# Darwall on Welfare as Rational Care

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## DARWALL'S SUBJECT

Darwall's subject is a person's welfare – or to use his synonyms, a person's 'good', 'interest', 'well-being', 'benefit', or 'eudaimonia'.[1] Darwall is satisfied that there is a univocal notion here. I am unsure and shall come back to that question at the end.

Darwall makes both a metaethical and a normative ethical claim about welfare. The metaethical claim concerns what welfare *is*:[2] 'what it is for something to be good for someone *just is* for it to be something one should desire for him for his sake, that is, insofar as one cares for him'. Why should care play this key role? Darwall points out a 'scope problem' about welfare.[3] What counts towards a person's welfare is different from what counts towards the satisfaction of that person's desires, even *rational* desires. I may be charmed by a stranger on a train whom I shall never hear of again and form a rational desire for the stranger's welfare, but the eventual satisfaction of my desire would not in itself enhance *my* welfare. Darwall's claim that welfare is restricted to what someone who cared about the person would want for, and for the sake of, that person has the advantage, among others, of solving this scope problem, though it is hardly the only way to solve it. There is also the example of Sheila:[4]

> By donating all her disposable wealth she can realize an outcome she very much cares about, say, the rebuilding of a city ravaged by war . . . Sheila also has a degenerative disease . . . . Happily, there is a relatively inexpensive drug that can arrest the symptoms . . . she cares so much about rebuilding the city that, even though the difference the cost of the drug would make in the rebuilding effort is quite small . . . , she nonetheless wants . . . to forgo the drug and donate all she has.

[1] Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* [hereafter *WRC*] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 1, 18, 25.
[2] *WRC*, p. 8; see other statements at pp. 4, 7, 11–12, 31.
[3] *WRC*, pp. 25 ff.
[4] *WRC*, p. 43.

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Darwall comments:[5]

> Does caring for her and wanting her welfare dictate your ordering of these outcomes in the same way Sheila does . . . ? It seems obvious that it does not . . . even though Sheila rationally prefers (rebuilding the city), (devoting some of her money to the medicine) is nonetheless . . . more for her good or welfare.

The presence of the idea of care is meant to help explain the crucial difference between benefiting a person and satisfying the person's own aims.

## AN OBVIOUS OBJECTION TO HIS METAETHICAL CLAIM

There is an obvious objection to Darwall's metaethical claim. As he himself states the objection,[6] 'don't we need to understand the idea of welfare first before we can understand what care is?' Is not care a function of what welfare is, not the other way around? Darwall answers:[7] 'a rational care theory of welfare doesn't require a definition of care. It is enough if care or concern exists as a natural psychological kind for us to refer to'. Darwall devotes chapter 3 to making the empirical case for care indeed being a natural kind. The case, once distinguished from matters of empathy (that is, putting oneself in another's shoes, which may, but need not, rise to the further level of caring – that is, to 'sympathetic concern', as Darwall also calls it), rests on a single rather slight piece of evidence – namely, on an experiment of C. D. Batson, which Darwall summarizes like this:[8] 'Introductory psychology students in one of Batson's early experiments hear an audiotape they believe to be a fellow student, Carol, who has to miss a month of classes while hospitalized . . . the subjects are asked if they will help Carol make up missed work'. The students have been divided in two cross-cutting ways. One is a division between 'low empathy' (that is, the students are told merely to listen carefully to the information about Carol they are given) and 'high empathy' (that is, they are told further to imagine how Carol must feel); the other is a division between 'easy escape' (the students will not see Carol later, they are told, as she will finish the course at home) and 'difficult escape' (the students are told that they will have to face Carol when she rejoins the class). Darwall continues: 'Subjects whose empathy is heightened by imagining what Carol must be feeling show a remarkable tendency to help, even in the

[5] *WRC*, pp. 44–5.
[6] *WRC*, p. 47; see also p. 9.
[7] *WRC*, p. 12; see also p. 50.
[8] *WRC*, p. 67; for Batson's research see C. David Batson, *The Altruism Question: Towards a Social-Psychological Answer* (Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1991).

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easy escape condition (71 percent)'. Now, how are we to interpret this experiment? Here is Darwall's interpretation:[9]

> . . . the vicarious distress that high empathy subjects feel comes to have a new object, namely Carol and her predicament . . . the subjects feel an emotion that is directed towards Carol and her plight. Their empathy gives rise to sympathy . . . they come to be distressed at Carol's plight *and* on her behalf. They come to feel concern for her and, consequently, to desire relief from her plight *for her sake*.

But there are, of course, other possible interpretations: for example, that we learn certain of our standards of behaviour by learning about the needs and interests of persons, and that they can motivate us even in the absence of the sorts of feelings of sympathetic concern that Darwall describes.

## HOW GOOD IS HIS SOLUTION?

One thing to be noticed about Darwall's empirical argument is that it focuses on only a particular range of examples. It starts with an example from Mencius: 'a young girl on the verge of falling into a well'.[10] It goes on to an example from Adam Smith: 'I console with you for the loss of your only son!'[11] We eventually come to what is described as Carol's 'predicament' and 'plight'. All pretty strong stuff: we are in the range of cases of death, disaster, danger, difficulty, suffering and harm – cases likely to elicit strong reactions from onlookers. Another thing to notice is that welfare can also be at stake, and can motivate persons, in a very different range of cases, involving no death, disaster, or the rest, but involving instead well-off persons who can still substantially be benefited – say, nephews and nieces with a bachelor uncle who shrewdly promotes their welfare. There are two obvious questions about Darwall's claim that caring is a natural psychological kind: (i) Does it even fit the negative range of cases? Is there an identifiable psychological state typically running through all of these cases: death, difficulty, harm, and so on? (ii) Does it also fit the positive cases: for example, the bachelor uncle?

Take first the negative cases. We know what water is; it is that stuff there. And we have ways of correcting ourselves in identifying examples of water; we have criteria for *same* stuff. But can I say, even in the negative range of cases, that I know what sympathetic concern is? Can I say it is this psychological phenomenon here? Are there criteria for same phenomenon? We should have to be able to identify occurrences

[9] *WRC*, p. 68.
[10] *WRC*, p. 50.
[11] *WRC*, p. 61.

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of sympathetic concern in cases ranging from an onlooker's reaction to the child teetering on the edge of the well to a person who, after careful reflection, decides on a policy of giving money to mothers with babies begging in the streets of Calcutta, and then does it *for them, for their sake*. I find the first question – the question about the negative range – difficult, but I am sceptical that in these cases there is a natural kind.

Now, the second question. I am much more sceptical that this natural kind is to be found in the case of the bachelor uncle. The bachelor uncle cares about his nieces and nephews. But does he *care* in Darwall's sense? I have said that the uncle is shrewd. Might he not know what his nieces and nephews are like, have good values himself, know how genuinely to help them along, and coolly do so for them, for their sake? Where is the natural kind here – the natural kind that is supposed also to appear in the negative cases?

At this point, Darwall may want to remind me that he introduces the natural kind in the course of a metaethical account of what welfare *is*. The account is meant to explain 'welfare' – that *notion* – through the idea of what a person who cares for someone should want for that person. It is not the claim that, whenever a person acts to benefit another, this natural kind will be present. I accept that. What I am sceptical about is the *existence* of the natural kind. It seems not to exist. So the obvious objection to Darwall's explanation of welfare still stands.

I am also troubled by the fact that our feelings of sympathetic concern can sometimes be distorted by sentimentality. One can be moved by what *looks* like sympathetic concern to acts of indulgence that may not benefit, and may even harm, the object of one's concern. But, as Darwall says,[12] 'In order for a thing to be in a person's interest it must be something someone who cared about the person would *rationally* want for him for his sake'. Exactly. But what is the standard of rationality at work here? The obvious answer is that the person who cares must get it right, that what he or she wants really will be beneficial. But what is the standard for getting it right? One might propose Hume's standard in his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste': one gets it right when one's sympathetic concern is honed by exposure to all relevant facts and to all requirements of logic. But that pushes the question back to the adequacy of Hume's standard. It seems to me that the mere fact of surviving exposure to relevant facts is not a strong enough standard to explain prudential value. We need, and there exists, a stronger standard: one's sympathetic concerns being formed by proper appreciation of the nature of the object of concern. But then

[12] *WRC*, p. 48.

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the direction of explanation would not run, as Darwall wants, from care to welfare.

I doubt that it does run that way. Instead, we identify good-making features of life, and what it is to care for a person for that person's own sake is then given necessary content by these features. This is a list account of welfare (I prefer not to call it an 'objective list' account, because our current understanding of the objective/subjective distinction in ethics makes it too sharp). A list account, of course, must face up to the scope problem. It does so by its requirement that nothing counts as enhancing a person's welfare unless it is subsumable under one or other items on the list. The satisfaction of my desire that the stranger on the train flourish does not contribute to my enjoyment or accomplish any other item on the list, and that is why it does not benefit me. Then there is the normativity problem. If one drops Darwall's sense of caring from the explanation of welfare, how can one explain its normativity?[13] Here the sharpness of the distinction between objective and subjective matters. Darwall assumes a sharp line.[14] On the ancient question, 'Are things valuable because desired or desired because valuable?', Darwall, I think, would say the first. I prefer the relatively neglected third alternative: neither. There is no priority. To identify something as good invokes elements of both understanding and sentiment, with priority to neither. On this account, caring does not disappear; it appears at a different point. This raises very large questions, but I have discussed them more fully elsewhere.[15]

## DARWALL'S NORMATIVE CLAIM

So far I have discussed Darwall's metaethical claim. I shall end with brief remarks about his normative claim. He says,[16] 'My normative claim will be that the best life for human beings is one of significant engagement in activities through which we come into appreciative rapport with agent-neutral values, such as aesthetic beauty, knowledge and understanding, and the worth of living beings'. This Aristotle-inspired account would yield a list of good-making features that would considerably overlap with the list I should want to defend: namely accomplishment, deep personal relations, certain kinds of metaphysical and moral understanding, and so on. It would, however, have no place for a most important feature: common pleasure. Darwall has a place, it is true, for a fairly elevated epiphenomenal pleasure – the sort of

[13] *WRC*, p. 45.
[14] *WRC*, e.g. pp. 45–6.
[15] James Griffin, *Value Judgement: Improving Our Ethical Beliefs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
[16] *WRC*, p. 75; see also p. 17.

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pleasure one detects in Golub's smile, which arises from engaging in activities through which we come into appreciative rapport with agent-neutral values, and which is a *sign* of the activity's value not what *makes* it valuable.[17] But there is also getting pleasure from the ordinary doings of everyday life. It usually comes from having a happy disposition, which in some people may have a genetic basis (for example, ample supplies of seratonin in the brain). One has this common sort of pleasure not as a result of appreciative rapport with agent-neutral values. One is largely passive in regard to it; either one is lucky enough to have a happy disposition or one is not. But common pleasure is clearly an important good. One's bachelor uncle, for example, would want one to have it, and if Prozac would help he might well underwrite it. I do not deny that the elevated sort of pleasure that Darwall speaks of is of great importance, but my calling this other sort of pleasure 'common' is just to contrast it with the 'elevated' sort, and should not be taken to suggest that it is any less important. A happy disposition is great good fortune, and Darwall's normative claim overlooks it.

Still, I must admit that it is hard to know what will constitute an objection to Darwall's normative claim. One can point out apparent counter-examples to it, but then Darwall says,[18] 'I do not claim that appreciating these values [viz. appreciative rapport with certain agent-neutral values] is the only source of human good. I only claim, somewhat vaguely, that it is the most important source'.

But Darwall does not explain this throw-away remark further; for example, there is no indication of what the other sources of human good are and how many of them it would take before his normative claim began to look so incomplete as to be misleading.

## A QUESTION

I end with a speculative question. Consider this example. As moral luck would have it, a young soldier finds himself in a situation in battle in which heroic self-sacrifice is called for. He believes that the battle is for a most important and noble cause. He is a deeply committed supporter of the aims of the war. The particular battle he finds himself in is crucial for success; and the situation in which he personally finds himself in the battle is similarly crucial. His side has almost won the war; another push would do it. He would never forgive himself if he failed. His appreciative rapport with the values at stake gives him a kind of exhilaration that carries him to victory and to his death. Darwall seems to say of this sort of case, that the young man's aim is rational, indeed

[17] *WRC*, pp. 75–6, 95.
[18] *WRC*, p. 80.

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noble, but not part of his welfare (recall the Sheila case). But he also says, in the course of making his normative claim, something that goes the other way. He says,[19] 'When I ask myself what kind of life it makes sense to want for my children, it just seems obvious to me that it is a life in which they engage in activities whose merit and relation to worth they themselves appreciate'. Is this not just what the young man does in his heroic self-sacrifice? What would the shrewd bachelor uncle want for his nephew or niece in such a situation? Would not such a staggering achievement contribute to the goodness of the nephew's or niece's life, even from the point of view of the caring bachelor uncle? Of course, Darwall accepts that one can be benefited (that is, one's welfare can be enhanced) by one's other-directed activity. He says,[20] 'The benefit comes through the appreciation of agent-neutral values – worth and merit – with which these activities connect us'. This prominently includes, Darwall says, the worth of other persons. He accepts a version of what he calls the Aristotelian Thesis, namely,[21] 'That the *prudential value* of virtuous activity consists largely in the appreciation of its connection to worth'. Why, then, would Darwall not say, given those views, that the soldier's heroic act *is* part of his welfare?

Then compare the soldier's life – dead at eighteen with a heroic achievement to his credit – with that of a person who, as luck would have it, never came up against a heroic challenge, never achieved anything out of the ordinary, but was a decent husband and father and lived contentedly to a ripe old age. Perhaps there is no *single* concept of benefit, or of a good life. Perhaps we cannot, in the end, compare a short, noble life of great heroism and a long life of ordinary contentment. Darwall says that our welfare is enhanced through activities that have merit or nobility because the activity involves appreciation of what is worthy of such commitment.[22] He thereby manages to fit nobility and welfare together in harmony. But I wonder whether they do not come apart in disharmony. Is it so clear that there is a univocal notion of 'welfare', 'well-being', 'eudaimonia', 'benefit', or 'a good life'?

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[19] *WRC*, p. 103.
[20] *WRC*, p. 95; see also pp. 94–7.
[21] *WRC*, p. 102.
[22] *WRC*, p. 79.

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