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**Neutral and Relative Value**

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Amongst normative reasons for action, a distinction is commonly made between the agent-relative and the agent-neutral. The fact that I have promised to pick you up from work is a reason for me to do that; the fact that bugging your phone would violate your privacy is a reason against it. The first of these is a fact about me, and a reason just for me; the second is not a fact about me, and a reason for everyone.

A distinction can also be drawn between relative and neutral attributions of value. Suppose my daughter and your son are competing for a job and my daughter gets it. Then it would make sense for us to react differently to the same event. It would make sense for me to think that what has happened is good and to celebrate it, but for you to think it is bad and be disappointed by it. If someone else, observing this difference, were to ask which of us is correct, the right response would be to reject the question: although our judgements differ, we are not really disagreeing. It is like the kind of difference-without-disagreement that there is when a positional judgement is relative to the perspective of an observer. When one card player says that the draw pile is on the left and the other says it is on the right, it is easy to explain how both can be speaking truly: the first is saying that it is on the left-relative-to-her, the second that it is on the right-relative-to-him. The parents’ judgements seem to display the same difference-without-disagreement. The job news is good-relative-to-me and bad-relative-to-you. However, not all value judgements are like this. Is the pleasure that some people get from violent pornography good or bad? When you answer that question, you do seem to be disagreeing with someone who gives a different answer. The judgement you are making, of course, is a judgement *about* only some people – those who get this kind of pleasure. But is their getting it good or bad? Different answers to that question do seem to contradict each other.[[1]](#endnote-2) They cannot be reconciled by relativizing them to the evaluator ([Wallace 2010: 518](#_ENREF_48)).

That gives us a distinction between two kinds of value-judgement. We can say that the first kind makes attributions of relative value, and the second neutral value. Examining the tenability of this distinction and enquiring about its significance is the topic of the chapter.

The parents in the example just given are not agents but interested observers, so the relativity of their value-judgements is not agent-relativity. However, in the literature on relative value, the main focus of attention is on *agent*-relative value, because of the bearing this has on the possibilities open to a consequentialist ethical theory.

Consequentialism, as I shall understand it here, is the broad family of ethical theories whose common feature is the claim that the rightness of an action is fully determined by its relationship to an evaluative ranking of states of affairs (“determined”, in the sense that this relationship is what *makes* an action right).[[2]](#endnote-3),[[3]](#endnote-4) To fill out a particular theory in this family, one must specify the relevant relationship and the evaluative ranking. How broad a range of possibilities does that leave open? If its ranking of states of affairs is relativized to agents, some writers maintain, a consequentialist theory can accommodate much of the content of moral “common sense” ([Sen 1982](#_ENREF_38); [Dreier 1993](#_ENREF_12); [Louise 2004](#_ENREF_19); [Portmore 2005](#_ENREF_29); [Portmore 2011](#_ENREF_31)). It can recognize constraints against performing certain bad kinds of actions, even when doing so will prevent more actions of the same type from being performed by others. If the rightness of my action depends on the value relative to me of the state of affairs it produces, and its being a state of affairs in which *I* torture someone makes it very bad relative to me, it could still be wrong for me to torture someone, even to prevent two tortures. A theory of this kind also allows my personal relationships and projects to bear directly on what it is right for me to do – so that it can be right to look after the welfare of my own children when with the same amount of effort and resources I could instead have benefited a larger number of other children more greatly. Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that any consistent set of opinions about right action can be consequentialized in this way – that for any such set of opinions, it is possible to construct a consequentialist theory that endorses them ([Dreier 1993: 23](#_ENREF_12); [Louise 2004: 536](#_ENREF_19)).

I turn to this issue from Section III, examining the viability of relative-value consequentialist theories and some of the difficulties they face. But I begin with the prior question of how we should understand the notion of relative value itself.

**I: Relative Value and “Good for”.**

The existence of relative goodness is controversial. More work is needed to defend and explain it than simply to offer examples like the one above, of the parents whose children are competing. An obvious first thought is that it is not really true that the parents are reacting to “the same event”. What I judge to be good is my daughter’s success; what you judge to be bad is your son’s failure: so we are actually attributing value to different objects, and that explains how we are not disagreeing.

However, despite the availability of that reply, the example does seem to draw our attention to something that merits further examination. Suppose we change the example, so that our children are not competing. They are applying for different, equally good jobs, and both succeed. Now two good things have happened, as both of us should be able to see. Even if your son is a complete stranger to me, I should be able to appreciate that it is a good thing that this young person has got a job. It makes sense for me to respond positively to that fact. However, it doesn’t make sense for me to respond as positively to your son’s news as to my daughter’s. It is fitting for me to celebrate her news, but not his. Her connection to me means that I properly value her success more highly. It’s not just that I do happen to value it more highly: it is more valu*able*, for me.

But how exactly are we to explain the content of claims about relative value such as these? What is the relation between the property of being good-relative-to that is attributed in such remarks, and what we are talking about when we use the ordinary English word “good” ([Schroeder 2007a: Sect. II](#_ENREF_36))? Ordinary English does not appear to have a phrase that expresses the kind of relativity that advocates of relative value believe in. It does have the phrase “good for”. But none of the three different meanings that that phrase can ordinarily have seems to attribute this kind of relative value. “Object *O* is good for person *P*” can mean (i) *O* benefits *P* or (ii) *O* serves *P*’s purposes or (iii) *O* is good according to *P*. But none of these coincides with what advocates of relative value are claiming. Perhaps my daughter’s success does benefit me or serve my purposes; but whether or not that is so, neither of those things need be what I am thinking when I think that her success is good. And nor is the claim that my daughter’s success is good-relative-to-me simply equivalent to the claim that, according to me, my daughter’s success is good. For one thing, that fails to distinguish the relative value of my daughter’s success from the neutral value of your son’s – for it is also true that, according to me, his success is good too. And for another, it does not allow for the possibility of failing to recognize something’s relative value. If a depressive illness leaves me unmoved by my daughter’s success, that could prevent it from being good according to me, but it would not remove its relative value: it would remain celebration-worthy by me. We need to say this in order to explain how my depression would be an impairment – a failure to respond fittingly to that good event.

Some writers express thoughts about relative value by using the metaphor of an evaluative “perspective” – thereby emphasizing the analogy with the perspective-relativity of positional judgements that we noticed above. But this metaphor calls for further explanation. It needs to be shown how it makes judgements of relative value distinct from “good for” judgements of type (iii).

So we need a clearer explanation of what it is for value to be relative to a valuer. The most helpful way to do that is to pursue the thought that good things are those that are fittingly favoured, and that what is fittingly favoured depends on the favourer ([Garcia 1986](#_ENREF_14); [Portmore 2007](#_ENREF_30)).

**II: Goodness and Fittingness**

That thought is central to a distinctive and longstanding tradition of theorizing about value. Within this tradition, good things are thought of as the fitting objects of favourable responses, and bad things of unfavourable ones.[[4]](#endnote-5)

In approaching that tradition, the best way to think of “fittingness” is as a name for the relationship we assert between a response-type and its object when we use evaluative words containing suffixes like “-worthy”, “-able”, “-ful”, “-some”, or “-ing”: “praiseworthy”, “desirable”, “shameful”, “awesome”, “boring”.[[5]](#endnote-6) Saying that an action is praiseworthy is equivalent, on this usage, to saying that it is a fitting object of praise – or, as we can also say, that it calls for praise.[[6]](#endnote-7) When we say this, however, some caution is required. The words containing such suffixes are not always evaluative: if you say that an event is “boring”, for example, you could be saying only that it causes boredom, and not that it is boredom-*worthy*. And if we use “fittingness” to express the latter, “-worthiness” relation, it has to be acknowledged that we are departing from ordinary speech, which more often uses “fittingness” to refer to all-things-considered appropriateness. An action can be praiseworthy without praise being all-things-considered appropriate (and vice versa).[[7]](#endnote-8) Nor is “fittingness” a name for the relation of being-a-normative-reason-for: we can have reasons for praising people who are not praiseworthy.[[8]](#endnote-9)

However, as long as these cautionary points are borne in mind, it can be plausibly claimed that good things are those that it is fitting to respond to favourably, and bad things unfavourably. Some writers (following Brentano and Ewing) have thought of this as a fitting-response *analysis* of value; others (following Moore) reject that further claim.[[9]](#endnote-10) We need not take sides on that.[[10]](#endnote-11) “Fittingness” can be used as a name for the relationship that positive and negative responses bear to good and bad things, respectively; and when it is, one can assert a connection between three groups of concepts: goodness and badness, favourable and unfavourable responses, and the relational concept of fittingness – leaving it open whether or not it is plausible to claim that any one of those concepts can be analysed in terms of the other two.[[11]](#endnote-12) Favourable and unfavourable responses, one can then add, take different forms – producing, protecting, appreciating, celebrating; avoidance, protest, dislike, grief – and this allows us to give content to the thought that there are different ways in which things can be good or bad: they can be the fitting objects of different responses of these two broad kinds ([Ewing 1947: Ch. 5](#_ENREF_13); [von Wright 1963](#_ENREF_47); [Anderson 1993: Ch. 1](#_ENREF_1); [Gaus 1990: Sect. 13-14](#_ENREF_15); [Scanlon 1998: Ch. 2, Sect. 3](#_ENREF_35); [Rescher 1969: Ch. 2](#_ENREF_34); [Thomson 1992](#_ENREF_45)).

How does this help us to make sense of relative values? To appreciate this, we can notice that, at least sometimes, fittingness is a three-place relation. In ascertaining whether an object is desirable or an alternative choiceworthy, we often have to know who is the desirer or chooser. A plate of oysters or a ticket to a public dissection may be desirable for you but not for me, if you will enjoy these things and I will not. The difference in what we enjoy makes the possession of these objects desire-worthy for you but not for me. So in this kind of case, the fittingness relation is a relation between three things: an object, a response and a responder. But if so, we have an interpretation for relative goodness. Whenever something is a fitting object of a positive response, it is good; but fittingness, when it is a three-place relation, is relative to a responder; so in those cases, goodness is relative to a responder.[[12]](#endnote-13)

With this, we have a way of making sense of the earlier parental example. My relationship to my daughter makes celebration a fitting response for me to make to her success, but not for you: it is celebration-worthy-by-me, and in that way good relative to me. How should we express this? The only phrase we seem to have available in ordinary English is “good for me”; but as we saw above, that is already used to express claims of three different kinds, (i)-(iii), none of which coincides with this one. In the interests of clarity, then, it seems better to introduce a new expression, “goodme”, where *O* is goodme whenever *O* is fittingly favoured by me (where “fittingness” is a name for the relation identified above).

This supplies us with an answer to the challenge of explaining the relationship between relative value and ordinary uses of the word “good”. It does not proceed by searching for an expression in ordinary English that can be unambiguously used to talk about that relation. But it does find a range of evaluative expressions in ordinary English whose suffixes express a relation that is instantiated whenever something is good or bad. It is by reference to the responder-relativity of that relation that we can explain the relativity of value.

**III: Consequentialism and Relative Value**

That supplies us with a plausible interpretation of claims about relative value. It does not yet tell us how to contrast it with neutral value – we will come to that in the next section. And notice that it does not require us to be attracted to consequentialism in order to have a case for recognizing relative value: rather, it suggests that wherever a fitting favourable or unfavourable response is responder-relative, we have relative value. But now, equipped with that thought, let us examine its application to consequentialism.

Why be attracted to consequentialism? The place to begin, I think, is with the “classical” view that treats the evaluative as prior to the normative: the goodness or badness that things have is the source of the reasons there are for us to respond to them in some ways but not others.[[13]](#endnote-14) Something that makes this seem attractive is the recognitional structure of our experience of goodness. You can be struck by the goodness of a piece of music, or a landscape, or a noble gesture when you encounter them. When, noticing that, it occurs to you that you ought to pay attention to the music, or protect the landscape, or emulate the gesture, that seems to be a further thought. If you say that an object is good and that you ought to look after it, you have not repeated yourself: the second, normative remark has a recommending force that is not yet present in the first, evaluative one. And the evaluative status seems prior in the order of explanation. It makes sense for you to tell me that *because* the music is so good, I ought to listen to it.

This makes views on which the evaluative is prior to the normative attractive. However, not all such views are consequentialist. Consequentialist views are those that concentrate on one kind of value bearer – a state of affairs – and hold that the rightness of action depends on its relationship to the value of states of affairs. To be a consequentialist, you need not hold that states of affairs are the sole bearers of value. But you do need to hold that states of affairs can be evaluatively ranked, and that the rightness of an action is determined by the relationship it bears to an evaluative ranking of states of affairs.

Why make this further claim? One prominent answer appeals to the plausibility of the principle:

(P) If, given all the actions you could perform and all the ways the world could be as a result, you know that one action will produce the best result, all things considered, then it is permissible.

One might doubt the principle that if your action *will* produce the best result, then it is permissible ([Dreier 1993: 24-5](#_ENREF_12); [Portmore 2005: 98-9](#_ENREF_29); [Schroeder 2007a: 279](#_ENREF_36)). When you are acting in conditions of ignorance, perhaps it can be impermissible to do what will actually produce the best result, because of the risk of producing a terrible one.[[14]](#endnote-15) But such cases are eliminated when you *know* that your action will produce a top-ranked state of affairs. If you know that, of all the ways the world could be as a result of your acting (including all of the qualities your action will have), it will all things considered be best if you perform a given action, how could that action fail to be permissible?

Principle (P) does not entail consequentialism. But consequentialism is the natural way to formulate a general theory of right action that accommodates (P), and (P) looks plausible. So this seems to confer plausibility on consequentialism.

However, when a consequentialist theory adopts a ranking of states of affairs that is not relativized to anyone, this line of argument confronts a problem. If there are constraints on permissible action of the form mentioned earlier – constraints against performing certain bad kinds of actions, even when doing so will prevent more actions of the same type from being performed by others – then that undermines the attempt to argue from (P) to a non-relative consequentialism. The point is often put this way. If the value of states of affairs is not relativized to anyone, then however large a contribution my bad action makes to the resulting state of the world, two such actions must make a contribution that is twice as great. So (P), and consequentialism, carry the implication that it is permissible to perform any action, no matter how bad, in order to stop two similar actions from being performed by others. That seems false, so both should be rejected.

On closer inspection, though, that is too quick. Suppose your action belongs to some bad act-type *T*, and the circumstances are such that the only way to prevent two other people from *T*ing is to perform an act of type *T* yourself. Then your action will have a feature that the other two do not have: it is an action of *T*ing-to-stop-two-other-people-from-*T*ing. So the value of the state of affairs produced by your action depends on how bad *that* feature is. An unrelativized axiology could contain the structural principle: for any bad act-type *T*, *T*ing-to-stop-two-other-people-from-*T*ing is more than twice as bad.[[15]](#endnote-16) A consequentialist whose axiology was structured in that way could still say that your action is impermissible.[[16]](#endnote-17)

So the problem is not actually that a consequentialist view with an unrelativized axiology cannot recognize constraints against performing actions of certain types: it can. The problem is that its constraints would have to be accompanied by matching constraints on third parties that seem implausible. To see this, imagine the following scenario. I have decided to torture one person in order to prevent two others from being tortured; you can prevent me. So there are these two alternative states of affairs:

s1 s2

I don’t torture A I torture A

B and C are tortured B and C are not tortured

You prevent me from torturing A You don’t prevent me from torturing A.

Which ranks higher? The usual view that accepts constraints on torturing will want to say both that I should not torture A to prevent B and C from being tortured, and that you should not prevent me from torturing A. I shouldn’t torture someone for the sake of minimizing the number of tortures; but nor should you intervene to stop me from doing that when you will thereby maximize the number of tortures. However, a consequentialist who says the first thing must assign a higher ranking to s1; to say the second, she must assign a higher ranking to s2. If her axiology is unrelativized, she cannot consistently do that.

A relative-value consequentialism avoids this problem. It holds that the rightness of my action is determined by the relationship it bears to an evaluative rankingme of states of affairs. We have seen how to interpret such relativized rankings. For s1 to be higher rankedme while s2 is higher rankedyou is for s1 to be fittingly preferred by me (because it is a state of affairs in which I do not torture) while s2 is fittingly preferred by you (because it is a state of affairs in which you minimize the number of tortures, without torturing). So a view of this kind is able to recognize constraints that target agents and not potential interveners. At the same time, it can explain the attraction of (P). For when (P) is given a relative-value interpretation, there is a powerful supporting argument for it – one that draws on the connection between goodness and fitting responses. When something is good, it is fitting to respond to it favourably. The fitting response to a state of affairs with higher value is to prefer it: when one state of affairs has a higher value than another, it is preferable. But there is a tight connection between the fittingness of preference and that of choice. Suppose I face a choice between doing *A* and not doing *A*, and I know that, all things considered, the state of affairs that will result if I do *A* is preferable to any state of affairs in which I do not – where “the state of affairs that will result if I do *A*” is understood to include my doing *A*. Then *A* must, all things considered, be more choiceworthy than not-*A*. When my action is included in a top-ranked state of affairs, there is no state of affairs containing an alternative action that is preferable to it, so it is no less choiceworthy than any other action, so it must be permissible.[[17]](#endnote-18) The upshot is an argument for relative-value consequentialism: it is the view that best accommodates and reconciles the plausibility of both principle (P) and the recognition of “common sense” moral constraints ([Portmore 2011: Ch. 7](#_ENREF_31)).

**IV: Relative and Neutral Goodness**

So we have an interpretation of relative goodness, and an explanation of how it can be used to allow for the existence of constraints within a consequentialist theory. However, what remains to be explained is how we should interpret *neutral* goodness. There is an array of different possibilities to consider: the five main ones are these.

1. *Non-indexation*.We might try to explain the contrast between neutral and relative goodness as a distinction between two different kinds of fittingness relation. An object has relative goodness when it participates in a three-place fittingness relation with a favourable response and a responder. But there are also fittingness relations with no responder-place, it might be claimed; and neutral goodness is what is possessed by the objects of those. To illustrate this, consider praiseworthiness. To be praiseworthy is to have a kind of goodness: the kind you have when you are the fitting object of praise. But praiseworthiness does not seem to be relative to a responder in the same way as desirability. A plate of oysters may be more desirable for you than it is for me; and if your tastes change, then they will lose the desirability (for you) that they used to have. But praiseworthiness is not like that. The praiseworthiness of Mandela’s achievement does not depend on any facts about any potential praiser. Praiseworthiness, one might say, is not praiseworthiness *for* anyone in particular; it is simply a two-place relation of fittingness between praise and its object.

That suggests a first account of the difference between neutral and relative value. As applied to the ranking of states of affairs, the thought would be this. State of affairs s1 is betterme than s2: it is fittingly preferred by me. But now compare s1 and s2 with:

s3

I don’t torture A

B and C are not tortured.

State of affairs s3 is better than s1 and s2, it might be claimed, without any indexation. It is preferable, but not preferable for anyone in particular: there is a fittingness relationship between these states of affairs and preference, but the relationship has no responder-place.

However, this first proposal causes problems for relative-value consequentialism. That makes the rightness of my action dependent on its relationship to an evaluative rankingme of states of affairs. But on this first proposal, s3 is not betterme than s1 and s2; it is just better than s1 and s2, without indexation. So a relative-value consequentialist who adopts this first proposal is unable to say that, when I can act to produce s3 instead of either s1 or s2, it is right to do so. But surely that action *is* right. The relative-value consequentialist needs an interpretation of neutral value on which it can affect the rankings of states of affairs that determine the rightness of action. The first proposal is unable to do that ([Smith 2003: 586](#_ENREF_43); [Wallace 2010: 522](#_ENREF_48)).

In looking for a better proposal, we might turn to the literature on agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for help. Actually, that distinction is drawn in two different ways, and they provide models for two further proposals for drawing the corresponding distinction between values.

To see this, we can return to the opening pair of examples. The fact that I have promised to pick you up from work is a reason in its favour; the fact that bugging your phone would violate your privacy is a reason against it. I explained what makes the first reason agent-relative and the second agent-neutral by saying that the first is a fact about me, and a reason just for me; the second is not a fact about me, and a reason for everyone. But that gives us two different criteria for the distinction, and they do not coincide. One makes the distinction in terms of who has the reason: just me, or everyone ([Parfit 1984: 143](#_ENREF_26); [Broome 2013: 66](#_ENREF_6); [Schroeder 2007b: 104](#_ENREF_37)). The other makes it in terms of the content of the reason: whether it contains a certain kind of reference to the agent ([Nagel 1970: 90](#_ENREF_23); [Nagel 1986: 152-3](#_ENREF_24); [McNaughton and Rawling 1995](#_ENREF_20); [Skorupski 1995: 49](#_ENREF_41); [Skorupski 2010: 63-7](#_ENREF_40)). To see the difference, consider this: the fact that keeping one’s promises treats the promisees with respect is a reason for keeping one’s promises, whoever one is. This qualifies as an agent-neutral reason on the first way of drawing the distinction: it is a reason that everyone has.[[18]](#endnote-19) But in the description of the reason, there is a reference to the agent, so on the second way of drawing the distinction it counts as agent-relative.

Since “agent-neutral” and “agent-relative” are philosophers’ technical terms, we should not be drawn into a spurious debate over which of these rival ways of drawing the distinction is right, but simply recognize them both and not confuse them. They provide two further models for thinking about agent-neutral values.

2. *Universalization*.Taking the first way of thinking about agent-neutral reasons as our model, we get this suggestion:

*O* is neutrally good iff ∀x(*O* is good*x*).

*O* is neutrally good just when it is fittingly favoured by everyone. If we say this, we can sensibly allow for context-sensitivity in determining the domain over which we are quantifying. Thus, in applying consequentialism, we might sensibly take “everyone” to comprise all moral agents, thereby excluding the actions of young children from assessment as right or wrong.

This proposal avoids the problem with (1). Now, s3’s being agent-neutrally better than s1 and s2 does imply that it is betterme. So this second proposal does allow the relative-value consequentialist to hold that it is right for me (and anyone else) to produce s3 in preference to either s1 or s2. However, it faces a new problem. We now have a view on which, whenever *O* is neutrally good, it must be goodme (along with everyone else). But it then becomes impossible to make sense of the characteristic feature of constraints: that they apply in cases where one should do what produces a state of affairs that is agent-neutrally worse. The relative-value consequentialist is trying to find a treatment of cases which meet *that* description: she does so by saying that a state of affairs that is agent-neutrally worse can be agent-relatively better. But on this second proposal, nothing can meet that description. Nothing can be agent-neutrally worse without being agent-relatively worse ([Schroeder 2007a: 293](#_ENREF_36)).

3. *No agent-reference*.So let us see what happens if we take the other way of thinking about agent-neutral reasons as our model. That defines an agent-neutral reason as one not containing a certain kind of reference to the agent who has it. We need to be careful about formulating the parallel proposal for neutral goods. The strict parallel would be:

*O* is neutrally good iff *O* makes no reference to the responder for whom it is fitting to favour *O*.

But the only things that are capable of referring to anything are semantic items such as words and propositions, and the minds that use them. No other good things refer to anything. This problem is not so pressing for the definition of agent-neutral reasons on which this is modelled. The “facts” that constitute our reasons can credibly (if contestably) be treated as propositions, and the question whether they refer to the agent for whom they are reasons then makes sense. The corresponding question for most good things – including states of affairs – makes no sense.

So the right way to formulate this proposal is instead:

*O* is neutrally good iff the properties in virtue of which *O* is fittingly favoured can be described without a reference to the responder for whom it is fitting to favour *O*.[[19]](#endnote-20)

Thus, state of affairs s1 has the property of including the torture of two people: that is a fitting object of my aversion, and since that property can be described without reference to me, it is a respect in which s1 is neutrally bad. There is a property of s2, on the other hand – namely, *my* perpetrating a torture – that makes it especially avoidance-worthyme. Since that property cannot be described without reference to me, it is a respect in which s2 has relative badness.

On this proposal, there will need to be a change in our definition of relative value. Goodness relative to *x*, on this proposal, is not defined as goodness*x*. Rather, both neutral and relative goodness are kinds of goodness*x*. Neutral goodness is the kind of goodness*x* that something has when the properties in virtue of which it is fittingly favoured by *x* can be described without a reference to *x*; relative goodness is the kind it has when they cannot.

This proposal can now avoid the problems with (1) and (2). It improves on (1) by allowing that all goodness is goodnessx, and thus that agent-neutral goodness can have a bearing on what it is right to do. And it improves on (2) by allowing that a state of affairs can be agent-neutrally worse while, overall, being betterme. This is possible because, since it makes relative and neutral goodness into different kinds of goodnessme, it can allow for cases in which neutral badnessme is outweighed by relative goodnessme.

However, now there is a new problem.[[20]](#endnote-21) Consider cases of proper competition: a running-race, for example, which you and I are both striving to win. In a case of this kind, a thought one might have is: “Both competitors are equally deserving. Neutrally speaking, the best outcome would be if the race is a tie, and both get first prize.” However, that thought might be conditional on both of us trying our hardest to win: only then, one might think, are we deserving of the prize. The thought, then, has the following structure: my winning is bestme (it is fittingly preferred by me), your winning is bestyou, but a tie is neutrally best. The problem is that it seems coherent to think that a thought of this form could be correct in a situation in which *everyone* is in proper competition. In a situation of that kind, the equal allocation of what we are competing for would be impartially best; but there would be no individual for which that allocation is preferable, so there would be no *x* for which that allocation is best*x*. Maybe there is in fact no such situation: that does not matter. The problem is that a thought of that form seems coherent, but this third account of neutral goodness cannot allow its coherence. If there can be coherent thoughts about what is neutrally best that are not thoughts about what is best*x* for any individual *x*, then this third account must be rejected too.

4. *The view from nowhere*.We can turn next to Sidgwick’s famous remark that “the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other” ([Sidgwick 1981: 382](#_ENREF_39)). This thought returns us to the metaphor of “points of view” or “perspectives”: just as there is my own personal evaluative perspective, there is an impersonal, objective point of view – the “view from nowhere”, as Nagel puts it, from which my special attachments are no more important than anyone else’s ([Nagel 1986, esp. Ch. 8](#_ENREF_24)). One way of reading Sidgwick is as distinguishing between how important my welfare subjectively seems to me from my own self-absorbed point of view, and how important it objectively *is*. Read that way, he is rejecting the idea of relative value: there is just the objective truth about the value of my welfare, and erroneous subjective opinion about its value. However, there is another direction in which to take Sidgwick’s thought – the direction in which Nagel takes it. This is that there are two different evaluative perspectives that we are capable of occupying: on the one hand, my own subjective perspective, the perspective internal to my own personal concerns; and on the other, an objective perspective from which I can see those concerns as only one set amongst others, in comparison to which it has no special claim to importance. And this suggests a fourth way of thinking about the contrast between relative and neutral value. It amounts to a contrast between what is goodme and what is goodthe universe, or goodnowhere.

But unfortunately, formulating the Sidgwick-Nagel thought in that way turns it into nonsense. When the metaphor of “points of view” is given the interpretation we found for it in Section II above, the idea of something’s being goodthe universe or goodnowhere becomes unintelligible. Goodness*x* is what something has when it is the fitting object of *x*’s favourable attitude. But nothing is the fitting object of the universe’s or nowhere’s favourable attitude. That makes no sense.

5. *Impartiality*.So let us try one further thought ([Suikkanen 2009](#_ENREF_44)). Again, this comes with a pedigree – it has its sources in Adam Smith ([1759](#_ENREF_42)) and Mill ([1861: Ch. 2](#_ENREF_21)). This is the thought that:

*O* is neutrally good iff *O* is goodimpartial spectator.

This now allows us to give a coherent interpretation to the idea of evaluation from a perspective that is removed from every set of personal concerns. The idea of something’s being the fitting object of an impartial spectator’s favourable attitudes does make sense. We know what it is for a person to be impartial with respect to the members of some group: it is for her attitudes and actions to be unaffected by her own personal interests, preferences and attachments. It can of course be questioned to what extent anyone actually succeeds in attaining that state. Perhaps it is an ideal that no one actually reaches. And the notion of a spectator who observes the entire state of the world and forms impartial attitudes about that is obviously an abstraction. But it is a coherent abstraction.

This proposal needs a further refinement. There are many ways of being impartial. Some of them are unjust, and others are monstrous: a judge who decides the outcome of a lawsuit by tossing a coin is acting impartially; so is a despot who inflicts suffering on people indiscriminately. Moreover, it seems to be a mistake to go looking for *the* form that morally good impartiality takes. It takes many different forms, depending on the context. If one is deciding the distribution of a good, then proper impartiality may involve attending to needs, or desert, or talent, or entitlement, depending on what is being distributed; if one is regulating an institution, it may mean confining one’s attention to whether agreed procedures have been followed, independently of any of those factors.[[21]](#endnote-22) “Proper impartiality” is many different things, not just one.

That helps us to deal with a worry that theories linking goodness to the responses of an impartial spectator standardly provoke. A spectator who was completely unmoved by anything could exhibit a kind of impartiality; but her attitudes would not be a reliable guide to what is good and bad. That is the wrong kind of impartiality. It is only if the spectator is *fittingly* impartial that good things will be the objects of her favourable responses – and fitting impartiality takes many context-dependent forms, not just one. The refinement we need, then, is this:

*O* is neutrally good iff *O* is goodfittingly impartial spectator.

On this proposal, we can then revert to the original idea that goodness relative to me is goodnessme.

This gives us a proposal for distinguishing neutral from relative value that also avoids the earlier problems. It has a coherent interpretation, unlike (4). Unlike (2) and (3), it does not imply that what is neutrally worse is worseme. It avoids the problem for (3) by allowing for the possibility of a competition which every competitor fittingly prefers to win outright, but which a fittingly impartial spectator would prefer to end in a tie. And it improves on (2) by making sense of the thought that constraints apply in cases where one should do what produces a neutrally worse outcome. State of affairs s1 is fittingly preferred by me over s2, since it is a state in which I perpetrate a torture, but not by a fittingly impartial spectator, since it contains more tortures. Finally, unlike (1), this proposal can explain how the fact that s3 is neutrally better than s1 and s2 can help to make it right for me to produce it. If a fittingly impartial spectator would prefer s3 to both s1 and s2, and there is no fact about me that explains why it is fitting for my response to be any different from that of an impartial spectator, then it will be fitting for me to prefer the same thing.

Moreover, this fifth proposal gives the relative-value consequentialist something illuminating to say about the relationship of her view to traditional, neutral-value consequentialism. At the heart of traditional consequentialism is the thought that we can identify the moral point of view with the impartial point of view. Traditional welfarism, specifying this further, identifies moral impartiality with the impartial promotion of welfare, counting the welfare of each equally; traditional utilitarianism, going further still, identifies welfare with happiness. It is its identification of morality with impartiality that explains why traditional consequentialism sees right action as determined by its relationship to a *neutral*-valued ranking of states of affairs. However, the relative-value consequentialist is also equipped with a diagnosis of what is wrong with that traditional view: it is too limited. Morality sometimes requires impartiality (of various kinds) from us; but sometimes it does not. The personal relationships I bear to other people and projects, and the role that the actions I perform play in my biography, are relevant to how it is fitting for *me* to respond to the alternatives open to me.

So this last proposal does give us an illuminating and plausible way to distinguish neutral from relative value. It allows for a kind of consequentialism to be formulated that accommodates agent-relative moral requirements and permissions. It allows my own attachments and my relationship to my own agency to have moral significance, while retaining the attraction of a theory that is structured around the acceptance of principle (P).

**V: Is Relative-Value Consequentialism Vacuous?**

We have found a satisfactory way of formulating relative-value consequentialism. Should we believe it?

One kind of reaction to that question is that stretching “consequentialism” into this relative-value form deprives it of any distinctive content. This trivializes consequentialism, since it can now accommodate any moral opinion; so someone who believes relative-value consequentialism does not believe anything substantial at all.[[22]](#endnote-23)

But that is wrong. There are some opinions about what is right and what is wrong that relative-value consequentialism, no matter how far we stretch it, will not accommodate – for example, that there are moral dilemmas in which all the alternatives open to you involve acting morally wrongly.

More significantly, even if relative-value consequentialism can accommodate a very broad range of opinions about which actions are right and wrong, it still makes distinctive and contentious claims about what determines their rightness or wrongness.[[23]](#endnote-24) It embraces the classical view that the evaluative is determinatively prior to the normative. So it does not simply claim that the actions there are good moral reasons for a person to perform can be matched to a corresponding axiology; it claims that there are good moral reasons to perform it *because* of its relationship to what has value. Moreover, it goes further, in restricting the determining ground of the rightness of action to the value of states of affairs. This distinguishes it from other theories that embrace the classical view. For example, it differs from Elizabeth Anderson’s “rational attitude theory”, which sees the rightness of action as determined by whether it expresses a rational attitude to what has value ([Anderson 1993: Ch. 2](#_ENREF_1); [1996: 539](#_ENREF_2)). Her theory accepts the classical view that the evaluative is determinatively prior to the normative, but it rejects consequentialism in making the rightness of action dependent on a proper responsiveness to bearers of value other than states of affairs, and in seeing the relevant forms of responsiveness to value as not restricted to promoting it.

So relative-value consequentialism is not trivial. All the same, it may seem unexplanatory. If its governing methodology is simply to consult intuitions about right action, and use those to construct its axiology, then it cannot offer us any help in guiding our normative thought. Unless there is some independent constraint on our axiology, it cannot help us to decide which normative opinions stand up to the demand for justification and which do not. The relative-value consequentialist is someone who simply reads his deontic opinions into the formulation of his axiology and then claims to find a justification for them there.

However, that criticism, too, seems unfair. The relative-value consequentialist need not adopt a methodology in which deontic intuitions are given a special privilege. Rather, it adopts the plausible principle (P) – a principle which, as we saw, is itself justified by the connection between fitting preference and choiceworthiness – as a constraint on the construction of a coherent ethical theory. It can then allow us to begin from independent considered judgements about both value and rightness, and invoke (P) to impose a constraint of coherence on the value- and rightness-judgements that can be reconciled with each other. This can allow it to adopt a sensible methodology that permits the mutual adjustment of judgements of both kinds in the search for a stable reflective equilibrium ([Portmore 2007: 63-4](#_ENREF_30)).

**VI: Is Relative-Value Consequentialism Plausible?**

However, although those two worries can be addressed, three further powerful challenges to relative-value consequentialism remain.

The first concerns the plausibility of its determination-claim. Often, it does indeed seem true that what *makes* an action right is its relationship to the value of its outcome. Administering an anaesthetic can be right because it reduces pain, and less pain is better than more. However, the corresponding determination-claim is much more dubious when a relative-value consequentialist applies it to a moral constraint.

Recall: relative-value consequentialism claims that the rightness of my action is determined by its relationship to the goodnessme of states of affairs, and explains goodnessme via the biconditional:

*O* is goodme if and only if *O* is fittingly favoured by me.

This does not identify the property of being goodme with the property of being fittingly favoured by me: it just says that whenever something has one of those properties it has the other. However, we have no independent grasp of what goodnessme is except through this biconditional: goodnessme is to be understood as the property something has when it is fittingly favoured by me. And this makes goodnessme the wrong candidate to offer as the stopping-point for determination-relations. Suppose we ask, in the torture example: Why is s1 fittingly preferred by me to s2? It will not do to answer that this is so becauses1 is betterme than s2, if our only grasp of what goodnessme is relies on the biconditional above. But nor will it do, when asked why refusing to torture A is choiceworthy, to answer that this is so because s1 is fittingly preferred by me to s2. Rather, the determination-relations run the other way. What makes it fitting for me to prefer s1 to s2 is the choiceworthiness of the actions those states of affairs contain. State s1 is preferable because s2 includes my performing an action that there are strong reasons (reasons of respect for humanity, one might say) not to perform. And if (for that reason), it is fitting for me to prefer s1 to s2, *that* is why s1 qualifies as betterme than s2. So the determination-relations run in the opposite direction to the one claimed by relative-value consequentialism.

The second worry concerns the restriction that relative-value consequentialism places on the value-bearers that determine rightness: it restricts these to *states of affairs*. It need not claim that states of affairs are the only bearers of goodnessme. That would be very implausible: if goodnessme is what something has when it is the fitting object of my favourable attitudes, then surely there are many other kinds of things that have it: persons, physical objects, pieces of music, and so on. But relative-value consequentialism says that states of affairs are the only bearers of goodnessme that determine rightness. That distinguishes it from other versions of the classical view (such as Anderson’s, as we saw above). But that seems problematic in the following way.

In answering the question, “What makes it right for me not to torture A?” a non-consequentialist version of the classical view can appeal to the value of the person A himself, in virtue of which it is fitting that I respond to A in a range of ways that amount to treating him with respect, which include not torturing him. Relative-value consequentialism cannot give that kind of answer. It must instead appeal to the valueme of a state of affairs in which I do not torture. It is because the world’s being one in which I do not torture has the property of goodnessme – the property in virtue of which that state of affairs is fittingly preferred by me – that it is right for me not to torture A. But that makes the determinants of rightness seem too self-regarding. It says that what matters morally is whether the world turns out to contain my performing a certain kind of action. But if rightness depends on a valueme-bearer, this is an implausible candidate to choose. It is more plausible to say that the wrongness of my torturing depends on the fittingness of respect for a person than on the fittingness of preference for the world’s being one in which I do not torture.

A third worry is this. How can relative-value consequentialism avoid giving morally irrelevant personal attachments and projects a bearing on moral rightness? Again, consider achievement in a competitive pursuit. Suppose you and I are engaged in a race to discover the cure for cancer. If either of us succeeds, that will be neutrally good. But if I get there first, that will be goodme; if you do, that will be goodyou. Surely that does not make it morally wrong for me to allow you to beat me to discovering the cure.

By itself, that need not be seen as a deep objection to relative-value consequentialism. It is an invitation to qualify the rightness-determining relationship in such a way that the higher rankingme of a state of affairs sometimes makes it morally right for me to produce it, but not always. However, the deeper worry it points to is this. It seems that there are several different determinants of whether a state of affairs is fittingly preferred by me. That it is a state in which my endeavours meet with success is one such determinant; that it includes my performing an action that is morally wrong is another. So the moral quality of my action, it seems, is one (but only one) of the various determinants of whether a state of affairs is fittingly preferred by me. Again, this suggests that the determination-relation runs in the opposite direction from the one claimed by consequentialism. The wrongness of certain actions makes it fitting for me to prefer states of affairs which do not include my performing those actions; it is not because it is fitting for me to prefer states of affairs that do not include certain actions that those actions are wrong.

So although relative-value consequentialism can be coherently formulated, there are reasons to be sceptical about it. It remains true that the earlier observations about the tight connection between preference and choice make principle (P) plausible:

If, given all the actions you could perform and all the ways the world could be as a result, you know that one action will produce the best result, all things considered, then it is permissible.

However, that should lead us to question just how much support the plausibility of (P) really does give to consequentialism. Consequentialism entails (P), but the converse is not true. (P) makes no claims about the determination-relation between value and rightness. So it is actually consistent with rejecting the classical view that the evaluative is determinatively prior to the normative altogether, let alone the more particular claims about the determination of rightness through promotion-relations to states of affairs that are distinctive of consequentialism.

**VII: Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the prospects for relative-value consequentialism, since it is an interest in those prospects that has given the stimulus to recent discussions of relative and neutral value. Critics sometimes suggest that relative-value consequentialism cannot be given a satisfactory formulation that retains what is supposed to be attractive about consequentialism. I have disagreed with that criticism, but have questioned the plausibility of this kind of theory on other grounds.

However, it should not be thought that if the prospects for relative-value consequentialism are poor, that should lead us to reject the distinction between relative and neutral value itself. We saw that this distinction can be defended independently of an interest in developing a theory of that kind. It requires only recognizing that the fittingness of responses to what has value can be responder-relative, and that is something we should accept whether we are consequentialists or not.[[24]](#endnote-25)

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1. **Notes**

   Some philosophers seem committed to rejecting the intelligibility of goodness-judgements such as this one. See e.g. ([Thomson 1997](#_ENREF_46)); ([Kraut 2007](#_ENREF_18)); and, for further discussion, ([Olson](#_ENREF_25)). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. As I understand it, this concept of determination is normative, not metaphysical. It is the concept of “making right” that a realist and an anti-realist can both deploy when they agree that (say) what makes it right to protect freedom of association is that it respects personal autonomy. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Broader definitions of consequentialism are possible. This one makes consequentialist theories into theories of the rightness of action. Others allow for independent ethical assessment of a range of other objects by evaluating their consequences ([see Pettit and Smith 2000](#_ENREF_28)). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Brentano uses the term “correct” for the same relation. See ([Brentano 1969: Sect. 22, 23, 27, p. 74, and Appendix IX, Sect. 13](#_ENREF_4)); ([Chisholm 1986: Ch.5](#_ENREF_9)); also ([Chisholm 1976](#_ENREF_8)). The same thought is expressed as a claim about “appropriate” responses by ([Moore 1903: 204-5](#_ENREF_22)), ([Gaus 1990: Sect. 6](#_ENREF_15)), and ([Zimmerman 2001: 199](#_ENREF_50)). For the source of this way of thinking, see ([Aristotle NE: 1139a24-30](#_ENREF_3)). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. “Response” needs to be understood broadly here, encompassing any orientational attitude or activity – so that acting to produce some not-yet-existing good state of affairs counts as a “response” to it. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Equivalent, and not an explanation of it. On this usage, the claim that a praiseworthy action is a fitting object of praise is not a substantive claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. This is a source of some confusion in the “fitting-attitude” tradition of thinking about value. Ewing and Broad, for example, clearly think of judgements of “fittingness” as overall verdicts of appropriateness ([Ewing 1947: 132-3](#_ENREF_13); [Broad 1930: 164-5, 219](#_ENREF_5)). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. This is the so-called “wrong kind of reasons” problem. For discussion, see ([Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004](#_ENREF_32)). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. For difficulties with such analyses, see ([D’Arms and Jacobson 2000](#_ENREF_11)). For a proposed dispositional analysis of the fittingness-relation itself, see ([Smith 2003: 591-2](#_ENREF_43)). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Nor need we take sides on T.M. Scanlon’s “buck-passing” view, that value-properties do not themselves give us reasons ([Scanlon 1998: 95-6](#_ENREF_35)). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. In talking of “favourable” and “unfavourable” responses, we can simply rely here on our pretheoretical recognition of the range of ways in which actions, feelings and other attitudes can amount to ways of being for or against their objects. (Contrast the more restrictive usage of ([Zimmerman 2001: 85-6](#_ENREF_50)).) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. As Campbell Brown ([2011: 762](#_ENREF_7)) points out, we could then represent our axiology as an ordered set of centred worlds. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. In calling this “the classical view”, I follow ([Raz 1999: 22](#_ENREF_33)). I do not mean the remark in the text to be read metaphysically – as claiming that value-properties are properties that their bearers have prior to and independently of our responsiveness to them – although it is compatible with that further claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. See ([Jackson 1981: 463](#_ENREF_16)), ([Parfit 2011: vol. 1, 159](#_ENREF_27)), and the discussion of “outcomism” in ([Zimmerman](#_ENREF_49)). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Someone advancing this principle is committed to the measurement of value on a ratio, and not merely an interval scale. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. “What if two other people will *T*-to-stop-two-others-from-*T*ing unless I do that?” Then that is covered by the same principle. Call that act-type *U*. Then I am still doing something the others are not: *U*ing-to-stop-two-others-from-*U*ing. And the structural principle says that that is more than twice as bad. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. That is not to say that whenever you *ought*, all things considered, to prefer a state of affairs including a given action, you ought, all things considered, to choose that action. Counterexamples to that can be devised by introducing “the wrong kind of reasons” for preference – reasons for preferring what is not preferable. If the eccentric billionaire imagined by Gregory Kavka ([1983](#_ENREF_17)) offers me a million dollars for forming a preference to drink a toxin, whether or not I drink it, that would give me a good reason for the preference but not the choice. However, that would not be a case in which drinking it would be prefer*able* – preference-worthy – without being choiceworthy. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. However, on this way of making the distinction, the particular reasons that are derivable from this are agent-relative. The fact that I have promised you to help to move your books is an agent-relative reason for me to help you move them – a reason that I have but others don’t. For this approach, see ([Schroeder 2007b: 104](#_ENREF_37)). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. This proposal is made by Michael Smith ([2003: 588](#_ENREF_43)): “neutral goods are those properties in virtue of which things are good whose characterization requires no mention of the subject to whom the property of being good is a relation”; also ([Wallace 2010: 523](#_ENREF_48)). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. It seems equally to be a problem for view (2). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. For further discussion, see ([Cullity 2013](#_ENREF_10)). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. For the view that this is not an objection to relative-value consequentialism, but rather an argument for the inescapability of consequentialism, see ([Dreier 1993: 23](#_ENREF_12)) and ([Louise 2004: 534](#_ENREF_19)). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. As I have defined it, it makes those claims. A weaker, biconditional definition is possible: one on which consequentialist theories of right action are theories of the form, “An action is right if and only if it bears relation *R* to evaluative ranking of states of affairs *S*.” Then it would still be incorrect that this trivializes consequentialism, for the reasons given in the previous paragraph. But it would at least be arguable that any plausible moral theory can be given a relative-value consequentialist form, if it is arguable that moral dilemmas are implausible. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. I am grateful to Antony Eagle, Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)