

Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. Pp. xi, 135.

George, feeling stressed and anxious about the criminal investigation into his firm's accounting practices, decides that it would do him good to get away and take a long, relaxing vacation in Bermuda. According to popular informed-desire accounts of a person's good, if George would desire to take a vacation to Bermuda upon being made fully aware of what his experience of the vacation would be like and of all the consequences therein, then this course of action would benefit him. This does not mean that George must actually be privy to whether his fully informed self would desire to travel to Bermuda, but whether he would, according to such an account, determines whether going to Bermuda would benefit George, whether he or anyone else is capable of knowing it.

However, whether the satisfaction of an agent's informed desires is good for him depends upon the psychological health of his informed self. If George's informed self were self-destructive or depressed, or if he just plain disliked himself—in fact, much of psychotherapy is built on trying to cure people of these afflictions of low self-esteem—then George's welfare would not be served by listening to such an advisor. That George's informed self would not have any of these attitudes is not something we can know a priori since, presumably, the way that increases in information would affect George's attitudes depends upon his current psychological proclivities, which are discovered through empirical psychology, not by speculating from our philosophical armchairs. Thus, according to informed-desire accounts, George's informed self, thinking that he is

unworthy of happiness and deserving of misery, may want himself to suffer the shame and ignominy of publicly being caught stealing from the till. But surely George's welfare is not promoted by satisfying the degrading desires of such a self-loathing self.

In *Welfare and Rational Care*, Stephen Darwall argues that the key to understanding a person's good or welfare lies not in informed selves (or not merely in informed selves), but in those agents who stand in a relation of care to that person. While his informed self may be indifferent or even hostile to George, one who cares for George cannot. For this reason, among others, Darwall proposes that an agent's good consists in those things that are rational for one who cares about him to want for him.

Another important reason why Darwall (27) moves to a care account of welfare is to avoid a "scope problem" facing informed-desire accounts. Even if what an agent's informed self would want for him provides that agent with a reason for action, this reason need not be one of self-interest. For example, George, feeling loyal to his firm, may prefer to stick it out and try to weather the investigation, and upon considering all relevant information he might continue to prefer this course of action. While this might give George a reason to stay, it would not be a reason that is grounded in his welfare; in fact, it might require George to "take one for the team," sacrificing his welfare for the sake of his firm. But a friend who was moved solely by his care for George would not desire that George make this sacrifice, even if the friend recognized that George had a duty to his firm to stay. It is thus from the perspective of care, not that of an informed self, that we are able to distinguish reasons of self-interest from reasons of duty.

Darwall's account might appear to entail that only agents who care about themselves have a reason to pursue their good. But as Darwall points out (6), we think

that people such as the depressive or self-loather are mistaken (although not incoherent) in thinking of themselves as unworthy of care, and thus we, if we accept Darwall's account, are committed to thinking that they do have a reason to pursue their good, even if they would deny it. If it is correct, Darwall's account shows that the normativity of an agent's welfare for his own rational deliberation depends not on whether he cares about himself, but rather on the fact that he is *worthy* of care (8).

In addition to the topics just touched on, there are fascinating and suggestive discussions of a number of other important issues in Darwall's book, including the difference between the way that truth is normative for belief and welfare is normative for care; whether a person's good provides *agent-neutral* or *agent-relative* reasons for action; Sidgwick's account of a person's good; and the fit between the rational care metaethical account of the concept of welfare and an intriguing Aristotelian normative account of welfare, according to which the life that is best for a person is constituted by active engagement with and appreciation of agent-neutral values. The central importance of the book, though, lies in the promise of giving a satisfactory metaethical account of a person's good, one that captures both the normativity and scope of a person's good. Therefore I will focus on the strategy—which runs through three of the four chapters of the book—that Darwall uses to elaborate and defend his metaethical account. While I find much of what Darwall says in this book persuasive, especially his criticisms of informed-desire accounts of welfare and his defense of the claim that the normativity of a person's welfare is dependent upon the fact that the person is worthy of care, his care-based alternative seems to me in need of further development. As I will explain, unless

Darwall has more to say about care than he does in the book, his strategy of explicating welfare in terms of care provides less philosophical illumination than advertised.

An initial worry about the viability of Darwall's strategy is that the concept of caring for someone seems to be, in part, the concept of wanting that person to benefit. This would make a definition of welfare circular, as Darwall recognizes: "Obviously care cannot be *defined* in terms of welfare, on pain of circularity" (12). His dissatisfaction is this: if the concept of care is in part defined in terms of welfare, the definition of care cannot be used to *elucidate* the concept of welfare because we first would have to understand welfare before we could understand care (47).

Darwall attempts to sidestep this problem by casting his account of care, not as a definition, but in the mould of natural kind accounts made popular by the pioneering work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam:

...we need not define care, if it is something like a psychological natural kind. Just as we can use a term like 'water' without a prior definition to refer to the natural stuff in the rivers and lakes for empirical inquiry, so likewise might we refer to care for purposes of a metaethical theory of welfare if it is a natural kind. (50)

One lesson from Kripke and Putnam is that the nature of the referent of a natural kind term is not something that one knows merely by knowing the ordinary meaning of the term; empirical inquiry is required. Just as it was an empirical discovery by chemists that the nature of water is H₂O, so too it might be thought that psychologists can discover the nature of care through empirical inquiry, even if the concepts that psychologists use to characterize care's essence are not part of the ordinary meaning of 'care'.

In order for a "natural kind" account of a term to provide the kind of illumination that Darwall seeks, there must be some way to individuate its referent, either

demonstratively or by way of a description, without having recourse to the term. For example, if the descriptions chemists use to pick out water equally applied to alcohol, H₂O could not be singled out as the referent of ‘water’. And the description of water cannot be couched in terms of the concept of water—‘watery substance’, for example, can’t be part of the description of water. This condition of individuation is not motivated by a desire to avoid a circular analysis. It is not that using the concept of water in the descriptions used to pick out the referent of ‘water’ is circular; the charge of circularity is intelligible only when applied to analytic definitions, and natural kind accounts that seek an a posteriori property reduction are not analytic definitions. Rather, the problem is that, given the explanatory ambition of providing an account of water graspable by someone who does not have an antecedent grasp of the concept of water, descriptions of the referent that employ ‘water’ will be of no help.

As it stands, Darwall’s account of care fails to meet this condition. Although he devotes almost one quarter of the book to giving a psychological portrayal of care, Darwall does not succeed in distinguishing the attitude of care or, as he also calls it, sympathetic concern, from its psychological cousins without employing the notion of welfare.

Here is the way that Darwall characterizes the difference between projective empathy and sympathy:

Projective empathy is a projection into the other’s standpoint. Attention is focused, not on the other, but on her situation as we imagine she sees it, or as we think she should see it. This, again, is a fundamental difference from sympathy. In sympathy, it is the other and the relevance of her situation *for her* that we focus on. (63)

Thus, sympathy does not involve, or does not merely involve, seeing a situation as from another person's point of view, but imaginatively takes in what it would feel like to be the person who has that point of view. An example of Darwall's brings out this distinction:

A person grieves the loss of his child, and in sharing his grief projectively my focus is on the child who was lost, not on the person whose grief I share. When, however, I turn my attention to what it must be like to live with this loss, I focus on the person himself and the ways his grief pervades and affects his life. Before my thought was: What a terrible thing—a precious child is lost. Now my thought is: What a terrible thing for him—he has lost his precious child. (63–64)

But this difference in perspective does not distinguish sympathy from proto-sympathetic empathy, in which the grieving person's plight is itself the object of imaginative projection. One can imaginatively project oneself into the self-conscious perspective that the grieving person has on his own plight without yet sympathizing with that person because, as Darwall points out, one may be in the grip of resentment or a desire for revenge and take pleasure in vividly imagining how horrible it must feel to be the person who has just lost his child (65). If this were one's motive for imagining another's plight, one's overall attitude obviously would not be that of sympathetic concern. Sympathy requires that one not only projectively identify with the plight of the grieving parent, imagining what it feels like to be that parent, but also that one does so out of a concern for the parent's welfare. One cannot sincerely claim to care for the parent and then be indifferent to the parent's plight upon realizing how horrible it must feel to be him. Rather, in caring for the parent, one desires to ease the parent's suffering. Even in mere empathy, one can come to feel distressed by imagining the parent's feelings, but this might merely cause one to focus on relieving one's own distress. Sympathy requires that

the distress be directed outward, toward the parent and his plight such that one desires that the parent's own suffering is relieved.

As is evident, this way of characterizing the difference between sympathy and empathy requires making use of the concept of welfare. Unless someone already grasps the concept of welfare, Darwall's characterization won't put him in a position to distinguish sympathy from empathy. Darwall, though, does describe another feature of care that might be thought to help here, which is that caring for another requires that this desire to promote the other's welfare be motivated out of regard for the person herself (68–69). And might not Darwall suggest that having regard for another *for her sake* can be the object of first-personal introspection—that we can simply look inward and know the difference between having regard for someone and having some other attitude toward her? Introspection would thus give us demonstrative access to care and other psychological kinds, just as perception gives us demonstrative access to water and other natural kinds. If we had this kind of direct acquaintance with care, we would not need a description to pick it out. And perhaps this introspective awareness of regard for another wouldn't require an agent to have the concept of welfare.

But is it really plausible that one can tell, just by brute introspective acquaintance, independently of one's grasp of the idea of another's weal and woe, that one's concern for another is a manifestation of care rather than, for example, *respect*? I'm not sure. Take John, who recognizes that he is concerned for an acquaintance, Mary, for her sake, but is wondering whether he is feeling care or respect for her. Both attitudes take persons as their indirect objects and involve the quasi-perceptual state of seeing someone as having worth; insofar as these are features that are open to introspection, John has access

to them. Awareness of these features of his psychological state may allow him to tell that he is feeling either care or respect for Mary, but not which. According to Darwall, what distinguishes care from respect is that care is responsive to a person's welfare whereas respect is responsive to a person's dignity (14–15). If John cares for Mary, then he will desire her to flourish, whereas if he merely respects her, he will be concerned not to violate her autonomy. But then the only way for John to tell whether he cares for, rather than merely respects, Mary, is to decide or discover whether he desires to promote her welfare. Thus, in order for John introspectively to identify his feeling toward Mary as one of care, and not respect, it appears that he needs to exercise the concept of welfare. Appealing to introspection, then, to pick out the referent of 'care' won't allow Darwall to fulfill the ambitious project of giving a rational care account of welfare understandable to those who don't already possess the concept of welfare.

Of course, if one's aim in giving an account of welfare were merely to make explicit its conceptual links, a circular definition of welfare in terms of care needn't be avoided, as Darwall takes pains to do. Locating a concept in its conceptual surrounds can certainly engender a kind of elucidation that philosophers often seek, making the concept's inferential potential explicit in a way that had been only implicitly understood before. Seen in this light, what Darwall may have shown is that the concepts of care and welfare are irreducibly bound to each other, and that no reductive account of welfare, such as an informed-desire account, that fails to recognize this link can succeed.

In an area of ethics in which it is difficult to come up with genuinely new proposals, not mere variants of the standard views, Darwall's book is a breath of fresh air. Although, as I have indicated, I find Darwall's account of care in need of further

elaboration if it is to satisfy his explanatory ambitions, this is a project eminently worth pursuing.

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