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Review of “Welfare and Rational Care”

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Book Review

Welfare and Rational Care, Stephen Darwall. Princeton Monographs, 2002. ISBN 0-691-09253-2. 1 photograph, notes, references, acknowledgements, and index. 135 pages.

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Stephen Darwall's *Welfare and Rational Care* is a well and clearly argued critique of informed desire accounts of welfare (according to which a person's welfare is identified with that person's preferences or rational preferences) and a defense of his so-called "rational care" theory, according to which a person's (S's) welfare is identified with what would be rational to do for S insofar as one cares for S for S's own sake.

The fundamental problem for rational preference theories, according to Darwall, is the scope problem, which Darwall nicely illustrates by way of a discussion of Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan*. Jane, for instance, loves Tarzan, but has promised to marry Clayton. Darwall points out that Jane's greatest desire is to do her duty, which, as she sees it, is to go through with her marriage to Clayton. But we would not be inclined to say, Darwall thinks, that by marrying Clayton, Jane thereby promotes her own welfare. She cannot plausibly be said to be doing it because she thinks it is good for *her*. Furthermore, Tarzan, though *he* is in love with Jane, prefers to leave Jane with Clayton, but if we interpret this desire as part of Tarzan's welfare, then we cannot make sense of the claim that Tarzan's preference is self-sacrificing, as was clearly intended by Burroughs. In short, if we assume that whatever a person rationally prefers is part of her welfare, we cannot make sense of self-sacrificing actions. So rational preference theories cannot accommodate the fact that what a person rationally desires and what is good for that person are not necessarily the same.

On the other hand, the rational care theory explains why there is a conceptual gap between what a person rationally prefers and what is good for that person. Since the theory identifies S's good with what it would be rational to want for S insofar as one cares for S for S's own sake, in cases where

S does not care for himself/herself or cares less for himself/herself than S cares for others, S's rational preferences will not correspond with what is in S's welfare. The rational care theory captures the idea that there are times when people do things for reasons other than self-interest. To reject this idea is to rob stories like the story of Tarzan and Jane of their interest and importance, for it reduces their dilemmas not to moral dilemmas but only to practical ones, and denies the possibility of truly heroic action.

Darwall admits that other theories besides the rational care theory can explain why there can be disagreement between what a person rationally desires and what is good for that person. For instance, a theory that lists some things, . g., pleasure,—as intrinsically good could explain how one's rational preferences can diverge from what is actually good for them, since people can be wrong about whether, for instance, some activity will bring them pleasure. But according to Darwall, such accounts fail because, unlike the rational preference account, they cannot accommodate another fundamental feature of welfare: that welfare is an *explicitly normative* concept. As Darwall points out, it is possible for two people to disagree about whether some thing is good for someone without disagreeing about any non-normative facts of the case. Darwall asks us to imagine a person who has the pleasant but illusory belief that her novel has sold 10,000 copies, when in fact it has sold only 12. Darwall points out that two people may agree that S's belief is pleasurable but disagree whether the belief is thereby good for S to have. This shows that what is good for S cannot be identified with pleasure or, for that matter, with *anything* non-normative, since for any non-normative fact N there will always remain the question of whether it is good for S that N obtains. Thus, the good cannot be defined in non-normative terms. On the other hand, suppose that S's welfare is that which it is rational to want for S for S's sake, and suppose further that X fits the bill. Then the question of whether X is part of S's welfare will not arise. So the rational welfare account constitutes a true definition of welfare.

Darwall says that the reason rational preference theories *appear* plausible is because they are based on the mistaken idea that a person's welfare is *agent-relative*. The assumption behind rational preferences theories is that to say that X is good for S is to say that S, but not anyone else, has a reason to bring X about. And that, in turn, seems to suggest that S's good will be a matter of what S subjectively prefers. The relationship between the proposition that welfare is agent-relative and the proposition that what is good for S depends only on what S prefers is not a strictly logical connection; it is possible to hold one without the other without self-contradiction. But there is an intuitive relationship between them, because both propositions take it that welfare is in some sense something *subjective*. But given that rational care theory says that S's good is that which it is rational to want for S insofar as one cares for S, it follows that if X is for S's good, *any* person who cares about S will have a reason for doing X. That is, rational care theory holds that if X is part of a person's welfare, that fact gives agent-neutral reasons bringing about X. Darwall thinks that once we see that a person's welfare generates agent-neutral reasons for doing what is best for S, the intuition that what is good for S is limited to what S prefers will lose its force.

The rational care theory would be uninformative if care were itself explicated in terms of doing what is good for a person. In order to avoid this problem, Darwall appeals to a more sophisticated version of the argument Mill makes in *Utilitarianism*, where Mill appeals to natural sympathy to explain why one should be moral. Darwall argues that the theory can appeal to care without defining it if care is a natural kind (just as, for the purposes of scientific theories, we can appeal to

the action of water without first saying what exactly water is). He then provides a sophisticated account of the psychology of empathy and sympathy, which, he says, forms the root of the phenomenon of caring. According to Darwall, sympathetic concern for others is the experience of others as mattering in a way that is not agent relative; that is, when we feel sympathy for another person, we care for that person's good for that person's sake. This fundamental human relationship (like the relationship of respect) is the ground for the rational care theory, insofar as it provides an account of care that does not involve appeal to what is good for the other. So while Darwall rejects the attempt to naturalize welfare in the sense that he argues against a non-normative analysis of the concept of welfare, he embraces a naturalistic basis for the concept of care.

In the final chapter, Darwall argues for a neo-Aristotelian account of the good life, according to which "the best life for a person (in terms of welfare) is one involving appreciative rapport with various forms of agent-neutral value, such as beauty, the worth of living beings, and so on" (17). As Darwall notes, accepting a particular metaethical theory of welfare (e.g., rational care theory), does not commit one to any substantive account of what sorts of things are good for a person. But Darwall says that "if what is good for someone is what it makes sense to want for her for her sake, from the agent-neutral perspective of one caring, then it should not be surprising that whether an activity makes a contribution to her welfare can partly depend on its relation to agent-neutral values" (75). That is, once we give up the idea that what is good for a person is agent-relative in the sense that it depends entirely on what the person prefers, we will no longer have any reason for thinking that the person's good will be entirely subjective. So although Darwall's neo-Aristotelian account of the good life is not implied by rational care theory, it is compatible with it and is part of the basic shift Darwall is urging us to make: to recognize that a person's good cannot simply be understood solely from the subjective point of view.

I have only given an overview of what I take to be the main line of argument in *Welfare and Rational Care*, but there is an enormous amount of philosophical ground here, from a critique of Sidgwick's theory of the good to a long and trenchant defense of neo-Aristotelianism. The book is also a good read, because Darwall's examples are interesting and illuminating. I think it is an important book as well, since, as Darwall suggests, if welfare is not to be identified with the subject's preferences, that allows for non-sentient subjects to have welfare and so would widen the net cast by moral value to anything that could be cared for for its own sake.

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