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A Surprisingly Common Dilemma

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There is a dilemma that arises for a surprising number of ethical views and that is generated by a thesis they share. They all hold that it's a necessary condition for an act or state of affairs to have an ethical property such as rightness or goodness that it be accompanied by the belief that it has that property. There is an escape from the dilemma that is open to some of these views, but it isn't open to others; for them the dilemma poses a problem.

1 The Dilemma for a View about the Right

Consider, as a first view of this type, one that is sometimes attributed to Kant and that says an act is right or your duty only if you do it because it's right, or from the motive of duty. To act rightly, this view says, you must be motivated by thoughts of rightness. But to do an act because it's right you must believe that it's right, so on this view it's a necessary condition for an act's being right that it be accompanied by a belief in its rightness.

The dilemma arises when we ask what exactly the content of the required belief is. One possibility is that it's the belief that the act is right simply or in itself, regardless of any accompanying motives or beliefs. It's right just as an act, whatever mental states go with it. But this belief is one the view we're considering says is false; it says an act is right only when accompanied by the belief that it's right. And though there is no logical incoherence in this, it would surely be odd for a view to make it a necessary condition for an act to be right that it be accompanied by a false belief about its rightness. Can you really act rightly only given a mistaken belief about your act's deontic status? An alternative possibility tries to avoid this difficulty by making the required belief one the view says can be true. More specifically, it says that to be right an act must be accompanied by the more complex belief that it's right *only if* accompanied by the belief that it's right. But now we have to ask what the content is of the belief embedded in this one, the belief you believe must be present. If it's that

the act is right just in itself and apart from any accompanying beliefs, the embedded belief is again one the view says is false. And that makes for a larger or embedding belief that it would again be odd to make necessary for rightness. It would be odd to require, as a condition for acting rightly, that you believe your act is right only when accompanied by a false belief about its rightness. And making the embedded belief conditional on a further belief about your act's rightness only raises the same question and the same difficulty about that further belief, leading to an infinite regress of beliefs that your act is right only when accompanied by the belief that it's right only when accompanied by the belief that it's right ... and so on. At no point do we reach a required belief with no content that is false.

This, then, is the dilemma for the view that an act is right only when accompanied by the belief that it's right: either it makes it a necessary condition for acting rightly that you have a false belief about your act's rightness, or it generates an infinite regress. W.D. Ross raised just this dilemma for the view in *The Right and the Good*:

If ... we say 'it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense of duty', this means 'it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense that it is my duty to do act *A*'. And here the whole expression is in contradiction with a part of itself. The whole sentence says 'it is my duty-to-do-act-*A*-from-the-sense-that-it-is-my-duty-to-do-act-*A*'. But the latter part of the sentence implies that what I think is that it is my duty-to-do-act-*A*-simply.¹

In saying the latter part of the sentence contradicts the whole, he was taking that part to be or at least claimed to be true. But in a later discussion he saw that the view in effect requires us to act with a false belief about our act's rightness, saying "it can hardly be claimed that it is our duty to act from a mistaken thought."² This was the first horn of the dilemma, and he went on to describe the second:

And if ... we try to amend the latter part of the expression to bring it into accord with the whole expression, we get the result 'it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense that it is my duty to do act *A* from the sense that it is my duty to do act *A*', where again the last part of the expression is in conflict with the theory, and with the sentence as a whole. It is clear that a further

¹ W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 5; see also H.A. Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. J. MacAdam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 3, 11, 157–8, 219.

² Sir David Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 118.

similar amendment, and a further, and in the end an infinite series of amendments would be necessary in the attempt to bring the last part of the expression into accordance with the theory, and that even then we should not have succeeded in doing so.³

Avoiding the first horn of the dilemma, in other words, leads to an infinite regress.

It may be objected that the dilemma I've described is a false one. I've assumed that there are only two beliefs that could be required for right action: that your act is right regardless of any accompanying beliefs, and that it's right only if accompanied by the belief that it's right. But you can also do an act, the objection says, with the simple belief that it's right, with no reference, either negative or positive, to an accompanying belief, and a refusal to make any such reference.⁴ Imagine a view on which a right act must both satisfy some objective condition, such as maximizing happiness or most fulfilling prima facie duties, *and* be accompanied by the simple or unqualified belief that it's right. If you do an act that satisfies the objective condition, then, if you believe your act is simply right, you satisfy the other condition about belief, which makes your act right and thereby makes your belief about it true. But there is no regress, the objection says, because your belief doesn't refer internally to any other belief. Your belief that your act is right can be both necessary for right action, and true.

But in a key context what this view calls a belief doesn't have what's standardly taken to be an essential defining property of belief, and therefore can't be adopted as a belief by someone who accepts the view. We normally think of a belief as affirming a state of affairs that is independent of it and determines its truth or falsity. If the state of affairs obtains, that makes the belief true; if the state doesn't obtain, that makes it false. In the familiar phrase, belief essentially has a mind-to-world direction of fit. But imagine that an act of yours satisfies the view's objective condition, say by maximizing happiness. The view then holds that your believing the act is right will make all the difference between the act's being right and not, and will thereby make its own content true. In this context it's self-validating and has the opposite, world-to-mind, direction

3 Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 5.

4 Your belief that the act is right could make no reference to accompanying beliefs just because you haven't considered the possibility that the act's rightness requires one. If once you're alerted to this possibility you agree that your belief has to decide one way or the other about it, you face the dilemma. Hence the stipulation in the objection that your belief not only doesn't, but refuses to, mention accompanying beliefs.

of fit.⁵ How, then, can it fit in the category of belief, and how, if you accept the view, can you form it as one? You could do this if you believed, falsely by the view's lights, that the objective condition suffices for rightness or if you had no opinion on this topic. But if you accept the view and believe your act satisfies the objective condition, you'll believe your act will be right if you believe it's right and wrong if you don't. How then can you form this belief *as a belief*, or as a mental state with the direction of fit standardly thought to be characteristic of belief? That would require treating as independent of your believing something that by your own lights isn't independent. So though you could satisfy the view's two conditions if you lacked what it considers true beliefs about what makes for right action, you can't do so if you believe its claims on this topic. But shouldn't an ethical view be satisfiable by people who accept it? Shouldn't it be possible to do the acts it says are right while having what it considers true beliefs about the conditions for rightness?

I said the view that acts are right only when done from the belief that they're right is sometimes attributed to Kant, and it was so initially by Ross, who in *The Right and the Good* called him the "great exemplar" of those who believe we ought to act from the motive of duty.⁶ And this interpretation does fit some of Kant's remarks, for example that "duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law."⁷ But Ross later withdrew the interpretation and took Kant to hold that an act can be in accordance with duty or right independently of the motive of duty, whose presence gives it the different property of moral worth.⁸ To me this is a better reading of Kant because it fits more of his text, for example, his claim that a shopkeeper who treats his customers fairly only from a selfish motive nonetheless acts in accordance with duty.⁹ It also shows how the dilemma we're discussing can be avoided. Rather than make it necessary for a thing to have one property that it be believed to have the very same property, a view can distinguish two ethical properties and say that a thing can have one property such as rightness independently of any accompanying beliefs, but certain beliefs are necessary for it to have a different property such as moral

5 More specifically: the belief can be made false by facts independent of it, if your act doesn't meet the objective condition, but it can't be made true by facts entirely independent of it, because its truth-condition includes itself.

6 Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 4.

7 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 13.

8 Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, p. 139.

9 Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 11. This reading is defended at length in Mark Timmons, "Motive and Rightness in Kant's Ethical System," in his *Significance and System: Essays on Kant's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 139–74.

worth. Then the belief about the first property that is necessary for it to have the second property can be true—it can be true, for example, that an act is right even though you don't believe it's right—and no dilemma arises.¹⁰

But this escape isn't available for a number of other views that face the dilemma, in particular a number of views about the good.

2 The Dilemma for Some Views about the Good

For one such view, consider the “endorsement constraint” discussed in political philosophy by Ronald Dworkin, Will Kymlicka, and others. They say we want or should want to lead a life that is actually good, rather than one we merely believe is good; our sincere beliefs about value can be false. But they think these beliefs nonetheless play what Dworkin calls a “constitutive” role in the goodness of our lives. More specifically, he proposes a constraint on value according to which nothing can be good or improve a person's life unless the person endorses it, or “regards it as valuable.” As Dworkin puts it, “no component contributes to the value of a life without endorsement,” so if someone “never endorses the life he leads as superior to the life he otherwise would have led, then his life has not been improved.”¹¹ Since endorsing something involves believing it's good, this means no element of your life can be good unless it's accompanied by the belief that it's good.

Dworkin and Kymlicka use this endorsement constraint to defend a liberal ban on perfectionist legislation by governments. A perfectionist state may want to use its coercive power to direct people into activities that are objectively good, but they argue that, given the constraint, this effort can't succeed. Though the threat of legal penalties may induce people into certain external

10 An alternative version of this escape continues to make a certain belief necessary for rightness, but changes the property that figures in the content of that belief to something other than rightness. For example, it can say an act is right only if it meets some objective condition such as maximizing happiness *and* is accompanied by the belief that it meets that objective condition, i.e. is accompanied by the belief that it maximizes happiness. This view isn't one of those this paper addresses, because its required belief isn't about an ethical property such as rightness or goodness. It's beliefs whose content directly concerns ethical properties that figure in the motives that have been regarded as most valuable by philosophers like Kant and Ross and that have most often been proposed as necessary for the presence of ethical properties.

11 Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 217–18, also 269; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 203–4.

activities, it can't make them endorse the activities or judge them to be good, and it therefore can't produce anything actually good. Since perfectionist state action is self-defeating, Dworkin and Kymlicka conclude, it should be avoided.

This derivation of anti-perfectionism from the endorsement constraint can be contested at several points,¹² but even apart from this, the constraint it appeals to faces our familiar dilemma once we ask what the content is of the belief about goodness it requires. If it's the belief that an activity—say, painting—is good in itself, regardless of any accompanying beliefs, it's a belief the endorsement constraint says is false: given the constraint, painting unaccompanied by endorsement is valueless. But if the belief is instead that the activity is good only when accompanied by the belief that it's good, we have to ask about the content of the belief embedded in this one, which either gives us another false belief or generates an infinite regress.

This type of dilemma can be avoided by distinguishing two properties and saying a belief about the first property is necessary for a thing to have the second, and this move is in principle possible here. We could say that whether an activity is good depends only on objective features it has independent of any accompanying mental states, but that it must be chosen with the belief that it's good if it's to have a different property, say that of being “good for you” or “meaningful.” And views with this general form have been defended.¹³ But, though this move is available, it wouldn't serve Dworkin's and Kymlicka's anti-perfectionist purpose. Given the resulting view, a perfectionist state might indeed be unable to promote activities that are good for people or meaningful, but it could still promote ones that are simply good. And why wouldn't it want to do that? It might agree that good-for or meaningful activities are preferable to ones that are merely good, so there is more reason to encourage them. But that doesn't mean there is no reason to promote ones that are merely good. They are, after all, good and worth promoting on that basis; they also have the very property people should believe their activities have. In the deontic context, that an act is merely right isn't something with no normative significance. If you don't have the motives or beliefs needed for your actions to have moral worth, you can still act rightly or wrongly, and a moral view can tell you to do the former and think it important that you do so. In the same way, it can be preferable if people who don't endorse their activities engage in good rather

12 See e.g. Thomas Hurka, “Indirect Perfectionism: Kymlicka on Liberal Neutrality,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 3 (1995): 36–57.

13 See e.g. Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), ch. 4; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

than bad ones, and that can give the state a reason to use its power to promote those that are good. Dworkin explicitly rejects the “additive” view that its being endorsed only makes an otherwise good activity better, because he sees that it doesn’t support a liberal ban on all state perfectionism; that requires the stronger claim that activities without endorsement have no value. But that claim faces the dilemma that either it requires, for any value in an activity, a false belief about the activity’s value, or it generates an infinite regress.

The dilemma also arises for a composite view of Henry Sidgwick’s. He combined the hedonist thesis that pleasure is the only good with a distinctive view, at least in his official statements, of what pleasure is. It isn’t, he argued, a feeling with a distinctive introspectible quality or one we desire to have—he rejected both those views—but instead is one that is “apprehended as desirable”¹⁴ by its subject at the time, where by “apprehensions” he meant beliefs and by “desirable” he meant “good,” so what makes a feeling a pleasure, on his view, is an accompanying “judgment of value”¹⁵ about it. But if only pleasure is good and something is a pleasure only if it’s believed to be good, then something is good only if it’s believed to be good and we have the familiar two possibilities. If the required belief is that a given feeling is good in itself and regardless of any accompanying beliefs, it’s one Sidgwick’s composite view says is false and having good things in your life depends on an illusion. But if the belief refers to a further belief about value, it leads to a regress.

A final relevant view concerns the different evaluative property of what’s “good for” you, which is often associated with concepts of “welfare,” “well-being,” and “prudential value.” According to L.W. Sumner, a state or activity must meet two conditions if it’s to be good for you: one affective and one cognitive. First, you must have a positive attitude toward it, or feel satisfied or fulfilled by it. Second, and more importantly for us, you must make a positive evaluative judgment of it, where this must be a judgment of its value “for you,” or of how well it measures up to your “prudential standards.” These aren’t the only possible standards. You could also judge a thing by perfectionist, esthetic, or ethical standards, but these aren’t relevant to its value *for you*, which depends only on your judgment of its value *for you*. One reason for this restriction is to allow

14 Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), p. 127; see also 128, 129, 131.

15 Henry Sidgwick, *Lectures on the Ethics of T.H. Green, Mr. Herbert Spencer, and J. Martineau*, ed. E.E. Constance-Jones (London: Macmillan, 1902), p. 130. This interpretation of Sidgwick’s view of what pleasure is is defended at greater length in Robert Shaver, “Sidgwick on Pleasure,” *Ethics* 126 (2016): 901–28. Shaver defends Sidgwick’s composite view against several objections, but not against the dilemma objection I’m raising.

willing sacrifices of welfare. If you forgo some of your own happiness for the greater happiness of others, you may judge your act positively by perfectionist or ethical standards. If those standards determined what is good for you, your act would involve no sacrifice of your good. If only prudential standards are relevant, however, it may involve sacrifice. According to Sumner, then, a necessary condition for a thing's being good for you or contributing to your welfare is that you judge that it's good for you or contributes to your welfare.¹⁶ And this cognitive condition is the only one in a related view proposed by Dale Dorsey, who says something is good for you if and only if you judge that it's good for you. Here your belief that something has the good-for property is not only necessary but also sufficient for its having that property.¹⁷

In a version that requires only the simple belief that a thing is good for you, with no reference to any accompanying belief, Dorsey's view faces especially starkly the difficulty that arose for other views of this form, namely that in a key context what they call a belief doesn't have a standard defining property of belief. Most of the other views contain an objective condition. In the view sometimes attributed to Kant, an act must do something like maximize happiness if it's to be right; in the Dworkin-Kymlicka view, an activity must have objective merits like those of painting if it's to be good. But Dorsey's view imposes no such condition alongside the one about belief. If it required just the unqualified belief that a thing is good for you, that belief would in all contexts make its content true, or always have the world-to-mind direction of fit. How then could it ever count as a belief, and how could someone who accepts the view ever form it as one?

Dorsey elsewhere defends ideas that may seem to address this difficulty. He argues that "constructivist" views like his require revisions to our concepts of belief and truth for normative, though not for non-normative, beliefs. A first revision in effect denies that normative beliefs have the mind-to-world direction of fit, so they do, either individually or collectively, verify themselves. A second, which is needed to avoid a regress that would otherwise be created by the first, abandons the common assumption that a belief's content must match its truth-condition, so if what makes it true is the fact that *p*, its content must be "that *p*." Instead, he argues, a normative belief's content and its truth-condition can diverge. This allows a person's belief on a normative topic

16 L.W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), ch. 6; on the cognitive condition see especially pp. 145, 148, 153–4, 172, 175. Sumner actually states the conditions as ones for happiness, but since he thinks happiness is what's primarily good for us, they apply by extension to good-for.

17 Dale Dorsey, "Subjectivism without Desire," *Philosophical Review* 121 (2012): 407–42.

to be made true by facts about her normative beliefs, as constructivism holds, while that initial belief's content makes no reference to any beliefs but instead ascribes, say, a non-natural property such as goodness, where constructivism says no such properties exist.¹⁸

These are radical revisions and prompt several questions, such as whether normative beliefs as so understood aren't too different from non-normative ones to belong in the same category. Those aside, I don't see how the revisions help with the specific difficulty I've raised for Dorsey's view of "good for." If that view is combined with his proposals about normative belief, the content of "a person's pleasure is good for her" concerns a non-natural property of good-for-ness while what makes it true is the fact of her believing it. But how, if she accepts the view and proposals together, can she ever form that belief? On one view, to believe a proposition is to affirm its content, but if she accepts Dorsey's constructivism she can't do that, because constructivism denies that non-natural properties exist. On another view, to believe a proposition is to affirm its truth-condition,¹⁹ but how can she affirm the fact that she believes a proposition about her pleasure if she doesn't already believe it? In any case, isn't this proposition one she can't believe, since it ascribes properties she doesn't think exist?²⁰ At the very least, Dorsey's revisions show how radical a response the difficulty about self-verifying belief requires.

Unlike Dorsey, Sumner proposes no revisions about truth or belief, and his view therefore directly faces our dilemma once we ask what the content of its required belief is. If it's that a state of you is good for you by itself and apart from any accompanying beliefs, the belief is one Sumner's view says is false. According to his view, nothing is good for you unless you judge that it's good for you. The alternative is that the belief says the state is good for you only when accompanied by the belief that it's good for you. But when we ask about the content of the belief embedded in this one, we either get another belief that is false or are launched on a regress.

As we saw, this dilemma can be avoided by distinguishing two properties and saying the belief that a thing has the first property is necessary for it to have the second. But, as with the endorsement view about simple goodness, it's hard

18 Dale Dorsey, "A Puzzle for Constructivism and How to Solve It," in J. Lenman and Y. Shemmer, eds., *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 99–118.

19 Given the assumption that a belief's content and its truth-condition must coincide, these two views are equivalent. Dorsey's rejection of that assumption makes them come apart.

20 If she instead affirms her affirming the proposition's truth-condition, we have a regress.

to see how this option is available here. Earlier I mentioned the view that if an aspect of your life is independently good, your believing that it's good gives it the different property of being good for you. But I doubt this view would appeal to Sumner. His general strategy is to give an independent characterization of what's good for people or constitutes their welfare and then to argue that only welfare as so understood is simply good. It would contradict this strategy to make judgments about simply-good prior to ones about good-for; whereas he needs good-for to be independently understandable, this proposal makes it derivative. For his view of good-for, as for the endorsement view about simple goodness, the dilemma I've described is a problem.

3 Conclusion

There may be other views with the structure I've described, in which case the same difficulty arises for them. But the scope of my argument shouldn't be exaggerated.

The views we've discussed all hold that our beliefs about, or more generally attitudes to, ethical properties can themselves have or bear on what has ethical properties. My argument doesn't challenge this more general view. It only insists that an ethical belief's relevance be, in Dworkin's terms, "additive" rather than "constitutive." If you correctly believe an act is right and do it because of that belief, this can give an act that is already right the different property of being morally worthy or good, but it can't be necessary for the act to be right in the first place; that is determined independently of your beliefs. If you engage in an activity that is independently good and endorse it as good, your endorsement or a desire it leads to can be an additional good over and above that of the activity and so make for more goodness on balance than there would be without it; two goods can be better than one. But it again can't be necessary for the activity's initial goodness. Likewise for "good for." Your belief that something is good for you can give it another property—though here I'm not sure what that could be—or enable it to be better for you. But it can't be necessary for the property the belief takes the thing to have. Our ethical beliefs can play an additive role, where they either help make for a different property than the one they ascribe or augment that property, but they can't play the more ambitious constitutive role of being necessary for that property's presence in the first place. A surprising number of ethical views give our beliefs that grander role, but its impossibility becomes evident once we ask in more detail what the content of the relevant belief is supposed to be.

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