing pleasure in p. The problem with the first two attitudes is that favouring a solitary good such as there being happy egrets but no agents would be tantamount to merely pursuing or being disposed to choose what is not possible to bring about. Bykvist points out that it cannot be fitting to pursue or be disposed to choose what cannot be brought about (p. 7). Therefore these are not suitable candidates of 'favouring' for such solitary goods.

Taking belief-entailing pleasure in p means that my pleasure in p entails my belief that p, but not p's truth. I take belief-entailing pleasure in having a warm bath if my pleasure in having a bath entails my

¹ The objection was hinted at in Dancy 2000.

² All page-only references are to Bykvist 2009.

belief that I am having a warm bath. Bykvist argues that there are solitary goods which it would be irrational to favour in this way, such as:

There being happy egrets but no past, present, or future believers (p. 8).

It would be irrational to take belief-entailing pleasure in this state, because the attitude entails the belief that there are happy egrets but no past, present, or future believers. Such belief is self-undermining, because having the belief would necessarily preclude the obtaining of the state of affairs or the truth of the proposition believed. Following Frederic Schick (2003, p. 99), such beliefs have ‘not properly believable’ contents. So, since taking belief-entailing pleasure in such goods would be based on a self-undermining belief, taking belief-entailing pleasure in such goods would be irrational. And if it is irrational to favour such goods in this way, then it cannot be fitting to favour such goods in this way (p. 8).

Each of these solitary goods thus presents a challenge to FA’s candidate attitudes of favouring. Bykvist believes that the only way for FA to escape the counterexamples is to try out some other favouring attitude which is not truth- or belief-entailing, and then goes on to criticize such attempts on different grounds (the ‘distance problem’ that occupies most of the remainder of his article, pp. 13-23). In what follows I aim to defend FA from Bykvist’s objections. In section 2 I explain why FA can reply to the argument from solitary goods by legitimately appealing to favouring attitudes that are not truth- or belief-entailing. Bykvist recognizes that such appeal is legitimate, but I think it would strengthen the case for FA to precisely spell out the *modal* reasons why the appeal is legitimate. In section 3 I consider Bykvist’s ‘distance problem’. I suggest that a refinement of FA via the notion of the veil of ignorance, mentioned and rejected by Bykvist himself, is more promising than Bykvist claims in providing a response to the distance problem.

2. Solitary goods and modal flexibility

Consider again the following solitary good:

There being happy egrets but no past, present, or future believers.

Let us call this state q . According to Bykvist, it would be irrational to take belief-entailing pleasure in this state, because the attitude entails the belief that there are happy egrets but no past, present, or future believers. Such belief is self-undermining, because having the belief would necessarily preclude the obtaining of the state of affairs or the truth of the proposition believed. Therefore it cannot be fitting to favour q by taking belief-entailing pleasure in q .

Bykvist however concedes that the challenge from solitary goods can be met if the FA theorist focuses on favouring attitudes that are not truth- or belief-entailing:

perhaps the emotional reactions involved in day-dreaming and reading fiction would fit the bill, since in these cases we seem to emotionally respond to objects and situations that we know do not exist. (p. 14)

All we need to do in this case is to simply imagine or contemplate q as a mere possibility: surely it is then fitting to take what we may call contemplative pleasure in q . Indeed, this is arguably what Bykvist and his readers do when considering solitary goods: surely it must be fitting to regard them as good, or they would not count as potential counterexamples to FA. But regarding them as good is, likewise, is an attitude that does not require believing that they actually exist (or their actually existing).

It is worth explaining why the challenge from solitary goods fails once favouring is defined by reference to contemplative attitudes. Bykvist appears to assume that, in order to be fitting, a belief-

entailing attitude towards a state of affairs and that state of affairs must possibly coexist.³ Since there is no world where *q* is the case and somebody believes that *q*, taking belief-entailing pleasure in *q* is self-undermining, and therefore cannot be fitting. The modal assumption seems to make sense for belief-entailing attitudes. To believe that *p* is to believe that *p* is true, or that *p* is actually the case. Even if *p* is not actually the case, that *p* at least logically *could* be the case in the world where someone believes that *p* is central to the rationality of any further attitude based on such a belief. But it would be a mistake to generalize this reasonable modal assumption to all fitting attitudes (Bykvist does *not* commit this mistake, but his not spelling out the modal assumption might invite an erroneous reading of his argument). In particular, the fittingness of the merely contemplative attitudes referred to above does not require that the contemplation and the contemplated state of affairs possibly belong to the same world. Indeed, when we contemplate solitary goods such as *q*, we know that *q* must belong to a different world than ours; a world where no believers, and a fortiori no contemplators, are present. There is no self-undermining in contemplating happy egrets but no contemplators, as, unlike belief, contemplation of *p* is not necessarily contemplation that *p* is actually the case. In turn, it is not irrational to take contemplative pleasure in happy egrets but no contemplators. Thus solitary goods such as *q* appear to be modally special values: the fittingness of favouring them with contemplative pleasure depends on the necessary distinctness of the ‘favouring world’ and the ‘favoured world’. This is not the case for most day-dreaming or fiction scenarios: usually these represent possible worlds that at least logically might coexist with our favouring them in the fitting way.

The challenge from solitary goods thus fails because not all fitting favouring attitudes are subject to the requirement that the favouring world and the favoured world must possibly coincide. The requirement seems to apply with some plausibility to belief-entailing attitudes, but not to merely contemplative attitudes. Highlighting what we may call the modal flexibility of fittingness relations also helps FA in responding to a similar challenge previously raised by Jonathan Dancy with the following ‘solitary evil’:

³ Confirmed by the author in correspondence.

the lonely and sudden death of someone without friends or relatives, far from any possible help. We could say that this is bad, even if there is nobody who has reasons to grieve or indeed reasons of any other sort. (Dancy 2000: 171)

However, though (for the sake of argument) it is not fitting for anyone in the dead person's world to respond in any way, because everyone is too far to even contemplate the scenario, surely it is at least fitting for us readers, contemplating this scenario, to take contemplative displeasure in such a solitary evil. This is so even if we could not logically both have the fitting response and be part of that scenario, because then it would no longer be a solitary death.

The modal flexibility also shows that FA does not need to resort to a dubious notion of 'potential reasons' to favour (also mentioned in Dancy 2000) or potential fittingness in order to account for solitary goods and evils.⁴ It is true that agents in the dead person's world would have reason to grieve (or it would be fitting for them to grieve), for instance if they knew about the solitary death. But, if they knew about the solitary death, then the death would no longer be 'solitary' in a philosophically interesting sense. Dancy asked us to consider a state of affairs such that no agent, in that world, has reasons 'of any sort' to respond to the lonely death, given the remoteness of the event. Accounting for the badness of the state of affairs by shifting attention to a near possible world where the lonely death occurs and agents are in a position to respond, and therefore have reasons to respond to it, amounts to changing the nature of the state of affairs whose value we needed to account for.

Focussing on the fittingness of contemplative responses given from a different world avoids this problem. In order to take contemplative displeasure at the lonely death we do not need to imagine

⁴ Cp. Derek Parfit's recent definition of 'reason-involving goodness': when we call something good in this sense, 'we mean roughly that there are certain kinds of facts about this thing's nature, or properties, that would in certain situations give us or others strong reasons to respond to this thing in some positive way' (Parfit 2011, p. 38).

ourselves as belonging to the contemplated world and responding to it from within: therefore our merely contemplating it does not change the state of affairs responded to. Since there is no modal requirement that (dis)favouring world and (dis)favoured world possibly coincide, the badness of a solitary death can be accounted for by the fittingness of responding with contemplative displeasure from a different world.

3. The distance problem and the veil of ignorance

In the second part of his article, Bykvist proceeds to object to a version of FA in terms of contemplative responses on the basis of the ‘distance problem’. In a nutshell, the problem is that degrees of value do not necessarily correspond to degrees of intensity of fitting responses (p. 16). Suppose the FA theorist were to claim that x is better than y if and only if it would be fitting to favour x more than y, if one contemplated x and y. Now, since it seems to be fitting to favour x (a certain amount of pleasure for one’s child) more than y (the same amount of pleasure for another child), it would follow that x is better than y. But this is counterintuitive. The problem seems to be that facts about the intensity of fitting attitudes are determined *inter alia* by facts about the favouring subject’s relation to, or ‘distance’ from the state of affairs, whereas facts about value are not. The distance may be personal, that is, refer to personal relationships the subject may have with regards to the state of affairs, as in one’s child case. But it can also be temporal: it may be fitting to take more displeasure in a recent tragedy involving a few people than in the Punic wars, despite the latter arguably being a worse event. Importantly, distance can also be modal: it seems fitting to take more displeasure in yesterday’s actual 100 deaths than in yesterday’s merely possible 101 deaths, despite the latter arguably being a worse state of affairs.

The FA theorist, as Bykvist suggests, might try to counter this difficulty by abstracting from distancing factors in the definition of value, for example by stipulating that the favouring subject is at ‘zero distance’ from the state of affairs (p. 18).

(FA)* x is good to degree n =df. it would be fitting to favour x to degree n if one contemplated x and were at zero distance from x.

What is the ‘zero distance’ from x? Bykvist considers and rejects the following interpretation of the ‘zero distance’ condition:⁵ the subject is at zero distance from a state of affairs when she is ‘behind a veil of ignorance and did not know who one was, which time was present, or which world was actual’ (p. 19). This version suggests that x is better than y =df. it would be fitting to favour x more than y, if one contemplated x and y and were behind a veil of ignorance from both. Consider again x (a certain amount of pleasure for one’s child) and y (the same amount of pleasure for another child). Since from behind the veil of ignorance one does not know whether the child in x is one’s own, from behind the veil of ignorance it seems to be fitting to favour x as much as y. Thus x does not come out implausibly as better than y. Bykvist has two complaints against this version. I think the FA* theorist can successfully reply to both.

Before illustrating Bykvist’s objections to the veil of ignorance account, let me note that Bykvist claims that FA* is a simplification of a general account of fittingness of response elaborated in Oddie 2005 (pp. 218-26). Bykvist does note, however, that Oddie does not argue for a *reduction* of goodness to the fittingness of a response as articulated in FA*. Briefly, Oddie argues that the fittingness of a

⁵ Bykvist also mentions a different interpretation, whereby a subject is at zero distance from a state of affairs if ‘she imagines it as actual, present and in the case of states of other people (and perhaps even animals), as happening to herself’ (p. 19). Bykvist rightly criticizes this version. In order to decide what it is fitting to favour in the case of states of affairs consisting of temporal wholes, or involving different people, we would need to either choose one temporal or personal perspective among others – thus being at some non-zero distance from the other perspectives – or else adopt an impossible ‘view from nowhere’ after taking up each different perspective (ibid.).

response is a function of two factors: the magnitude of the good contemplated and the distance of the contemplator from the good in question. Now, while FA* might be argued to be a consequence of Oddie's functional account for the special case where a contemplator is at zero distance from a contemplated good, Oddie's account does not endow any particular locus with a privileged status, nor does it privilege a particular response as *the* fitting response. In this respect Oddie's account is different from the veil of ignorance account that I am defending here. My proposal can be regarded as either privileging a certain position (i.e. the one behind the veil of ignorance), or else giving some independent content to the notion of being at zero distance.

Bykvist's first complaint stems from the fact that any state such as *q* (there being happy egrets and no past, present, or future believers) 'will bear its non-actuality on its sleeve' (p. 20). That is, in self-consciously contemplating states such as *q*, we cannot help knowing that they are not actual, that is, that they belong to a different possible world. In other words, the world where *q* is the case cannot coincide with the favouring world and we, *as contemplators of q*, cannot help knowing this. So the veil of ignorance will not work in these cases, and any subject will necessarily be at some non-zero modal distance from such states. Now, consider the state of affairs *r*:

There being unhappy egrets but no past, present, or future contemplators.

No subject can be at zero modal distance from *r*. We know that *r* cannot be part of the actual world. But FA* states that *x* is good to degree *n* =df. it would be fitting to favour *x* to degree *n* if one contemplated *x* and were at zero distance from *x*. Since no subject can be at zero distance from *r*, the antecedent of the *definiens* is necessarily false for *r*. The whole counterfactual *definiens* therefore comes out as vacuously true, and *r* comes out as good to some degree. But this is certainly implausible.⁶

⁶ One referee pointed out that if it is impossible to be at a zero distance from *r*, then there might not be any fact of the matter concerning whether *r* would be favoured or disfavoured under such impossible circumstances. So the relevant counterfactual might lack a truth-value, rather than being vacuously true. This modifies the content but not the force of Bykvist's first objection against FA*: if the *definiens* lacks a truth-value, so does any claim about the value of *r*. But this seems implausible: *r* seems to be positively bad.

Bykvist's second complaint is that the actual value of a state of affairs will not always be reflected by what it is fitting to feel about it from a merely imagined perspective, such as the one we adopt by imagining states of affairs from behind the veil of ignorance (p. 20). 'When one self-consciously imagines p one does not form a belief that p obtains; one still maintains one's disbelief in p' (ibid.). This epistemic stance, which Bykvist calls 'suspension of disbelief' with respect to p, is a distancing factor which makes a difference to the fittingness of one's response. For instance,

it is fitting to take more pleasure in there being happy gnomes when one believes (truly) that this state of affairs obtains than when one merely imagines it as actual, (ibid.)

although there being happy gnomes seems to be equally good whether the state of affairs is truly believed to obtain or is merely imagined.

The reply to these concerns consists in clarifying and extending the role of the veil of ignorance. Bykvist's first complaint is that the veil of ignorance is necessarily lifted for modal facts about solitary goods like q: one simply *cannot* ignore that q is not actual. However, to ignore such facts can mean either to somehow temporarily forget them, or to not regard them as relevant. The functioning of the veil of ignorance need not be tied to our ability to ignore certain facts about a contemplated state of affairs in the first sense. It can be plausibly suggested that the veil of ignorance has, instead, a normative role: it is meant to bracket or silence the normative relevance of a certain number of facts (modal, temporal, about one's identity) to the fittingness of responses to the state of affairs. Likewise, being at zero distance from a state of affairs means disregarding the relevance of such facts when contemplating the state of affairs. It is beside the point whether these facts are already known to the subject contemplating the state of affairs, or even whether the subject cannot help knowing them. The

veil of ignorance does not require one to ‘do as if one didn’t know’ certain facts, but rather to ‘do as if they didn’t count’.⁷

To ignore that q is not actual while self-consciously contemplating q is perhaps impossible; but it seems quite feasible to bracket or not regard as relevant the fact that q is not actual, in order to determine which response is fitting to q at zero distance. To see how this can work, compare solitary goods such as q against non-solitary, possibly actual, states of affairs, for example the state s:

There being many happy egrets (as many as in q) and a few unhappy egrets.

Despite q bearing its non-actuality on its sleeve, it seems in principle feasible to bracket the relevance of such known modal fact, and take more contemplative pleasure in q than in s, thus favouring q more than s at zero distance. Since it is fitting, at zero distance, to favour q more than s, it follows that q is better than s. (Of course, once the veil is lifted, it may be fitting to favour s more than q, since s, though containing less happiness than q, is possibly actual and even realizable whereas q is not.) Thus the notions of zero distance and veil of ignorance seem to be applicable in this way also in the case of solitary goods. If so, FA*’s counterfactual *definiens* will have much less chance of being vacuously true, and the value of states like r above (there being unhappy egrets but no past, present, or future contemplators) will not be distorted by FA*. It would be fitting to disfavour r if one contemplated r and one were at zero distance from r. One *can* be at zero distance from r. Therefore r is bad.

Bykvist’s second complaint can be replied to by extending the range of distancing factors that the veil of ignorance asks us to bracket. If one’s epistemic stance towards p (be it belief or disbelief or suspension of disbelief) is one such distancing factor, to the extent that it is fitting to take more pleasure in happy gnomes one (truly) believes to exist than in happy gnomes one merely imagines,

⁷ This interpretation seems to fit Rawls’s notion of the veil of ignorance. The original position does not require that people be in fact able to ignore certain facts about themselves (e.g. historical location, social status, personal characteristics etc.). What it requires is that one be able to bracket the relevance of such facts when imagining finding oneself in the original position (Rawls 1999, pp.16-17, 104). Moreover, also in Rawls the veil of ignorance has a normative role: ‘veiling’ certain facts makes a difference to which principles of justice it would be *rational* to choose. Likewise, for the FA theorist ‘veiling’ certain facts makes a difference to which states of affairs it would be fitting to favour more.

then the veil of ignorance will bracket epistemic distancing factors too. Epistemic relations to the state of affairs affect the fittingness of responses in a similar way to one's modal, temporal, or personal relations; presumably, other things being equal, good (bad) states one knows or believes to obtain are closer to one, and thus merit a more positive (negative) response, than good (bad) states one merely imagines.

In other words, when determining the fittingness of responses to p at zero distance from p , we are supposed to contemplate p while disregarding the relevance of the fact that we believe or not that p is or was or will ever be the case. Again, it is beside the point whether one is able to somehow forget one's own epistemic relation to the states of affairs. For some states, we cannot help knowing that we do or do not believe them to obtain, but all one needs to do to occupy the zero distance position is to bracket the relevance to fittingness of such epistemic facts. If the application of the veil of ignorance to one's epistemic relations is thus plausible, there being happy gnomes will merit the same response at zero distance, whether we believe or merely suspend our disbelief that it is the case. Consequently, there being happy gnomes will have the same value, whether or not we believe that it is the case.

A possible objection to FA* is the following.⁸ It might seem that on FA*, if two states of affairs x and y are of equal value but not at equal distance from some contemplator c , then it is not fitting for c to favour x and y equally. But it seems fitting even for c to favour x and y equally. This would be a fact that FA* cannot capture. However, FA* can capture this fact. If x and y are of equal value, then on FA* it follows that if one contemplated x and y at a zero distance from both, then it would be fitting to favour them equally. Since, given the normative interpretation, anyone (including c) can be at a zero distance from x and y , in the sense that one may ignore the differences in distance from x and y , then it is fitting for anyone (including c) to favour x and y equally. Of course, once the veil of ignorance is lifted, and the unequal distance of x and y from c revealed (according to the appropriate personal, temporal, modal, or epistemic dimension), then (e.g.) it might also be fitting for c to favour x more than y . This would be a *pro tanto* fittingness to be weighed against the *pro tanto* fittingness of c 's

⁸ Thanks to one of the referees for pointing this out.

favouring x and y equally, and the former might well outweigh the latter. If x is a certain amount of happiness one believes to be realizable (say, happiness enjoyed by 100 people tomorrow) and y is the same amount of happiness one knows to be unrealizable (happiness that could have been enjoyed by 100 people 100 years ago), then given their different modal and temporal distance, it might be fitting to favour x more than y *all things considered*—that is, actual unequal distance and imaginary zero distance considered. But the fittingness of favouring them equally behind the veil of ignorance, that is, at zero distance from both, though outweighed, is not therefore cancelled, and thus still serves to define x and y as equally valuable. The obvious fact that we are always located somewhere in modal, temporal, personal, and epistemic space with respect to any state of affairs is perfectly compatible with the standing possibility of ignoring our particular location, in the normative sense outlined above. FA* exploits this possibility as a resource to define value.

No doubt both the normative interpretation of the veil of ignorance and the question of which kinds of facts are to be veiled deserve further exploration, but it seems that a fitting attitude analysis along these lines is available in order to resist Bykvist's objections based on the 'distance problem'.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Bykvist's recent challenges to FA can be successfully met. The challenge from solitary goods can be met by focussing on contemplative attitudes that are not truth- or belief-entailing. Though Bykvist does recognize this reply on FA's part, I have argued that it is important to highlight the modal reasons why contemplative attitudes can resist the challenge: in a fittingness relation, it is not the case that the favouring world and the favoured world must possibly coincide. Bykvist's second challenge questions the ability of FA to match facts about the intensity of fitting attitudes and facts about value, particularly in the case of solitary goods. I have argued that

including the notion of a veil of ignorance in FA, and understanding its role as bracketing the relevance of certain facts, can contribute to meeting Bykvist's second challenge.⁹

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