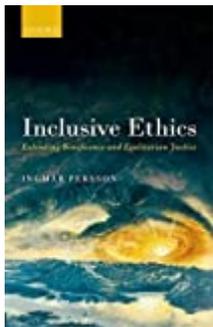


# INCLUSIVE ETHICS

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**Full Title:** Inclusive Ethics: Extending Beneficence and Egalitarian Justice

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With his latest work, Ingmar Persson has developed extant ideas found in almost thirty publications produced during the last three decades. The result is an original, eclectic, highly provocative and, what he calls, 'revisionary' piece of morally-oriented thought, one that strives to be systematic (despite Persson acknowledging its limitations) and draws upon debates in biology, psychology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind in order to challenge commonly-held justifications and intuitions regarding moral concepts, ethical frameworks and the point of moral philosophy. (Critics would likely argue against the claim that Persson posits a 'moral theory' due to the absence of any explicit theory of the right and any justified normative claims regarding the nature of moral evaluation and the strength of moral reasons.)

The three pillars of Persson's partial system are the structure and content of inclusive ethics and the concepts of beneficence and 'extreme egalitarianism'. (I use the term 'partial' because, even though Persson aims to be systematic in his treatment of inclusive ethics, beneficence and egalitarianism, there are, as he acknowledges, important accounts of things like autonomy, the strength of moral reasons, normative aspects of inclusive benefitting and the equal distribution of benefits, conceptual content and the links between mere perceptions and the content of perceptions that are missing.) Beginning with justifications for the claim that moral reasons for action are based on desires, Persson's fundamental aim is to show that 'altruistic desire should encompass the welfare of possible sentient beings, regardless of their species, and that, since rights and deserts are groundless, justice is largely a matter of equality' (p. 230). What follows is an articulation and principled justification of his distinct brands of consequentialism, perceptual empiricism, ontological realism and mental-physical (conceptual) monism (despite the claimed irreducibility of mental states to physical states) as well as of his pro-life worldview and morally pertinent accounts of just equality and the natures of life and death. (It should be noted that although Persson's approaches to these areas are derived from his conception of inclusive ethics,

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his accounts of consciousness, pleasure as a basis for well-being and the relation between autonomy and intrinsic value are also motivating factors behind the notion that intrinsic moral importance is anchored in the possibility of consciousness.)

Unlike an ethics that encompasses particular cultures, specific socio-political groups or the species of human beings in general, Persson's inclusive approach to morality is encapsulated by the ideas that *possible* conscious beings 'morally matter for their own sakes' (p. 65) and that we should extend *intrinsic* moral significance 'not only to human beings distant in space and time, but also to non-human animals, and even to possible beings who do not (yet) exist' (p. 232-3). Consequently, inclusive ethics appears to offer (in structural, metaphysical and ethical terms) a framework for making sense of Persson's approach to beneficence and equality *qua* two reasons for moral action. However, it is clear that his arguments for an inclusive ethics depend upon his theory of the good, that is, the philosophical import of his desire-oriented accounts of well-being and autonomy as 'two aspects of the notion of things going well for us or being intrinsically valuable for us' (p. 27). As a result, although 'extreme egalitarianism' appears as an off-shoot of Persson's inclusive approach to morality, the fundamental concepts of inclusive ethics and beneficence are more reciprocally related.

The first part of *Inclusive Ethics* is primarily concerned with defending the view that 'something can be benefitted only if it is possible that it acquires consciousness' (p. 145), implying that 'perceptually salient distinctions' between, for example, humans and non-humans and existence and non-existence are morally insignificant. With the notion that moral values of outcomes provide reasons for action, whereby value is measured in terms of benefits and harm, and by drawing distinctions between personal and impersonal values as well as between an intrinsic *state* sense of the term 'benefit' *qua* having or containing benefits and a more explicitly

comparative *event* sense *qua being benefited* when becoming better off, Persson supplements his defence of inclusive ethics in order to argue that the possibility of becoming better off presupposes an understanding of existence, its causes, its development and its processes in value terms, specifically, in terms of benefiting and harming. These two central tenets of part one (that for something to have intrinsic moral value there must be the possibility for consciousness and that both existing and coming into existence should be understood in terms of benefits) are supported by Persson's assertion that for an outcome to have moral value, there must be something about our welfare that is good or bad in and of itself, like pleasure and pain and their relation to desires.

With the focus on desires, specifically, intrinsic desires, Persson splits welfare into two modes – well-being and autonomy. The former is experiential; it consists in actually experiencing the satisfaction of our desires. The relationship between desires and autonomy, however, is 'trans-experiential' in the sense that we can, under 'informed, rational and free' conditions (p. 67), formulate and act on desires though we may only experience their satisfaction in the future if at all (because their satisfaction occurs, for example, after our demise or during brain stem death). For Persson, the fact that we spend time acting upon our desires for how we want things to turn out after we die is a good reason to claim that the exercise of our autonomy in the formulation of future-oriented desires can be an important aspect of 'things going well for us' even if we act on them only to never experience their satisfaction. It follows that 'to be benefited, being made better off or having more welfare can consist in either having more well-being or getting autonomy more respected' (p. 27).

This 'dual-aspect' account of welfare is used to distinguish 'persons' and sentient beings.

According to Persson, reasons of beneficence and a reason of respect for autonomy need to be

considered when determining the moral value of an outcome involving *persons* (due to the fact that an act can affect not only one's future well-being but current and future exercises of autonomy). For a sentient being, however, characterised 'as a being who has desires directed at its current experiences, but no capacity for autonomy' (p. 48), things can only be intrinsically valuable in terms of its well-being, that is, it can only be benefitted or harmed through acts that impinge upon its actual experiences of the satisfaction of its desires.

From the point of view of psychology, the implications of this 'dual-aspect' approach to welfare are wide-ranging. For example, due to the fact that, according to Persson, reasons of beneficence can be called upon to appraise the moral value of acts that facilitate or prevent a possibly conscious being coming into existence, common psychological justifications for abortion begin to lose their grip. Firstly, by making a distinction between the *state* sense of the term 'benefit' and the *event* sense, Persson argues that, in principle, it is possible that 'the [impersonal, intrinsic] value of an outcome in respect of its sum or set of benefits can be boosted by creating new individuals' even if the value of non-existence is 'intrinsically neutral' (p. 11) and, therefore, cannot be compared to a state of existence in terms of the something *being benefited* by being created. Secondly, recall Persson's claim that the intrinsic value of well-being is something only sentient beings or persons can experience. Accordingly, a pre-conscious foetus cannot be *hurt* since it 'cannot *experience* any harmful effects, that is, nothing can be *intrinsically* bad for it' (p. 56). However, a foetus can still be *harmed* in the sense that depriving it of a continuation of existence is *extrinsically* bad for it since its termination prevents not only 'their potential to acquire consciousness being actualised' (p. 57) but future experiences of the good of well-being and exercises of autonomy. In other words, it is *extrinsically* good for a foetus that a capacity to experience enjoyment is both actualised and 'exercised in the future in so far as this results in

experiences that are intrinsically good for them' (p, 51). The assumption is 'that their being dead is worse than the conscious existence that they would otherwise have had' (p. 57).

In addition to adopting an inclusive approach to beneficence, Persson extends the concepts of inclusivity to the area of justice. He acknowledges that justice as equality will never do the work we demand from a normative theory. He suggests that it needs to be supplemented with (as a minimum) moral reasons concerning beneficence (reasons that could, more likely than not, counteract efforts at mitigating welfare inequalities). That said, if there is anything that gestures at the content of a possible theory of the right it can be located in the principle of justice that he takes to be a belief of all 'extreme egalitarians' (those that claim that justice requires that everyone be equally well off unless they choose otherwise):

(J) Justice requires that everyone be equally well off, unless there is something that makes it just that some are worse off than others, or some autonomously choose to be worse off (p. 150).

Despite attempting to explain why a specific instance of unjust benefit inequality might be worse than another, the primary tasks of part two involve an analysis of the grounds and meaning of just equality, a denial of rights and deserts and a critique of prioritarianism as a rival to extreme egalitarianism.

As well as appearing counterintuitive, 'for it could imply that we ought to concentrate our resources on making life slightly better for countless invertebrate animals, since this might conceivably maximize the sum of welfare in the world' (p. 227), Persson's theory of just equality is open to extant criticisms of welfare equality. For example, if critics agree with Ronald Dworkin that equality of welfare is, ultimately, a utilitarian version of egalitarianism, then they will still bring the

usual problems associated with utilitarianism to bear on Persson's inclusive approach to just equality. ( See Ronald Dworkin (1981) 'What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (3): 185-246.)

Another example concerns Persson's claim that 'to be benefited, being made better off or having more welfare can consist in either having more well-being or getting autonomy more respected' (p. 27). Despite the distinction between higher and lower qualities of well-being, which, as aspects of Persson's principle of beneficence, can counteract the mitigation of welfare inequalities, critics will hold Persson to account on the basis of both offensive tastes and expensive tastes arguments. According to the latter, 'equality of welfare seems to recommend that those with champagne tastes, who need more income simply to achieve the same level of welfare as those with less expensive tastes, should have more income on that account' (Dworkin 1981, 228). If either offensive tastes or expensive tastes arguments are implied by Persson's account of the good, then these are additional reasons for suggesting that inclusive ethics is at odds with our common moral intuitions (but, as Persson is all too aware, this is product of his revisionary bent).

For those that might seek to apply Persson's inclusive approach to morality to some sort of normative theory of the right, the most obvious issues concern the indeterminacy of defining worst-off groups and better-off groups, the indeterminacy of judging the value of aggregates of benefits and the degree of unjustly unequal and justly equal distributions of benefits as well as the inevitable collapse into consequentialism that follows any seemingly arbitrary characterisation. Indeed, the counterintuitive applied elements of Persson's theory are disclosive of such indeterminacy, which he acknowledges to be problem, stating that 'there is no objective or intersubjectively acceptable way of weighing these dimensions of benefits against each other [well-being and exercises of autonomy], just as there is no such way of weighing them against the

injustice of an unequal distribution of benefits. Thus, it will often be indeterminate which of two outcomes is best all things considered, and ought to be chosen' (p. 21). Mindful of the limits of his inclusive approach, Persson suggests that because the principle of beneficence pulls in opposite directions to the principle of just equality of benefits, both principles must be 'balanced against each other in an altogether intuitive fashion. This is one reason why a morality composed of both of these principles will not issue in determinate precepts about what morally ought to be [*sic*] done in practice' (p. 20-1). What results is a morality that 'will appear to many as too abstract and general to be taken seriously' (p. 232).

Persson would claim that the concerns critics might raise are misguided – the detritus of common-sense morality towards which his revisionary approach is directed. In short, it may well be the case that these kinds of normative uncertainties are the prices we have to pay for a principled inclusivity, a morality that is 'doctrinally more definite, foundationally unshakeable, readily applicable and motivationally realistic' (p. 234). It is clear that Persson puts a high price on certainty and, as a result, wishes to 'refrain from arguing for more precise normative claims about the strength of moral reasons to act' (p. 3). Indeed, the fact that he derives his inclusive approach to morality from desires is because 'the nature of intrinsically desiring pleasure is such that on its basis *you can be certain that* pleasure is intrinsically desirable for you, but you cannot be certain of any non-natural or irreducible normative/evaluative fact such as there being a reason for you to desire pleasure intrinsically' [*italics added*] (p. 28). Of course, this begs the question of what level of certainty applies to Persson's principles of inclusive beneficence and just quality.

It is in the final section of the book regarding the respective *points* of his morality, of morality in general and of moral philosophy that it is most obvious why Persson strives for principled certainty and, simultaneously, steers clear of positing any normative outputs of his inclusive

approach. What comes across in Persson's tightly-argued, systematic analysis of what we can and can't be certain of is his antipathy towards moral norms, which, according to Persson, find their basis in common-sense morality that we are hard-wired to believe as a result of 'our evolutionary past in which our ancestors lived in small communities with primitive technology' (p. 22). Persson stresses that the point of moral philosophy is to produce 'something like a *rational consensus* about what is morally right and wrong, and what is the ground and meaning of this' (p. 235). Such a consensus not only presupposes the existence of moral norms, it implies that such norms can be useful, authoritative and, in part, determinations of the value of the moral philosophy that seeks to explain them. The problem is that, for Persson, not only are our most common moral norms products of common-sense morality, his own 'radically revisionary morality' (p. 233) is (for the reason that it 'cannot deliver anything but the sketchiest advice about what ought to be done in concrete situations' (p. 230)) unlikely to satisfy the condition that 'it must be possible in general to follow it' (p. 234), meaning that it 'will suffer a loss of manifest authority' (p. 233).

When it comes to the prospects of moral philosophy in general, Persson is even more pessimistic, suggesting that seemingly irresolvable tensions between consequentialists and deontologists, between metaethicists that argue for the objectivity of moral norms and those that claim subjectivism/internalism, will make it unlikely for moral philosophy to generate any sort of 'rational consensus' (whatever that may be in quantitative terms, a matter Persson does not seek to address). W



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