

DISCUSSION

WRONGNESS, WELFARISM AND EVOLUTION: CRISP ON REASONS AND THE GOOD

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In *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), Roger Crisp presents answers to some of the oldest questions in moral philosophy. The book is sparkingly clear and contains abundant insights and interesting arguments. One strength is that it does not require substantial acquaintance with the literature in order to follow and benefit from the discussion, although those versed in the current debates will doubtless get more out of the book. The breadth of the book is also impressive. It tackles a dizzying array of topics, any one of which could have warranted a book. But therein lies the rub. The book discusses so many topics that it does not always feel like a coherent whole. It also covers so much in such a comparatively small space that the reader cannot help wondering whether important complications have been omitted or objections left unconsidered. Given the large range of topics that Crisp covers and arguments he deploys, I will not attempt to summarise the book. Instead, I will consider objections to what I consider to be the main tenets of Crisp's theory.

1. In chapter one, Crisp defends his first major thesis – that there are no *ultimate* moral reasons – by which he means that there are no reasons to act which cannot be explicated in non-moral terms. Whilst Crisp does a reasonable job of motivating the thesis, he does not explicitly identify his opponents. I presume that Scanlon's Contractualism is at least one of his targets, and perhaps the main one, at least insofar as Scanlon (in *What we Owe to Each Other*) holds that the wrongness of an action provides an extra reason against performing it. An objection to Crisp's strategy is that whilst it is good at showing that many moral theories can be recast in terms which avoid moral concepts, he does not do enough to reject the intuitively plausible idea that wrongness itself can be reason-providing. He discusses an example he calls 'Inheritance', where X has the opportunity to bump off his rich uncle Jack and

claim the inheritance he needs to pursue various projects which would abate his misery. Crisp considers, but rejects, the view that ‘morality may well be said to provide an ultimate reason not to kill Jack’, saying that ‘[t]here certainly are ultimate reasons for me not to kill Jack, such as that I shall by doing so decrease his well-being and that of his friends and relations’ and that ‘it is more plausible to conclude that the only reasons against killing are non-moral’ (pp. 14, 15).

First, one might wonder whether Crisp himself will be able to provide adequate reasons for X not to kill Jack if the killing would be painless, given the hedonist theory of well-being he later defends. More importantly, Crisp’s choice of example is contentious, as it is not the sort that is most likely to capture the target intuition – that wrongness itself is reason-providing. Suppose A has a choice between (1) Preventing B from *accidentally* running over (unconscious) C with a digger; and (2) Preventing D from *maliciously* running over (unconscious) E with a digger. The implication of Crisp’s thesis is that A has equally strong reasons to perform either action. Yet there seems at least something to be said for the idea that A has *more* reason to prevent the malicious running over of E by D, because of the wrongness of D’s action.

2. Having apparently established that there is no reason to do what is morally right ‘except in so far as there is some ultimate reason that can be stated in non-moral terms’ (p. 36), Crisp gives his positive account of the ultimate reasons we have. The basic answer is (p. 37) ‘Welfarism about Reasons’, or the claim that all ultimate reasons for action are grounded in well-being. In defending this, Crisp considers views that hold that we have reasons stemming from considerations other than well-being. The first view he discusses is Moore’s, as revealed by his example of the two worlds (which no-one ever sees), one beautiful and the other a heap of filth, and the question of whether we have reason to bring about the former. Crisp’s second example is Kant’s injunction that even in an island community about to disperse, the last murderer should still be executed.

In response to Moore’s example, Crisp (p. 62) says that he fails to see why any agent should bring about the beautiful world, unless some benefit should accrue to a sentient being from doing so, either in its production or contemplation. He also says that if there were some cost in well-being to bringing it about then there would be a reason against doing so. Clearly the latter claim is

beside the point. One can hold that we have non-welfarist reasons even if one also believed that welfarist reasons were always overriding in cases of conflict. There is nothing incoherent in that proposal, so Crisp's second point is superfluous.

Against his main thesis, one can reasonably say that, by discussing Moore on beauty and Kant on punishment, Crisp has not chosen the most representative or plausible opponents. Consider a case in which we have to bring about one of two worlds – containing equal numbers of vicious and virtuous people – in which well-being would be distributed in the following ways:

	World 1	World 2
Vicious	100	110
Virtuous	110	100

(This is a modified version of an example used by Ross in *The Right and the Good*.) Crisp's welfarism about reasons implies that other things being equal we have no more reason to bring about World 1 rather than World 2. Yet, in this example, it seems that we do have more reason to bring about World 1 rather than World 2. Of course, some would want to go further and say that we can have reason to bring about distributions in which the virtuous fare better than the vicious, even at the cost of total well-being, but this is by-the-by. The example is merely supposed to show that there are cases which are better suited to testing Crisp's thesis. Even if we do ultimately adopt Crisp's thesis, he has not tested it against its toughest opponents. To really prove the case for welfarism about reasons Crisp needs to argue against positions like the one above, and this seems a much harder task.

3. The third strand I wish to take up is Crisp's use of evolutionary debunking arguments. Such arguments appear in various places throughout the book and I believe their use causes problems for Crisp's thesis, especially for the claims he makes in the chapters on well-being and practical reason. In chapter four, Crisp defends a hedonist account of well-being, by which he means a theory of what is 'ultimately good for any individual'. Crisp's account is that what is ultimately good for any individual 'is the enjoyable experience in her life, what is bad is the suffering in that life, and the life best for an individual is that with the greatest balance of enjoyment over suffering' (p. 102).

One of Crisp's key arguments for hedonism about well-being is an argument from the evolution of values. He introduces Nozick's well-known experience machine example before arguing that the claims of accomplishment and authenticity to genuine, non-hedonic, value can be 'thrown into some doubt' by the following claim (reconstructed from what he says on p. 121), which I call 'EV':

(EV) There is an evolutionary explanation of why we tend to value accomplishment and authenticity. In the societies of our ancestors those hunter-gatherers who brought back more food would have been rewarded with a larger share, along with esteem and status within the group.

Crisp concedes that 'this story is of course not on its own sufficient to debunk the claim of accomplishment to independent non-hedonic value for individuals'. However, he clearly thinks that whatever doubt (EV) casts upon accomplishment and authenticity is significant and he goes on to ask:

Could it not be that our valuing of accomplishment is an example of a kind of collective bad faith, with its roots in the spontaneous and largely unreflective social practices of our distant ancestors? This and the previous argument apply not only to accomplishment, but also to authenticity . . . Valuing honesty, transparency, genuineness, and so on has a clear payoff: it fends off deception, and thereby assists understanding of the world, which itself issues in a clear evolutionary advantage. (p. 121)

The first problem is that, as Crisp mentions earlier in the book, we need to know why these beliefs are undermined by reflection on their evolutionary origin, whilst other beliefs – such as beliefs about mathematics – are not. Crisp (p. 17) says that 'What makes for a successful debunking argument is a difficult question, the answer to which depends on the kind of arguments under discussion.' This is not sufficient guidance, especially given that Crisp deploys debunking arguments in key parts of the book.

Let us assume, however, that such differentiation and explanation is forthcoming. There is still a more significant problem with Crisp's use of this strategy to motivate hedonism about well-being,

namely that the same move appears likely to work against Crisp's own theory. Consider the following claim, which I call 'EV2':

(EV2) There is an evolutionary explanation of why we tend to feel pleasure (pain) – because of its effectiveness at motivating us to engage (refrain from engaging) in evolutionarily advantageous (disadvantageous) activities. Those early humans who felt pleasure and pain most strongly would have been most likely to engage in only evolutionarily advantageous activities. There is also an evolutionary explanation for why we tend to *value* pleasure – because there is a clear evolutionary advantage to those individuals and societies that value pleasure and engage in pleasurable activities.

EV2 does not presuppose psychological hedonism. Rather, it merely requires the truth of the claim that pleasure is *an* effective mechanism for moving us to certain activities, which seems undeniable. Also, whilst it is easy to see how humans who were motivated by pleasure to eat, procreate and hunt would be more successful in evolutionary terms, EV2 does not relate solely to the bodily pleasures. It applies equally to intellectual pleasures in terms of the evolutionary advantage of coming to understand the physical world and human psychology. It seems plausible to believe that humans who were motivated by pleasure to learn about their physical environment and about human psychology would have reaped evolutionary rewards as a result of their increased understanding. Thus, Crisp's evolutionary debunking strategy works just as successfully against the claim of pleasure to value as it does against the claims of accomplishment to value. If Crisp wants to retain his argument, he needs to differentiate between pleasure and accomplishment in a way that insulates the former from the reach of his evolutionary debunking argument. Yet, it is not clear how such a non-question-begging differentiation could work.

4. In his discussion of practical reason, Crisp argues for a 'dual-source view', or the claim that our only practical reasons are those of pure self-interested partiality and pure-impartiality. To reject the claim that we also have reasons to be partial to our family and friends, Crisp again utilises the evolutionary debunking strategy. He says that social relations:

have a biological basis in kin-relationships, the evolutionary benefit of which is obvious. We are naturally inclined to favour our relations and those close to us in our group. That is not *enough* to debunk the rational force of these social relations, but *it does throw them into doubt*. (p. 143, italics supplied).

The objection will be obvious by now, namely that Crisp's dual-source view appears vulnerable to the same evolutionary debunking strategy. Believing that we have reasons to be concerned about the well-being of everyone and also to prioritise our own interests seems highly likely to have been evolutionarily beneficial. If the evolutionary origin of the belief that we have reasons to favour social relations casts doubt upon it, then it seems that this same debunking strategy will also work against the dual-source view.

Crisp anticipates part of this objection. In a footnote to the previously quoted passage, he says that 'the same could be said concerning other-regarding reasons in general'. He then responds to this by saying that the impartial point of view 'seems stable under reflection in a way that partiality to others does not' (p. 143). Yet many people believe that *some* partiality to friends and family is at least permissible and perhaps obligatory. They are also likely to believe that this claim *is* stable under reflection. More important, though, is that Crisp does not discuss whether the other element of the dual-source view (reasons of pure self-interested partiality) is vulnerable to his debunking strategy.

Suppose Crisp relies on the claim that the constituents of the dual-source view seem stable under reflection. If we were impressed by Crisp's strategy, we might think not only that the evolutionary advantage to the view explains and debunks our belief in it, but also that that its stability under reflection is simply another feature which ensures its evolutionary efficacy. Thus, even if both aspects of Crisp's dual-source view, and these alone, are stable under reflection, it is unclear whether the view can avoid falling victim to his debunking argument.

Here I have covered a mere fraction of the huge number of ideas, insights and arguments to be found in *Reasons and the Good*. There are two chapters I have not mentioned – those which deal with moral knowledge and equality – and the chapters that I have discussed contain a mass of other ideas unmentioned here.

As I see things, Crisp's most important theses are that: hedonism is the true account of well-being; that only well-being pro-

vides ultimate reasons and that the only reasons we have are of partial self-interest and pure impartiality. I think more is required to show that wrongness and other non-welfarist considerations do not provide ultimate reasons, as well as to show how the hedonistic account of well-being and dualism of practical reason are themselves safe from Crisp-style evolutionary debunking arguments. Nevertheless, this is a rich and rewarding book which will contribute greatly to a number of debates throughout moral philosophy.

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