***Welfare: A Guide***

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This guide is developed to help you understand Christopher Heathwood’s chapter, “Welfare,” in *The Routledge Companion to Ethics.* I’ve simplified and condensed much of what Heathwood has said, and unlike Heathwood, I frame the debate in terms of consequentialism. We will be discussing this on 31 May 2018.

Why do *we* care about welfare?

Consequentialist theories analyze what makes an act *right* in terms of how much *goodness* follows from the action. Here we’re going to think about goodness in terms of goodness *for people*. A synonym for *goodness for people* is *welfare*. Sometimes the word *utility* is also used in this sense.

So, in order to have an account of consequentialism, we need to have an account of welfare. As we’ll see, it’s not easy to give an account of welfare. In what follows, we’re going to look at five answers to this question.

What *aren’t* we asking?

There are three questions we aren’t asking:

1. What *helps us* achieve welfare
2. What is good (period)
3. What is a good life

(1) There are many things that are good for us only insofar as they help us increase our welfare. For example, consider why we say that exercise is good. Is exercise good for us all by itself, or is exercise good for us because it helps us achieve other purposes? It seems like it’s the latter. Exercise helps us improve our health, makes us feel good, and gives us a sense of accomplishment.

When we’re talking about things that are good for us, we’re talking about things that are good for us *all by themselves*. The technical term of these things are *intrinsic goods*.

Exercise isn’t good for us all by itself. Exercise is good because it helps us achieve other things, so we say that it is an *instrumental good*. Of course, we have to ask whether the things exercise helps us achieve (health, pleasure, a sense of accomplishment) are themselves intrinsic goods. The idea is that we can keep asking what *these* things are good for until we don’t have an answer. When we don’t have an answer to *why* something is good for us, we say that it’s good for us *all by itself*. That is, it’s an intrinsic good.

(2) We can further distinguish between things that are intrinsically good *for people* and things that are intrinsically good *period*. For example, imagine a world in which there are no people. Can we describe this world as good or bad? For example, do you think this world would be better or worse if it had mathematics, or art, or beautiful vistas in it? If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, you think that what is good for people is distinct from what is good period.

(3) Our question is conceptually distinct from what it is good *to do*. What it is good to do is a *moral* question. It helps us figure out what we *should do*. It’s possible that it’s good *for us* to do good. For example, suppose that we think that pleasure is what is good for people. Then, we might hold that we can achieve pleasure by doing good things. But we needn’t think that. We might think that often doing good things doesn’t bring us pleasure. In this case, what it is good to do and what is good *for us* come apart.

Analysis 1: objective list theories



Welfare, or what’s good for us, consists in possessing certain objective things, such as: happiness, knowledge, friendship, freedom, intellectual activity, creative activity, and the respect of others. It might also include less abstract things like: having a loving family or even eating a lot of chocolate cake.

Problems for this view:

1. **It is hard for a consequentialist to use because it’s non-obvious how to compare things on the list.** This is slightly different from the point Heathwood makes, but I think it is easier to understand. The consequentialist wants to say that we ought to do what will increase the overall welfare. But suppose that we know that one act will increase friendship by a factor of two and that the other act will increase happiness by a factor of three. Which act is better? It depends whether we should weight friendship and happiness equally or if, say, happiness is more important than friendship. But *by how much* is happiness better than friendship? Many find this question unnatural to ask or even insurmountable.
2. **What’s on the objective list are really only instrumental goods.** Remember when we asked the question, “Why is exercise good for us?” Someone who makes this objection thinks that when we can ask the same thing about, say, freedom, we can also come up with an answer. So at best, freedom is only an *instrumental* good.
3. **Some people don’t seem to like the stuff on the objective list.** Consider someone who hates intellectual activity and would prefer to work with her hands all day. Do we really think that engaging in intellectual activity increases her welfare?

Analysis 2: welfare hedonism

Welfare, or what’s good for us, consists of pleasure and the absence of pain. The longer and more intense a pleasure is, the better it is. The longer and more intense pain is, the worse it is.

Problems for this view:

1. **Gross people derive pleasure from gross things**. Consider the Aztec priest who derives immense pleasure from sacrificing humans. Do we really want to say that this pleasure is *good* for the priest? That committing human sacrifices increases his *welfare*?
2. **The experience machine shows that we don’t just care about pleasure.** Imagine that you are in an experience machine. You have the happiest and most pleasurable life imaginable—but it is all an illusion, created by some expert computer programmers. You never learn you’re in a machine. Now imagine that you *actually* live the happiest and most pleasurable life imaginable. Which one is better? If you think that it’s better that you *actually* lived the life, then you think that what’s good for us consists of more than just pleasure.
3. **Some people don’t seem to care about pleasure all that much.** Imagine someone who wants to be a great high altitude climber. High altitude climbing involves a great deal of pain and not that much pleasure. Still, the climber’s primary interest is in accomplishing her goals. Do we really want to say that her welfare would improve if she gave up high altitude climbing and focused on more pleasurable activities? Would her life be *better* for her?

Analysis 3: preferentism

Welfare, or what’s good for us, consists of the fulfillment of our preferences.

Problems for this view:

1. **Some of our preferences just don’t seem like the kind of thing that can affect our happiness.** Suppose I prefer that an exoplanet made entirely of water exists. As it turns out, I’m lucky—such planets exist, although I never learn about them. Do we really want to say that my life is *better* because such a preference was fulfilled?
2. **Sometimes we prefer things because we are confused or ill informed.** Suppose that I badly want to eat a particular chocolate cake that I see in a bakery window. Actually, the chocolate cake is made from kale, which I hate (this part is true) and to which I am deathly allergic (this part is fictitious). Do we really want to say that it would be *good for me* to have satisfied this preference?
3. **Gross people have gross preferences**. Let’s return to the Aztec priest who derives immense pleasure from sacrificing humans. He would prefer to sacrifice humans all day long. Do we really want to say that it’s *good for him* that he do so?

Analysis 4: aim achievementism

Welfare, or what’s good for us, consists in achieving our aims or goals.

Problems for this view:

1. **Some *prima facie* good things don’t seem connected to our aims.** For example, I was thrilled when Nathan Chen won the men’s figure skating world championship. It wasn’t one of my *goals* that Chen won. But given how happy I was when Chen won, doesn’t it seem like it was *good for me* that Chen won?
2. **The view has problems explaining why suffering is bad.** Suppose that I have a powerful headache that falls short of a migraine. I can accomplish everything I normally would want to accomplish. The only difference is that I am in pain while I do so. It seems like I would be better off if I didn’t have this headache. But since the headache doesn’t affect whether or not I achieve my aims, this view has trouble explaining why that is.

Analysis 5: hybridism

Welfare, or what’s good for us, consists in finding pleasures in things that valuable independently of the pleasure we take in them. Another way to put it is that welfare consists in finding pleasures in things that are worth taking pleasure in.

Problems for this view:

1. **It is hard for a consequentialist to use because it’s STILL non-obvious how to compare things on the list.** If I take five units of pleasure in maintaining a friendship and two units of pleasure in helping others, is the latter pleasure better than the former pleasure?
2. **Is there a principled way to determine what is worth taking pleasure in?**