

No Outcome Is Good, Bad, or Evaluatively Neutral for Anyone

Michael Rabenberg
rabenbergm@gmail.com

Penultimate draft of a paper published in *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 21 (2024): 654–670.

Please cite [the published version](#).

Abstract

I argue that no outcome is good, bad, or evaluatively neutral for anyone. My argument concerns *non-comparative* personal evaluative properties alone; it does not support (say) the conclusion that no outcome is *better* for anyone than any other outcome. First I argue that there is a sequence of outcomes with the following properties, and that the existence of such a sequence supports the conclusion that no outcome is good for anyone: (i) the first member of the sequence is good for you if any outcome is good for you, (ii) any two adjacent members of the sequence are on a par for you, and (iii) the last member of the sequence is not good for you. I then defend similar arguments that no outcome is bad or evaluatively neutral for anyone. Thus, I conclude that no outcome is good, bad, or evaluatively neutral for anyone.

Keywords: Ethics; value theory; parity; goodness; non-comparative goodness

Introduction

Consider the following claim:

- (1) No outcome is good, bad, or evaluatively neutral for anyone.

Most people believe that (1) is false, even obviously false. I shall defend (1).

(1) ought not to be confused with either of the following claims:

(1S) No outcome is good, bad, or evaluatively neutral *simpliciter*.¹

(1T) Nothing is good, bad, or evaluatively neutral *qua* member of any of its types.

(1S) implies, for example, that an outcome in which there are exactly 1 trillion people, all of whom live long lives full of agony, is not bad *simpliciter*. (1T) implies, for example, that a pen that a normal adult human can hold easily, that expresses ink when one presses its tip against something but not otherwise, and so on is not good *qua* pen. It might be that my defense of (1) could be adapted into a non-inferior defense of at least one of (1S) and (1T), but I believe that this is a complicated matter and shall not pursue it in this paper.

Throughout this paper, I shall assume that two outcomes can be, in Ruth Chang's terminology, *on a par* for someone.² Two outcomes, x and y, are on a par for some subject, S, just in case x and y are comparable in value for S, x is neither better nor worse than y for S, and x and y are not equally valuable for S. For illustration, consider two qualitatively very different outcomes available to you, neither of which is better for you than the other: a trip to the movies (M) and a trip to the zoo (Z). Plausibly, given suitable fillings-in of the details of M and Z, M and Z are not *equally valuable* for you, even though neither is better for you than the other. For consider M+, a variant of M slightly better for you than M (e.g., an outcome just like M save that it would involve slightly tastier popcorn). If M and Z were equally valuable for you, then M+ would have to be better for you than Z, but it seems that M+ need not be better for you than Z.³ Furthermore, it does not seem that M and Z are

¹ Defenders of (1S) include Almotahari and Hosein (2015), Geach (1956), and Thomson (1997).

² See Chang (2002).

³ See Chang (2002).

incomparable in value for you. For it seems most appropriate for you to be at least somewhat *ambivalent* (and not *indifferent*) in the face of your choice between M and Z, roughly because they present you with significantly different values, but presumably it would not be most appropriate for you to be ambivalent in the face of two items that are truly incomparable in value for you.⁴ Thus, it seems that, given suitable fillings-in of the details of M and Z, M and Z are on a par for you.

Beyond having provided the brief rationale for parity's existence in the previous paragraph, I shall not in this paper argue that two outcomes can be on a par for someone.⁵ That said, philosophers have posited comparative evaluative relations other than parity that could replace parity in my argument without damage to my argument. Examples include Parfit's *rough comparability* or *imprecise equality* (1986, 431; 2011, 555–61) and Griffin's *rough equality* (1986, 80–1, 96). In general, many philosophers who believe in *value incommensurability* generally will be able to accept the core of my argument, whether or not they believe in *parity* specifically.⁶

Here, a bit crudely, is how my argument for (1) will go. In Section 1, I shall defend this claim:

(1G) No outcome is good for anyone.

I shall do so by arguing that there is a sequence of outcomes with the following properties, and that the existence of such a sequence supports the conclusion that (1G) is true: (i) the first member of the sequence is good for you if any outcome is good for you, (ii) any two adjacent members of the sequence are on a par for you, and (iii) the last member of the sequence is not good for you. In Section 2, I shall defend similar arguments for these conclusions:

⁴ See Chang (2012) and Hare (2010).

⁵ Parity skeptics include Gert (2004) and Gustafsson and Espinoza (2010).

⁶ Those who believe that all instances of value incommensurability are instances of value incomparability will not be able to accept the core of my argument, but I assume that this view is false.

(1B) No outcome is bad for anyone.

(1N) No outcome is evaluatively neutral for anyone.

Because (1) is the conjunction of (1G), (1B), and (1N), I shall conclude that (1) is true.

Some might find (1) so implausible that they will take my argument to amount to a *reductio* for the assumption that there are two outcomes that are on a par (or imprecisely equally good, or roughly equally good, or...) for someone.⁷ I think that this would be the wrong lesson to draw from my argument. For one thing, I think that parity is all over the place, and indeed a much more widespread and humdrum comparative evaluative relation than equality. (Beyond very contrived examples, such as that of the piles of hay faced by Buridan's ass, how often does one encounter distinct items that are truly *equally* good for one?⁸) For another thing, I think that (1) has none of the revisionary implications—for practical reason, for moral theory, for metaethics, for any other such thing—that some might at first glance take it to have. For example, (1) does not imply that the following revisionary claim is true:

(1!) No outcome is better for anyone than, equally good for anyone as, worse for anyone than, or on a par for anyone with any other outcome.

⁷ Alternatively, one could hold that the thesis of this paper ought to be, rather than (1), the following disjunctive claim: (1) is true or no two outcomes are on a par (or imprecisely equally good, or roughly equally good, or...) for anyone.

⁸ It is plausible that one often encounters distinct items that one ought for practical purposes to treat as though they were equally good for one, but this fact is irrelevant to the topic at hand. It is also true that one often encounters several distinct items, none of which is better for one than any other; but these are ordinarily not cases of equality.

Nor do any claims in my argument for (1) imply that (1!) is true. (Indeed, some imply that (1!) is false.) Thus, this paper puts no pressure on the (obviously intuitively appealing) view that some outcomes stand in positive personal comparative evaluative relations (e.g., *better-for-Amy-than*, *worse-for-Bob-than*, *equally-good-for-Charlie-as*, *on-a-par-for-Diana-with*) to some other outcomes.

To readers who find (1) seriously unappealing, I put the following question: What of importance—for practical reason, for moral theory, for metaethics, for whatever—would be lost if we accepted (1), provided we rejected (1!) and any other such revisionary claim concerning positive personal comparative evaluative relations? I myself believe that nothing of importance would be lost if we did this. For example, although many views, such as hedonism, desire-satisfactionism, and objective-list theory, are commonly characterized as theses about what makes a life *good* or *bad* for its subject, I see no significant cost to reinterpreting such views as theses about what makes some lives *better* or *worse* for their subjects than others. Similarly, although the letters of some versions of consequentialism (e.g., some versions of total utilitarianism) arguably rely on the assumption that some outcomes are *good* or *bad* for some people, I believe that the spirit of such views can be accommodated by holding that some outcomes are *better* or *worse* in certain respects (with respect to welfare, say) than some others.⁹ I grant, however, that arguing in detail for the non-radicality of (1) would require a separate paper.¹⁰ I shall therefore content myself at present with encouraging my readers to take (1) seriously, as counterintuitive as it might be.

1. No Outcome Is Good for Anyone

⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to address these concerns. The referee also raised the question whether a proponent of (1) ought to say that the concept GOOD-FOR is inconsistent. Certainly (1) does not entail this conclusion on its own, but it might be that the argument of this paper could be adapted into a non-inferior argument for this conclusion.

¹⁰ One prominent claim contrary to my view is that an outcome in which a person is created can be *good* (or *bad*) for this person but cannot be *better* (or *worse*) for this person than an outcome in which this person is never created. See for example McMahan (2013) and Parfit (2017). See Broome (1993) for relevant discussion, which appears in an article in defense of a position at least very similar to the one defended in this paper.

In this section, I shall defend the following claim:

(1G) No outcome is good for anyone.

Consider the following four outcomes:

A an outcome in which you have 100 hours of unconsciousness

A+ an outcome in which you have 99 hours and 59 minutes of unconsciousness, followed by one minute of moderate pleasure

A- an outcome in which you have 99 hours and 59 minutes of unconsciousness, followed by one minute of moderate pain

B an outcome in which you have 100 hours of a complex mixture of intense pain and intense pleasure

Note that A+ is a variant of A in which the last minute of unconsciousness is replaced by one minute of moderate pleasure, and that A- is a variant of A in which the last minute of unconsciousness is replaced by one minute of moderate pain. These facts will be important in what follows.

It seems very plausible that, given suitable fillings-in of the details of A and B, the following claim is true:

(2) A and B are on a par for you.

Note the modesty of what I just said. I did not say that, given *any* fillings-in of the details of A and B, (2) is true; nor did I say that it is *easy* to fill in the details of A and B such that (2) is true. I said that, given suitable fillings-in of the details of A and B, (2) is true. Obviously those who deny the existence of parity will deny this claim, but I find it difficult to think of any good reason why anyone else would deny this claim.

I shall suppose that (2) is true, given suitable fillings-in of the details of A and B. Furthermore, for brevity's sake, I shall in what follows typically refrain from explicitly making "given suitable fillings-in of the details" qualifications about the outcomes that I consider. Such qualifications ought to be assumed to govern the entire argument of the paper.

The truth of (2) makes it plausible that the following claims are both true:

(3) A+ and B are on a par for you.

(4) A- and B are on a par for you.

Why does the truth of (2) make it plausible that (3) and (4) are both true? Typically, if outcomes x and y are on a par for you, then there exist variants of x, x+ and x-, such that x+ is slightly better for you than x, x- is slightly worse for you than x, x+ is on a par for you with y, and x- is on a par for you with y. (The example of M, Z, and M+ from the Introduction helps to bring this out.) But A+ and A- are variants of A slightly better for you than A and slightly worse for you than A, respectively. Thus, the truth of (2) makes it plausible that (3) and (4) are both true.

My present point does not rely on the assumption that, *necessarily*, if outcomes x and y are on a par for you, then there exist variants of x, x+ and x-, such that x+ is slightly better for you than x,

x^- is slightly worse for you than x , x^+ is on a par for you with y , and x^- is on a par for you with y . On the contrary, I believe that this assumption is false, for I believe that it is possible for two outcomes, $O1$ and $O2$, to be on a par for you despite the fact that one or both of the following claims are true: (i) No variant of $O1$ better for you than $O1$ is on a par for you with $O2$; and (ii) No variant of $O1$ worse for you than $O1$ is on a par for you with $O2$.¹¹ But such cases are atypical, and at any rate I see no good reason to believe that the case of A , A^+ , A^- , and B must be such a case.

I shall suppose that (3) and (4) are both true. Now consider the following claim:

- (5) If outcome x is good for you and outcome y is on a par for you with x , then y is good for you.

(5) strikes me as very plausible on its face. I hope that it has a similar effect on you. However, for the sake of the not-immediately-convinced, I shall now present three arguments for (5).

First, consider the following principles:

- (+) If outcome x is good for you and outcome y is better for you than x , then y is good for you.
- (=) If outcome x is good for you and outcome y is equally good for you as x , then y is good for you.

¹¹ For example, I think that there could be two outcomes that are (so to speak) *barely* on a par for you, where one of them is such that *any* improvement of it would result in its not being on a par for you with the other. Those who believe that improvements and worsenings admit of arbitrarily small possible magnitudes will presumably deny the possibility of such a situation, but I think that improvements and worsenings do not so admit. These intricacies are irrelevant to the argument of this paper.

(+) seems very plausible,¹² and (=) seems very plausible, at least given the assumption that (+) is true.

(+) and (=) therefore seem very plausible. Furthermore, they seem to stand or fall together.

Suppose that (+) and (=) are true. *Why* are they true? This seems to be a plausible answer: (+) and (=) are true because a “movement” from goodness to non-goodness requires either a *failure of value comparability* or a *worsening*. So, if heaven and the number seven are value incomparable, then it might be that heaven is good and seven is not. Or if the television show *Seventh Heaven* is worse than heaven, then it might be that heaven is good and *Seventh Heaven* is not. But if a situation of neither sort obtains for two items, then these items are either both good or both non-good. So, the following claim, which entails (+) and (=), seems plausible:

(5+) If outcome x is good for you, outcome y is comparable in value for you to x, and y is not worse for you than x, then y is good for you.

But (5+) entails (5).¹³ So, we have an argument for (5). One could of course resist this argument by rejecting (+) and (=) or by rejecting my explanation of their truth, but I find neither option as attractive as accepting (5).

Here is a second argument for (5). Consider the following thesis, which is weaker than (5):

(5-) If outcomes x and y are on a par for you and x is good for you, then y is *not bad* for you.

¹² Nebel (2018) appeals to the impersonal-value analog of (+) in an interesting argument for the acyclicity of *better-than*. Many would characterize (+) as the impersonal-value analog of the thesis that ‘good’ is monotonic. But this is contestable, for the thesis that ‘good’ is monotonic is the thesis that if x is good and y is *more good than* x, then y is good; and it is contestable whether being better than something is identical to being more good than this thing.

¹³ Suppose that (5+) is true; and suppose for *reductio* that (5) is false. Then there exist outcomes a and b such that (i) a is good for you, (ii) b is on a par for you with a, and (iii) b is not good for you. Given (ii), b is comparable in value for you to a and not worse for you than a. So, by (5+) and (i), b is good for you. This contradicts (iii). So, (5+) entails (5).

This principle seems very plausible. Suppose that it is true. *Why* is (5-) true? This seems to be a plausible answer: (5-) is true because a “movement” from good to bad requires a worsening. But why does a movement from good to bad require a worsening? Natural thought: Because a “movement” from good to anything “below” good requires a worsening. So, this principle seems plausible:

(5+*) If outcome x is good for you, outcome y is comparable in value for you to x, and y is not good for you, then y is worse for you than x.

But (5+*) entails (5).¹⁴ So, we have another argument for (5). As before, one of course could try to resist my argument by resisting (5-) or my explanation of its truth, but simply accepting (5) strikes me as a more attractive way to go.

Here is a third argument for (5), which is longer than the previous two. Consider two outcomes, O1 and O2. Suppose that the following claims are true:

(a) O1 and O2 are on a par for you.

(b) O1 is good for you.

Now suppose, for *reductio*, that the following claim is true:

¹⁴ Suppose that (5+*) is true. Suppose that there are outcomes a and b such that a is good for you and b is on a par for you with a. Suppose for *reductio* that b is not good for you. Then, by (5+*), we get the conclusion that b is worse for you than a, which is inconsistent with the supposition that b is on a par for you with a. So, b is good for you; and the point generalizes. So, (5+*) entails (5).

(c) O2 is not good for you.

Then it seems very plausible that one of the following claims is true:

(c1) O2 is bad for you (as some might think A- is).

(c2) O2 is evaluatively neutral for you (as some might think A is).

(c3) O2 is not of value for you (as some might think an outcome in which you were never created would have been).¹⁵

I shall now argue that (c1)–(c3) are each false, given (a) and (b). (Some might think that none of (c1)–(c3) follows from (a)–(c). It will facilitate exposition to ignore this possibility for the moment, but I shall return to it.)

If (c1) were true, then, given (b), O1 would be better for you than O2. For if x is good for you and y is bad for you, then x is better for you than y. But, given (a), O1 is not better for you than O2. So, (c1) is false. Furthermore, if (c2) were true, then, given (b), O1 would be better for you than O2. For if x is good for you and y is evaluatively neutral for you, then x is better for you than y. But, given (a), O1 is not better for you than O2. So, (c2) is false. Finally, if (c3) were true, then, given (b), either O1 and O2 would be incomparable in value for you or O1 would be better for you than O2. For if x is good for you and y is not of value for you, then either x and y are incomparable in value for you or

¹⁵ Note that I am not claiming, inconsistently with (1), that any outcome is bad for you or evaluatively neutral for you. I am claiming only that, given (a), (b), and (c), it appears to follow that one of (c1), (c2), and (c3) is true.

x is better for you than y.¹⁶ But, given (a), O1 and O2 are comparable in value for you and O1 is not better for you than O2. So, (c3) is false. So, (c1)–(c3) are each false. It follows that (c) is false, i.e., that O2 is good for you. But we have reached this conclusion via the assumption that (a) and (b) are true, and O1 and O2 were chosen arbitrarily. Thus, we reach the general conclusion that (5) is true.

Some might say that none of (c1)–(c3) follow from (a), (b), and (c), and that one of the following claims might be true instead:

(c4) It is indeterminate whether O2 is good for you.

(c5) It is indeterminate whether O2 is evaluatively neutral for you.

(c6) It is indeterminate whether O2 is bad for you.

Furthermore, some might think that we ought to *expect* value-indeterminacy–affirming claims such as (c4)–(c6) to turn out true, given assumptions such as (a). And so some might think that there is nothing *ad hoc* about saying that one of (c4)–(c6) might be true, given (a), (b), and (c).

I shall now argue that (c4)–(c6) are each false, given (a) and (b). First I shall argue that (c4) is false. Suppose that (c4) is true. What might make (c4) true? Well, it seems very plausible that if (c4) is true, then this is because O2 is a “borderline case” with respect to being good for you and not being good for you, presumably in something like the way in which some people are “borderline cases” with respect to being bald and not being bald. But if O2 is a borderline case of this sort, then, given (b), it seems very plausible that O1 is better for you than O2. For it seems very plausible that if x is good

¹⁶ In fact I endorse a stronger claim: if x is good for you and y is not of value for you, then x and y are incomparable in value for you. But the weaker claim just asserted will serve my purposes.

for you and y is a borderline case with respect to being good for you and not being good for you, then x is better for you than y. In defense of this conditional claim, we can note that seemingly parallel claims are plausible when applied to many gradable properties that admit of borderline cases. Consider *baldness*. If Albert is bald and Ben is a borderline case with respect to being bald and not being bald, then it seems to follow that Albert is balder than Ben. In general, it seems that if x is bald and y is a borderline case with respect to being bald and not being bald, then x is balder than y. But it is hard to see why we ought not say something similar about outcomes that are good for you and outcomes that are borderline cases with respect to being good for you and not being good for you. Thus, it seems that if (c4) is true, then O1 is better for you than O2. But (a) implies that O1 is not better for you than O2. So, it seems that (c4) is false.

An argument similar to the one against (c4) just articulated seems to undermine each of (c5) and (c6). It seems that if (c5) or (c6) is true, then O2 is a borderline case either with respect to being evaluatively neutral for you and not being evaluatively neutral for you or with respect to being bad for you and not being bad for you. But if O2 is a borderline case of either of these sorts, then, given (b), it seems very plausible that O1 is better for you than O2. For, very plausibly, if x is good for you and y is a borderline case with respect to being evaluatively neutral for you and not being evaluatively neutral for you, then x is better for you than y; and, very plausibly, if x is good for you and y is a borderline case with respect to being bad for you and not being bad for you, then x is better for you than y. But (a) implies that O1 is not better for you than O2. So, it seems that (c5) and (c6) are each false. So, it seems that (c4)–(c6) are each false.

Perhaps some might raise the possibility that (c4)–(c6) might *all* be true, because O2 might, for all (c) says, be a borderline case with respect to *being of value for you* and *not being of value for you*. The idea, perhaps, would be something like this: an outcome in which you have 100 years of ecstasy, for example, is definitely of value for you; an outcome in which you never exist, for example, is definitely

not of value for you; but there are outcomes that are neither definitely of value for you nor definitely not of value for you, and O2 might be, for all (c) says, such an outcome.

I am far from sure what it would be for an outcome to be a borderline case with respect to being of value for you and not being of value for you. (Perhaps an outcome, if such an outcome is possible, in which it is not definitely the case that you ever exist and not definitely *not* the case that you ever exist meets this description.) However, being sure about this matter is not necessary for my purposes. If O2 is an outcome of the sort currently being imagined, then presumably it is somehow indeterminate whether O1 and O2 are comparable in value for you. But this is not so, given (a). For if x and y are on a par for you, then it is not indeterminate whether x and y are comparable in value for you. So, it cannot be that O2 is a borderline case of the sort currently being imagined.

I have argued that, given (a) and (b), none of (c1)–(c6) is true. Because I take (a), (b), and (c) jointly to imply that at least one of (c1)–(c6) is true, I take my argument to show that (a) and (b) jointly imply that (c) is false. If I am right about this, then (5) is true. And so we have a third argument for (5). Of course, some might try to resist my argument for (5) by arguing that none of (c1)–(c6) follows from (a), (b), and (c). I lack anything like a knockdown argument that this claim is false, but I do fail to see a plausible basis on which to defend this claim. Given (a), (b), and (c), what evaluative status could O2 plausibly be thought to have, if it has none of the statuses attributed to it by (c1)–(c6)?¹⁷

¹⁷ Some writers, appealing to cases similar in important respects to that of A+, A, A-, and B, have defended the existence of impersonal non-comparative evaluative properties beyond the familiar trio of goodness, value neutrality, and badness. For example, Gustafsson (2020, 2023) has recently defended the existence of a fourth impersonal non-comparative evaluative property, which he calls “undistinguishedness.” (For similar proposals, see Espinoza (2009) and Carlson (1997, 2011, 2016). I discuss Gustafsson’s view for brevity’s sake, but what I say about his view bears *mutatis mutandis* on other relevantly similar views.) Some might think that one could resist my third argument for (5) by saying that O2 might be undistinguished for you. This is because, if some outcomes are undistinguished for you, then an outcome that is good or bad for you can be on a par for you with an outcome that is undistinguished for you even though outcomes that are undistinguished for you are not good or bad for you. Thus, if O2 is undistinguished for you, then (c) is true but none of (c1)–(c6) is true. In addition, positing outcomes that are undistinguished for you would allow one to reject each of (5+) and (5+*), and so to reject my first and second arguments for (5). (Gustafsson himself does not present his view in terms of personal value or in terms of personal parity, but one who believes that some outcomes are personally undistinguished and that some outcomes are personally on a par with some outcomes would presumably defend the response just articulated.)

I shall suppose that (5) is true. Now consider the following claim:

(6) At least one of A- and B is not good for you.

Note that A- is a variant of A which is slightly worse for you than A, or at any rate we seem free to assume as much. Given this fact, it seems very plausible that A- is not good for you; and at any rate, it seems very plausible on its face that A- is not good for you. Furthermore, (2) and (5) jointly imply that if B is good for you, then A is good for you. But it seems very plausible that A is *not* good for you. So, it seems very plausible that B is not good for you. Thus, I take it to be plausible that *neither* A- *nor* B is good for you. At any rate, I take (6) to be plausible.

That being said, the spirit of my argument for (1G) does not rely on (6), as will emerge toward the end of this section. Thus, even philosophers who (for whatever reason) think that A- and B are both good for you could accept the core of my argument for (1G). However, assuming (6) for now will facilitate exposition.

Suppose, then, that (6) is true. Now consider the following claim:

(7) If any outcome is good for you, then A+ is good for you.

A full treatment of the comparative merits of my proposal, on the one hand, and “extra property” views such as Gustafsson’s, on the other, is beyond the scope of this paper, but I shall briefly mention one consideration that I think tells in favor of my view. A defender of a view relevantly like Gustafsson’s is committed to denying each of the following theses:

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| (Good-Better) | If outcome x is good for you, outcome y is comparable in value for you to x, and y is not good for you, then x is better for you than y. |
| (Bad-Worse) | If outcome x is bad for you, outcome y is comparable in value for you to x, and y is not bad for you, then x is worse for you than y. |

(Suppose that outcome a is good for you, outcome b is undistinguished for you, and a and b are on a par for you. Then a and b are a counterexample to (Good-Better). Suppose that outcome c is bad for you, outcome d is undistinguished for you, and c and d are on a par for you. Then c and d are a counterexample to (Bad-Worse).) But I think (Good-Better) and (Bad-Worse) are very appealing, and my view does not require rejecting them. This, I think, is a point in my view’s favor.

(7) seems to me to have great plausibility. In its defense, we can note that most theories of wellbeing classify pleasant experiences among the components of wellbeing, at least provided that these pleasant experiences are taken in appropriate objects, are not instrumentally bad for their subjects, and so on, and we can stipulate that the pleasant experience or experiences involved in A+ meet such conditions. Furthermore, although desire-satisfactionists about wellbeing do not classify pleasant experiences themselves among the components of wellbeing, they do classify desire-satisfactions among the components of wellbeing, and we can stipulate that A+ involves desire-satisfaction on your part. (For example, we can stipulate that you have a desire for pleasure, and that this desire is satisfied by your having the pleasure involved in A+.) If, then, A+ is not good for you, then it seems doubtful that any outcome is good for you.

Some philosophers might hold that one minute of moderate pleasure makes *no* contribution, not a *small* contribution, to a person's wellbeing. Others might think that unconsciousness makes a negative contribution to a person's wellbeing. Those who think either of these things will presumably deny (7). I find these positions implausible, but the core of my argument for (1G) does not rely on (7), as I shall show below. However, assuming (7) for now will facilitate exposition.

Suppose, then, that (7) is true. Now I shall show that (3)–(7) jointly imply that (1G) is true. (3)–(5) jointly yield the following sub-conclusion:

(5.5) If at least one of A+, B, and A- is good for you, then A+, B, and A- are all good for you.

(5.5) and (6) jointly yield the following sub-conclusion:

(6.5) A+ is not good for you.

And (6.5) and (7) jointly yield the following conclusion:

(8) No outcome is good for you.

But there is nothing special about *you* in this respect. So, if (8) is true, then (1G) is true, i.e., no outcome is good for anyone. So goes my argument for (1G).

Let me abstract somewhat from the details of my argument and identify in a more general way how I have arrived at the conclusion that (1G) is true. In doing so, I shall show that the spirit of my argument does not rely on (6) or (7).

If there are outcomes that are on a par for someone, as I have assumed, then it appears that there are what we might call *descending border-crossing paths*, or so I have argued. A descending border-crossing path is a sequence of two or more outcomes with the following properties: (i) the first member of the sequence is good for some subject, S, if any outcome is good for S; (ii) any two adjacent members of the sequence are on a par for S; and (iii) the last member of the sequence is not good for S. Given suitable fillings-in of the details of A+, B, and A-, at least one of the following sequences of outcomes is a descending border-crossing path, or so my argument implies: <A+, B> and <A+, B, A->. (I use angle-brackets to designate sequences of outcomes.)

The existence of descending border-crossing paths seems strongly to recommend the conclusion that (1G) is true. It does not seem possible to “move” from an outcome that is *good* for some subject, S, to another outcome that is *not good* for S via a chain of *on-a-par-for-S-withs* alone. However, if there are descending border-crossing paths and (1G) is false, then it is possible to “move” in this way. Thus, it appears that if there are descending border-crossing paths, as I have argued, then

(1G) is true. And so it also appears that if there are outcomes that are on a par for some subject, as I have assumed, then (1G) is true.

Although the letter of my argument for (1G) relies on the claim that *At least one of $\langle A+, B \rangle$ and $\langle A+, B, A- \rangle$ is a descending border-crossing path*, and thus also on (6) and (7), the spirit of my argument relies only on the claim that *there are descending border-crossing paths*, and thus does not rely on (6) or on (7). If you think that neither $\langle A+, B \rangle$ nor $\langle A+, B, A- \rangle$ is a descending border-crossing path, then I invite you to imagine a different sequence of outcomes that you take to be a descending border-crossing path. So long as you can think of at least one such sequence, whatever its length and constituent outcomes, you ought to accept (1G), even if not for precisely the same reasons that I have given in this section to accept (1G).

It seems that the only way to resist both the letter and the spirit of my argument for (1G) would be to defend the following claim:

(9) There are no descending border-crossing paths.

But how could one go about defending (9)? Obviously one could, and many would, defend (9) by defending the following claim:

(10) No two outcomes are on a par for anyone.

But because I have supposed throughout this paper that (10) is false, I shall ignore this possible way of defending (9).

Could one defend (9) in a plausible manner without defending (10)? Here, two new terms will help. First, call some outcome, O, “conditionally good for you” just in case O is good for you if any

outcome is good for you.¹⁸ To illustrate: (7) could be rephrased as the claim that *A+* is *conditionally good for you*, and every descending border-crossing path begins with an outcome that is conditionally good for you. Second, call some outcome, O+, “celestial” just in case there is *no* outcome, O-, such that (a) O- is not good for you, and (b) there is a sequence of outcomes $\langle O+, \dots, O- \rangle$, any two adjacent members of which are on a par for you. To illustrate: Consider an outcome, call it “G,” in which you have *1 googolplex of years of unadulterated ecstasy*. Perhaps it might be thought that it is impossible to “move” from G to an outcome that is not good for you by a sequence of *on-a-par-for-you-withs* alone. If moving in this way is impossible, then G is a celestial outcome.

Now consider the following claim:

(11) Every outcome that is conditionally good for you is celestial.

(11) entails that (9) is true, i.e., that there are no descending border-crossing paths. For if there is a descending border-crossing path, then it is possible to “move” from a conditionally-good-for-you outcome to an outcome that is not good for you by a sequence of *on-a-par-for-you-withs* alone; but (11) implies that “moving” in this way is impossible. Furthermore, (11) is compatible with the falsity of (10). Therefore, one could defend (9) without defending (10) by defending (11).

(11) seems to me to be the best basis on which to resist my argument for (1G). But I also think that (11) admits of counterexamples. Obviously the argument of this section implies that A+ is a counterexample to (11). But even if A+ is not a counterexample to (11) (presumably because A+ is not conditionally good for you), I take it that there are at least *some* conditionally-good-for-you outcomes that are not plausible candidates for celestial outcomes. Consider, for example, an outcome in which you have *one day of unadulterated moderate pleasure*. This strikes me as an extremely good

¹⁸ Mine is an idiosyncratic use of the term “conditionally good for you.”

candidate for being conditionally good for you. Furthermore, I happily grant that “moving” from this outcome to an outcome that is not good for you via a sequence of *on-a-par-for-you-withs* alone might require a very large number of steps. But it also seems plausible that making such a “move” is possible. But if this is possible, then it appears that there are counterexamples to (11), whether or not A+ is one.

2. No Outcome Is Good, Bad, or Evaluatively Neutral for Anyone

In this section, I shall defend the following claims:

(1B) No outcome is bad for anyone.

(1N) No outcome is evaluatively neutral for anyone.

Because (1) is the conjunction of (1G), (1B), and (1N) and I have already defended (1G), I shall conclude that (1) is true.

If there are outcomes that are on a par for a subject, as I have assumed, then there appear to be what we might call *ascending border-crossing paths*. An ascending border-crossing path is a sequence of outcomes with the following properties: (i) the first member of the sequence is bad for some subject, S, if any outcome is bad for S; (ii) any two adjacent members of the sequence are on a par for S; and (iii) the last member of the sequence is not bad for S. It seems very plausible that, given suitable fillings-in of the details of A-, B, and A+, $\langle A-, B, A+ \rangle$ is an ascending border-crossing path. At the very least, it seems very plausible that *there are ascending border-crossing paths*.

It seems that if there are ascending border-crossing paths, then (1B) is true. For it seems impossible to “move” from an outcome that is bad for some subject, S, to an outcome that is not bad

for S via a chain of *on-a-par-for-S-withs* alone, but if there are ascending border-crossing paths and (1B) is false, then it is possible to “move” in this way. Thus, it appears that if there are ascending border-crossing paths, as I have claimed, then (1B) is true. And so it also appears that if there are outcomes that are on a par for someone, as I have assumed, then (1B) is true. So goes my argument for (1B).

Now for my argument for (1N). If there are outcomes that are on a par for a subject, as I have assumed, then there appear to be what we might call *border-exiting paths*. A border-exiting path is a sequence of outcomes with the following properties: (i) the first member of the sequence is evaluatively neutral for some subject, S, if any outcome is evaluatively neutral for S; (ii) any two adjacent members of the sequence are on a par for S; and (iii) the last member of the sequence is not evaluatively neutral for S. It seems very plausible that, given suitable fillings-in of the details, $\langle A, B, A \rangle$ and $\langle A, B, A \rangle$ are border-exiting paths. At any rate, it seems very plausible that there are such paths.

It seems that if there are border-exiting paths, then (1N) is true. For it seems impossible to “move” from an outcome that is evaluatively neutral for some subject, S, to an outcome that is not evaluatively neutral for S via a chain of *on-a-par-for-S-withs* alone, but if there are border-exiting paths and (1N) is false, then it is possible to “move” in this way. Thus, it appears that if there are border-exiting paths, as I have claimed, then (1N) is true. And so it also appears that if there are outcomes that are on a par for someone, as I have assumed, then (1N) is true. So goes my argument for (1N).

This concludes my defense of (1). No outcome is good, bad, or evaluatively neutral for anyone.

Acknowledgements

This paper was inspired in very large part by an objection that Ronni Gura Sadovsky raised several years ago to a claim that I made in a different paper. I offer her my especially hearty thanks. For helpful written and unwritten feedback, I am also grateful to Javier Caride, Elizabeth Harman, Jake

Nebel, Tom Parr, Heather Rabenberg, and two anonymous referees for the *Journal of Moral Philosophy*.

Biographical Note

Michael Rabenberg has written on the value of death, the morality of rescue and beneficence, and the ethics of prenatal injury, among other topics.

References

- Almotahari, M. and Hosein, A. (2015). "Is Anything Just Plain Good?" *Philosophical Studies*, 172: 1485–1508.
- Broome, J. (1993). "Goodness Is Reducible to Betterness: The Evil of Death Is the Value of Life." In Koslowski, P., and Shionoya, Y. (eds.), *The Good and the Economical: Studies in Economic Ethics and Philosophy*. Berlin: Springer.
- Chang, R. (2002). "The Possibility of Parity." *Ethics*, 112: 659–688.
- Chang, R. (2012). "Are Hard Choices Cases of Incomparability?" *Philosophical Issues*, 22: 106–126.
- Carlson, E. (1997). "The Intrinsic Value of Non-Basic States of Affairs." *Philosophical Studies*, 85: 95–107.
- Carlson, E. (2011). "Defining Goodness and Badness in Terms of Betterness without Negation." In Dzhaferov, E., and Perry, L. (eds). *Descriptive and Normative Approaches to Human Behavior*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing.
- Carlson, E. (2016). "'Good' in Terms of 'Better'." *Noûs*, 50: 213–223.
- Espinoza, N. (2009). "Some New Monadic Value Predicates." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 46: 31–37.
- Geach, P. (1956). "Good and Evil." *Analysis*, 17: 33–42.
- Gert, J. (2004). "Parity and Value." *Ethics*, 114: 492–510.
- Griffin, J. (1986). *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Gustafsson, J. (2020). "Population Axiology and the Possibility of a Fourth Category of Absolute Value." *Economics and Philosophy*, 36: 81–110.
- Gustafsson, J. (2023). "The Possibility of Undistinguishedness." *Philosophical Studies*, 180: 609–613.

- Gustafsson, J. and Espinoza, N. (2010). “Conflicting Reasons in the Small-Improvement Argument.” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 60: 754–763.
- Hare, C. (2010). “Take the Sugar.” *Analysis*, 70: 237–247.
- McHugh, C., and Way, J. (2016). “Fittingness First.” *Ethics*, 126: 575–606.
- McMahan, J. (2013). “Causing People to Exist and Saving People’s Lives.” *Journal of Ethics*, 17: 5–35.
- Nebel, J. (2018). “The Good, the Bad, and the Transitivity of *Better Than*.” *Noûs*, 52: 874–899.
- Parfit, D. (2011). *On What Matters: Volume 2*. Oxford: University Press.
- Parfit, D. (2016). “Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?” *Theoria*, 82: 110–127.
- Parfit, D. (2017). “Future People, the Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 45: 118–157.
- Thomson, J. J. (1997). “The Right and the Good.” *Journal of Philosophy*, 97: 273–298.