Credits

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In the 2010–11 academic year, Berkeley Philosophy—undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty—embarked on an unusual and untried venture. A friend of the department had given us a vision and support to realize it. The vision was of undergraduates going beyond what they had studied in courses, to pursue their own, independent approach to a deep philosophical problem. Behind this vision lay the hope of identifying and encouraging “outliers”: innovative voices and outlooks, which, in time, might come to recast the field.

To this end, philosophy majors and minors were invited to submit essays to a prize competition. There were few constraints. The essays could be of any length up to ten pages, and they could be on any topic in moral and political philosophy broadly construed. However, a special premium was placed on submissions that strove for originality: that sought to challenge perceptively existing assumptions and positions. Setting this particular competition apart was not only that it offered extraordinarily generous monetary prizes, but also that it would be judged by a major senior philosopher, flown in to Berkeley especially for that purpose. No doubt, this made taking part in the competition at once an attractive and daunting prospect.

The resulting yield of submissions was striking, both in its quality and quantity. It posed a formidable challenge to the committee of three graduate students—Brian Berkey, Andy Engen, and Julia Nefsky—charged with somehow winnowing down the pool to five top finalists. After much hard work and agonizing decision-making, the committee sent the papers to the 2011 Distinguished New Crop Visitor, Professor Samuel Scheffler, of New York University. Professor Scheffler then faced the even more challenging task of identifying from among these five a first-, second-, and third-prize winner.

First prize went to “An Account of Practical Wisdom Needs an Account of Intuitive Intelligence,” by Charles Goldhaber. How should practical deliberation—deciding what to do—be understood? On the one hand, it can seem artificial and over-intellectualized to suppose that we decide what to do in each particular case by deducing it from a comprehensive vision of how our lives should go. On the other hand, if we decide by mere intuition, then how is deliberation anything more than following animal instinct: how is it anything deserving to be called “practical wisdom”? Through a careful reading of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Goldhaber explores this dilemma and identifies constraints on an adequate solution: that it give an account of “intuitive intelligence.”

“‘Rawls on Justice’ Revisited,” by Mi-Hwa Saunders, won second place. Liberal political thinking may seem caught in a paradox. Liberal-
ism aims to allow everyone to pursue a way of life of their own choosing. Yet, for precisely that reason, liberalism seems unable to allow people to pursue illiberal ways of life if they so choose. Saunders, revisiting a famous debate between Thomas Nagel and John Rawls, suggests a way out of the dilemma. The liberal ideal should be understood as aiming not at “neutrality” among ways of life, but instead appropriate treatment of people viewed as “free and equal.”

The final prize went to “Unreflective Action and Moral Normativity,” by Daniel Sharp. Sharp seeks to reconcile two attractive strains of contemporary philosophical thinking about action. The first, exemplified by the work of Christine Korsgaard, finds the source of normativity—of “oughts” or “shoulds”—in the self-conscious, reflective structure of at least some human action. The second, rooted in Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology, and taken up in different ways by Berkeley’s own Hubert Dreyfus and John Searle, observes that much of human action seems completely devoid of self-conscious reflection. Can Korsgaard’s account of normativity be reformulated, Sharp asks, in a way that does justice to the fact that so much of our action is immediate responsiveness to the “affordances” that the world presents us with?

The papers from the other two finalists, “Utility, Priority and Well-Being,” by Alexander Setzepfandt, and “In Defense of Kantian Moral Theory,” by Nader Shoaibi, were similarly searching and impressive. Setzepfandt takes on a fundamental question in political philosophy, of how to distribute scarce resources among people with claims to them. We should give priority to those who are worse off, he argues, but should understand “worse off” not in terms of subjective “utility,” but instead in terms of more objective “well-being.” Shoaibi observes that morality is, in part, a matter of abstracting away from partial, personal concerns and ascending to a universal perspective. But how then, he asks, can it make claims on actual people, who are identified with their own partial, personal concerns? He explores how Kantian morality, which is often seen as the paradigm of “universalist” abstraction, might meet this challenge.

Here for you to read are the fruits of that venture—and a taste of things to come in the 2012 New Crop Competition, which will be judged by Professor David Chalmers, of Australian National University and New York University.

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An Account of Practical Wisdom Needs
an Account of Intuitive Intelligence
There is little clarity within Aristotle scholarship about how the intellectual virtue ‘practical wisdom’ (*phronēsis*) contributes to the ethical agent’s choice of right action. In the *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*, Aristotle characterizes practical wisdom first and foremost as a state that affords excellent deliberation; the practically wise agent is “able to deliberate finely” (VI.5, 1140a26). Yet, a clear and complete account of how practical wisdom allows for this seems absent. Most of the text that concerns practical wisdom describes it negatively or through analogy—e.g., as being in a way like excellence in craft and theoretical reason yet differing in specified aspects. For this reason, building a positive account of practical wisdom requires a thorough process of construction: interpreting what it is from the way it differs from the other intellectual excellences. This leaves gaps to be filled in, which accounts in part for the extent of disagreement in the secondary literature. But, the presence of these gaps makes investigating practical wisdom a philosophically rich, textually demanding activity.

I do not attempt to build a full positive account of practical wisdom here. Instead, I argue for a necessary condition on a successful positive view. In Part I of this paper, I survey Aristotle’s account of deliberation in *NE* Book III. In Part II, I turn to the analogy between practical wisdom and craft in order to demonstrate how two logically complementary views of practical wisdom—the ‘Grand End View’ and an alternative proposed by Sarah Broadie in her *Ethics with Aristotle* that I call the ‘Balancing View’—arise from this analogy. In Parts III and IV, I raise problems for the Grand End View and the Balancing View respectively. In Part V, I argue that we should accept something like the Balancing View, and that an account of intuitive intelligence is thus necessary for a complete, positive account of practical wisdom.

I. Book III: The Structure of Deliberation

Practical wisdom affords excellent deliberation (VI.5, 1140a26). Deliberating well leads to acting well (*eupraxia*), which just is living well, or *eudaimonia* (‘the good life’) (I.4, 1095a17-21), the formal end of all action that is ‘complete’ in that it could not be made better (I.7, 1097a30-35). Presumably, then, understanding the structure of deliberation will help elucidate practical wisdom’s role in deliberation and thus too in living a good life.

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1 All citations refer to the Irwin translation of the *NE*, unless noted otherwise. Irwin translates *phronēsis* as ‘prudence’; I have taken the liberty to replace all instances of *phronēsis* (and its adjectival forms) with the common translation ‘practical wisdom’, including quotations of Irwin’s translation.
Part of *NE* Book III develops a picture of deliberation. Its first four chapters explain the elements of our agency necessary for acting well, or virtuously. For Aristotle, if an agent has acted virtuously his action was voluntary (III.1) and decided upon (III.2) through a deliberative process (III.3) proceeding from a wish (boulēsis) for some appropriate end (III.4). To speak of a given event as an agent’s virtuous action, we first need to see how the event can be considered (i) his action and (ii) something decided upon. The account of the voluntary in Book III, Chapter 1 explains (i). The following three chapters, then, explicate (ii)—what it is for an action to be decided upon construed in terms of the elements of agency that form decision.

Action that results from decision is a species of the voluntary, “which extends more widely” (III.2, 1111b7-10). In III.2, Aristotle suggests that decision is ‘what has been previously deliberated’; he supports this suggestion by appealing to the etymology of ‘deliberation’ (prohaireton), meaning ‘before- (pro-) choosing (haireton)’ (1112a14-18).

We deliberate only about “what is up to us”, i.e., “actions that we can do” (III.3, 1112a30-33), and more so in cases “where the outcome is unclear and the right way to act is undefined” (1112b9-10). That which is certain, whether it be repetitive natural phenomena (such as the rising of the stars at night) or an unquestionably clear form of conduct, is not up

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2 Aristotle concludes from his ‘function argument’ that acting well just is acting in accordance with virtue (I.7, 1097b23-1098a21).

3 These four qualities of virtuous action derive from Aristotle’s characterization of virtue as “a state that decides” (II.6, 1107a1-3). Action that is decided upon is voluntary and results from deliberation, which begins in wish. As Broadie notes, Aristotle’s notion of decision (prohairesis) is conceptually inseparable from the deliberative process in which it is formed (Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, 179).

4 The voluntariness of an event determines both whether that event can be considered an action and whether it can be identified with an agent, as only when the agent has *acted* voluntarily can the resulting event be understood as his. Of course, there may be descriptions of this event for which the agent acted nonvoluntarily—for example descriptions concerning particulars that the agent was ignorant of at the time of action (III.1, 1111a7-16). To illustrate, when Oedipus committed roadside murder, he voluntarily killed someone but nonvoluntarily killed his father. What is important here is that an agent must have done *something* voluntarily for any event to be properly predicated of him. This is as opposed to what is forced, like being carried off by the wind, where the agent did not cause but was “victim” to the event (1110a1-4).

5 Besides action that results from decision, voluntary action includes also, e.g., spontaneous action done “on the spur of the moment” and the actions of animals or children, both of whom act from appetite, not rational decision (III.2, 1111b7-10, 12-13, 1112a15-16, *cf.* III.1, 1111a25-28).
for deliberation. The occasion for deliberation requires a multiplicity of achievable possibilities. Deliberation, then, is the intelligent process by which we decide on one possibility over the others.

Deliberation, according to Aristotle, does not concern the selection of ends but rather “what promotes ends” (1112b12). In deliberation we select the most expedient or fine of the various possible means to our current end (17-18). We then determine “how [that] means itself is reached, until we come to the first cause, the last thing to be discovered” (19-20). As such, deliberation is a type of backwards-leading “inquiry” (22). One begins with his intended end (goal), selects an appropriate means to that end, and means to that means, and so on, “tracing the principle to himself” (1113a6). Deliberation concludes with an action whose method for achievement is clear-cut from the deliberator’s current situation, such that he need not deliberate further in order to act. This action is what is decided on (3). Decision, then, is a “deliberative desire to do an action that is up to us” (12).

Decision, as resulting from deliberation, first requires an end from which deliberation starts. This end is provided by wish. Aristotle does not give us a detailed account of how wishing is principled. However, wish seems to reflect the agent’s conception of the good (III.4, 1113a15-16). The excellent person, “being himself a sort of standard and measure” (35), wishes for the good. The base person, by contrast, wishes for something that merely (and incorrectly) appears good (25-27). As such, wish seems related to the agent’s states of character, each of which “has its own distinctive [view of] what is fine and pleasant” (32) and is thus involved in delineating what seems good to him.

These chapters raise a few related questions: Why does only wish set our ends? Why can’t we deliberate about ends but only the means to them? Deciding on what general end is worth pursuing seems not only possible but common to our experience. Making such decisions even seems to be an important critical task for any ethical agent. Why then

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This definition supports the negative depictions of decision given in III.2. Decision’s connection with deliberation determines its domain of objects and thus explains why decision is not a species of wish or belief, which concern different domains. Wish and belief can concern things that are not achievable through our own agency, including things that are impossible. Decision—as a part of deliberation, which is about ‘what is up to us’—concerns only “what we think would come about through our own agency” (III.2, 1112a20-27). The conceptual link between decision and deliberation also explains how decision is not appetite: since decision is “deliberative”, it is in part rational, whereas appetite is of the totally nonrational part of the soul (I.13, 1102b30-31).
An Account of Practical Wisdom Needs an Account of Intuitive Intelligence

does Aristotle insist that we do not deliberate about ends? Aristotle can appear to have been misled into holding this view by taking craft-deliberation as the model for all types of deliberation.

We deliberate not about ends, but about what promotes ends. A doctor, for instance, does not deliberate about whether he will cure, or an orator about whether he will persuade, or a politician about whether he will produce good order… Rather, we lay down the end, and then examine the ways and means to achieve it (III.3, 1112b13-16).

In craft-deliberation, the end is by definition laid out in advance. Insofar as a doctor is a doctor his goal will be to cure patients. This single goal will organize all of his activity qua doctor—he does not deliberate about whether to cure, only about what is the most expedient form of treatment for a given patient. But, insofar as that doctor is a man, various other goals will be relevant to him, e.g., being a good family man, which in certain situations may trump his doctorly duties. And ultimately, it is ‘up to him’ to be a doctor or not, so pursuing his end of curing seems to be up for deliberation qua man.

One way to make sense of the idea that we do not deliberate about ends is to say that, insofar as we are always human beings, we always have the set formal end of eudaimonia motivating our action. We thus only deliberate about the means that either lead to or constitute that end. Indeed, there is no sense in deliberating about whether to pursue this end given that it is by definition the singular good that there can be no reason against pursuing. In a certain sense, it would seem, we do always wish to lead a good life.

There are problems with taking this formal end to be the singular object of wish. How should we make sense of III.4, which allows for wish to have many different objects? What of Aristotle’s claim “the ends turn out to be many” (I.1, 1094a7-8)? If everyone wishes for eudaimonia, how does what the excellent person wishes for differ from that of the base person (III.4, 1113a24-35)? Is wishing for eudaimonia enough to

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7 This follows from eudaimonia’s being a ‘complete’ end that could not be made better (I.7, 1097a30-35; cf. Broadie, 183).
8 It should be noted that this interpretation overlooks the fact that Aristotle says that we do not deliberate about ‘ends’ plural, but an ‘end’ singular. Nonetheless, It seems right to say that we always act with the goal of leading a good life, at least insofar as we decide on our action deliberatively and do not serve irrational or self-destructive impulses (e.g., in akratic action) that Aristotle explains may arise in unruly appetite, not rational decision (III.2, 1111b14-15).
get deliberation started? How do we deliberate down from this formal ideal, barren of empirical content, to a particular action relevant in this situation? These questions threaten the viability of the position that eudaimonia is the single, universal wished for end (from which deliberation begins). But, as we will see, the Grand End View tries to defend something like this position.

II. The Analogy with Craft and the Genesis of Two Views of Practical Wisdom

Practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom, and craft knowledge are all intellectual excellences. Each is characterized by the sort of ‘rightness’ it seeks and the faculty (i.e., part of soul) that enables this seeking. Both practical wisdom and craft are excellences of the rationally calculating part of the rational division of the soul, which concerns principles that admit of being otherwise (VI.1, 1139a5-12; VI.4, 1140a1-2, VI.5, VI.11). As such, it seems natural to look to craft first to aid in understanding practical reason, since both craft and practical reason concern possible objects within the same domain (i.e., that which may be otherwise).

Before proceeding, one difference is worth noting: Craft concerns productions (poeisis), which have their ends outside the production (i.e., in the product), while practical wisdom concerns actions proper (praxis), which have their end in acting well itself (VI.4, 1140a1-6; VI.5, 1140b5-8). I will come back to this point.

The analogy with craft will help answer a question from the end of Part I: If we assume that eudaimonia is the universal end sought in all practical activity—which it is in a formal sense—then how does what the virtuous agent wishes for (aims at) differ from that of the vicious agent? One answer is that each sees this formal end as consisting in different sorts of lives and thus begins deliberation from a different substantial conception or picture of the good life. This is analogous to the way that both expert and inept doctors aim at producing health but may differ in skill proportionately to the adequacy of their respective pictures of what health consists in.

What makes a doctor good at her craft? Experience tells us that the doctor’s success in her craft is largely due to the fact that she heals in virtue of a robust and accurate picture of what health consists in. For her, the ordinary conception of health is not an adequate starting point from which to determine a particular diagnosis. She can deliberate finely about what treatment to give because her robust conception of what the end of health consists in informs her practical choices about which means are ap-

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9 Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle, 194.
propriate. For instance, a good doctor knows that health consists, in part, in a balanced endocrine system, and it is in virtue of this knowledge that she correctly selects *this* drug for *this* case.\(^{10}\)

Taking the analogy of practical wisdom with craft seriously, we might expect that the man of practical wisdom will also use a robust conception of what his formal end (*eudaimonia*) consists in to guide his deliberation. Practical wisdom will then be much like medicine but concerned with the human good without restriction (*cf.* VI.5, 1140a27-28). If this parallel is apt, we can say that—though all agents aim at *eudaimonia*—the virtuous deliberator aims so by deriving his action from a substantial, determinate, morally-correct conception of this end, whereas the vicious deliberator’s conception is uninformed, sparse or morally-bad end.\(^{11,12,13}\)

The man of practical wisdom, then, is one who has a complete, true picture of the formal end, which informs his choices. He then effectively derives the appropriate means in many situations in virtue of actualizing this picture. This is the Grand End View of practical wisdom.

So far we have taken for granted the parallel between the technical excellences of practical wisdom and craft. Since craft is concerned with bringing its end into being, i.e., a production (VI.4, 1114a12, 17-18), it is valued for its product and, unlike moral activity, not for the craftsman’s deliberation or action. A doctor is not praised for doing doctorly things or having excellently determined a treatment as much as she is praised for curing people. Medicine might be a misleading archetype for craft in the sense that we all find from experience that doctors who work from a better conception of health enjoy more success. But a witch doctor who cannot explain his healing arts and instead works from ‘intuition’ exhibits equal doctorly excellence if he is equally effective at curing. Here, we see that a robust conception of an end is unnecessary for the practice of a craft; since it is not a precondition on success, it is potentially dispensable and reduces to a useful sort of means.

With this in mind, let us turn to a different sort of craft. We can be successful in some activities without having an articulate picture of what

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10 Ibid. 194-195.
11 Ibid. 212.
12 For example, the virtuous man might aim at *eudaimonia* as the exercise of specific virtues of which he has some fairly determinate conceptions, while the vicious man might aim at *eudaimonia* merely as a life of pleasure.
13 This is in line with the fact that the vicious are blamed both for ignorance of what is beneficial (III.1, 111031-32) *as well as* for valuing the wrong things (e.g., valuing what is pleasurable over what is noble).
that success consists in. If we take these sorts of activities as paradigmatic of craft, the analogy with craft models a different view of practical wisdom. Broadie points to simple motor skills\(^\text{14}\) as paradigmatic:

We... know from experience that knowledge of anatomy and kinetic theory is not a necessary condition for successful practice of skills of riding a bicycle, tightrope walking, or juggling... If practical wisdom is like the ability to keep one’s balance, then the [practically] wise man does not have to be guided by a precise picture of what he aims at in order to succeed in achieving it. He need not be able to say more than what would also be said by nonvirutous prohairetic [i.e., rationally deciding] agents: namely, that he is trying to strike a balance that is right from the point of view of life in general (Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, 197).

In balancing, there seems neither room nor need for a technical end to guide one’s activity.\(^\text{15}\) If the analogy between this species of craft and practical wisdom is sound, then practical wisdom need not be anything more than an effectual intuitive sense that some certain means or activity is right for the present situation. Accepting this analogy is in effect a rejection of the Grand End View, which states that practical wisdom necessarily requires a substantial and comprehensive conception of the good life. This alternative interpretation of practical wisdom, which I call the Balancing View, accords with Aristotle’s thought that, concerning practical matters, “our nature is satisfied with the minimal clarity that success requires”.\(^\text{16}\) Here, however, a problem also arises: If only a ‘sense of balance’ is required for decision, it is hard to see how decision is deliberative; I will return to this problem in section IV.

### III. Difficulties for the Grand End View

The Grand End View is the thesis that practical wisdom consists in having a substantial conception of *eudaimonia* and effectively using the conception of this end to principle instances of deliberation towards its actualization. Under this view, a decision exhibits practical wisdom if it satisfies the following two criteria: (1) acting on this decision gets the agent closer to actualizing his comprehensive picture of the good life, and (2)

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14 These sorts of activities still count as craft in Aristotle’s sense in that they end in the agent’s intentionally bringing something into being (e.g., a state of balance).

15 That is, being able to articulate what is involved in success of these crafts is neither necessary for nor aids in the practice of the craft.

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the agent has an objectively adequate comprehensive picture of the good life. Practical wisdom, according to this view, is the state that affords (1) and (2). This is a simple yet substantial account of practical wisdom, but it suffers from various problems. I note three that I find most pressing.

(A) *Betrays the phenomenon*—Always starting deliberation from an all-encompassing view of the good life does not match our common experience. What we are familiar with is the process of deciding on, say, how to best manage one’s time preparing for an exam, how to help a friend in need, or what to eat for lunch. In these cases, deliberation seems to have a locality that does not originate in any general picture—we simply see some possibilities, select what seems best and figure out the relevant proceeding actions. Beginning deliberation from a “Grand” starting point, an abstracted conception of the good life, is relatively alien to our common experience.

(B) *The Application Problem*—For the Grand End View to get off the ground, something must be said about how a substantial conception of a Grand End is to inform the agent to deliberate well in particular situations. If being practically wise just is possessing and implementing a true Grand End, then this view must account for the way we ‘link up’ situational aspects relevant to the selection of the best immediate activity with the end. One may be tempted to think that this ‘link up’ is possible because the agent’s conception of the good life provides premises for ‘rule-case’ type deliberation—i.e. by saying ‘living well consists in doing x in situations where certain perceived features y are present’.

But this interpretation is problematic. Deliberation requires a plurality of means to select from. But an ideal, complete, ‘rule-case’ Grand End that is applicable in all situations would sufficiently dictate in advance the required action in every possible situation. If it is possible to possess such a Grand End, it would do away with deliberation all together. Aristotelian deliberation requires selection of a means among multiple possibilities,

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17 Idem.

18 Part of what makes this reading tempting is the structure of the practical syllogisms that Aristotle presents as a model for the process of practical reasoning (e.g., see VII.3, 1147a1-9; *Movement of Animals*, 701a9). These syllogisms consist in major premises that state that x is good in certain situations and minor premises, which note perceptual features of the situation that reveal the possibility of acting on a major premise. These practical syllogisms have a rule-case form. It is unclear how the practical syllogism is to square with Aristotle’s previous exposition of deliberation. The two accounts seem to be at odds with each other. David Wiggins suggests a solution: There is reason to think, he argues, that the practical syllogisms are not examples of the process of deliberation but, rather, ways of assessing the product of deliberation (Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Reason”, 227-237).
not the operation of a procedural calculus. Rule-case application based on what Broadie calls “mythical adherence to an exhaustive plan” would not be deliberation at all.19

The rejection of a rule-case account of deliberation accords with Aristotle’s skeptical remarks regarding the applicability of generalizable rules for acting well (II.2, 1104a3-10).

…questions about actions and expediency, like questions about health, have no fixed answers. While this is the character of our general account, the account of particular cases is still more inexact. For these fall under no craft or profession; the agents themselves must consider in each case what the opportune action is, as doctors and navigators do (II.2, 1104a3-10).

While certain general rules about navigation may prove useful in practice, these rules cannot infallibly dictate how to navigate best. To navigate well always requires sensitivity to particular situations. For Aristotle, moral activity is the same—the best decision cannot always be derived in advance or from moral principles alone; rather, the agent must consider in each case what is best.

Prima facie, it is the apparent rigidity of moral principles that invites skepticism about their universal applicability. Skillful deliberation is not entirely mechanical but, in most cases, requires situational attunement. One may wonder how rigidly formulated principles could ever account for this sensitive and spontaneous aspect of decision. On the other hand, the deliberative process seems to be more than an instinctive response to one’s environment. Decision must be, in some sense, mediated by some intelligence. The suggestion that a general conception of the good life—a portrait of sorts—can guide deliberation seems to occupy a middle ground between inflexible rule-application and mere instincual reactions. A picture, it seems, enjoys an apparent vagueness that rules do not: The agent must apply that picture to particular cases and seems to do so not necessarily in precise ways but rather with some degree of freedom and malleability. In this sense, a semi-determinate picture of the good life seems flexible in ways that moral principles might not and thus can appear adaptable enough to be useful in all cases. Nothing seems to block the conceptual possibility that the practically wise agent uses a single picture to aid in his determination of the best course of action in every situation.

The Grand End View says that this possibility is a necessity: It says not just that the practically wise man can use a picture to select his means

19 Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle, 211.
in each case but that (at least in some morally relevant cases) he must. Why must? The idea here could be that the selection of the appropriate means is a non-mechanical yet intelligent process—and that the intelligent character of this process derives from the fact that it is guided by a general conception of the good life. But this thought does nothing more than assert the view. Why practically wise decisions must be guided by a conception of the good life, and how exactly this conception contributes to the formation of a decision remain unexplained. A successful explanation of a Grand End View must take up these tasks.

(C) Explanatory Circularity—If practical wisdom consists in part in having an articulate picture of the Grand End, which includes a conception of all the virtues, it must already incorporate a view of practical wisdom (i.e., itself). As Broadie notes, this self-referentiality creates a problem of circularity. She explains that Aristotle, cannot... ascribe without circularity the picture of the good he is himself developing, since this picture introduces a portrait of practical wisdom. If the portrait (and hence the Ethics as a whole) is complete only when the wise man’s Grand End has been painted in, the portrait is necessarily incomplete not as an outline which may be filled in, but as something in principle defective (Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle, 200; cf. 193).

So long as (i) practical wisdom is considered to be an element of the good life, and (ii) being practically wise requires possessing a substantial conception of the good life,20 then being practically wise requires having a conception of being practically wise. Practical wisdom, then, becomes incoherent, in that it is circular. If we grant both premises, we can never fully explicate the Grand End, which must include in its portrait the very having of that portrait. We, then, can never fully explain practical wisdom or complete virtue, which includes it. This is devastating to Aristotle’s project. It makes the NE incompletable. Furthermore, it entails that we can only ascribe this imperfect, qualified version of practical wisdom to ourselves and others.

This problem holds only if we grant both (i) and (ii). Premise (i), which states that the best life includes excellence in deliberation, is not only intuitively correct but also central to Aristotle’s ethics. To give it up would be to remove practical wisdom from its role in the formal definition of virtue (II.6, 1107a1-3) as well as its status as a virtue itself. For this reason, it seems best to give up premise (ii), and with it the Grand End View.

20 Premise (ii) is a formulation of the Grand End View.
These problems have no simple solutions.\textsuperscript{21} Taken together they show that supposing that practical wisdom needs a robust conception of a singular end is untenable. As such, the Grand End View of practical wisdom seems doomed to failure.

IV. Difficulties for the Balancing View

The Balancing View is in effect a rejection of the Grand End View. Unlike the Grand End View, the Balancing View claims that no articulate conception of what \textit{eudaimonia} consists in is necessary for choosing the correct action. According to this view, practical wisdom is simply the source of getting things right at each step of deliberation regardless of the end.\textsuperscript{22} The man of practical wisdom is one who has a fine-tuned, intuitive ability to act well. He carries with him a number of fairly determinate ends\textsuperscript{23} from which he determines the means case by case. This is done by taking into account the relative particulars in order to decide—through intuitive feel—on which means is best in \textit{this} situation.

But what makes this intuitive selection intelligent, or even deliberative? Animals are also capable of responding appropriately to situational features in an intuitive way. Their movement is organized by perception and desires for objects like food and shelter. According to Aristotle, the actions of humans that originate in the faculties we share with animals (say, drinking water when thirsty and near water) occur in a similar way.

\textsuperscript{21} This will hold so unless we (A) develop an error theory for why the experienced phenomenon of deliberation does not seem to begin with a general conception of the good life, (B) explain why the man of practical wisdom \textit{must} use a conception of the good life, and (C) remove practical wisdom both from the set of virtues necessary for \textit{eudaimonia} and from Aristotle's definition of virtue, which contains a reference to practical wisdom (II.6, 1107a1-3). The solutions to problems (A) and (B) seem difficult, and Aristotle does not provide us with any resources in these matters. Fixing (C) conflicts with central premises from the text.

\textsuperscript{22} John McDowell gives a similar characterization of practical wisdom: “If that capacity cannot be identified with acceptance of a set of rules, there is really nothing for it to be except the capacity to get things right occasion by occasion: that is, the perceptual capacity that determines which feature of a situation should engage a standing concern” (McDowell, \textit{Mind, Value, and Reality}, 30). This view, he claims, is textually supported by Aristotle's claim that practical wisdom is a perceptual capacity (VI.12, 1142a23-30).

\textsuperscript{23} I suggest that wished for ends can be anything that can seem good \textit{simplicity}—i.e., not just in a moral sense. Many of these will arise naturally—we, by nature, wish for health, companionship, pleasure, and—insofar as we are by nature “political animals” (\textit{Politics} I.2, 1253a8)—perhaps also honor and citizenship.
Such cases, for Aristotle, do not involve deliberation.\textsuperscript{24} Other than the presence of “deliberation”, however, all the aspects characteristic of practical wisdom under the Balancing View are present—general desires, intuitive grasp of the particulars, and an action appropriate to the situation. What, then, does deliberation consist in? Broadie explains,

For Aristotle, the difference between a deliberated response and an animal’s response lies in the fact that the former is mediated by intelligence. This for him is the fundamental contrast: between the presence and absence of the play of intelligence on the particulars, not between the presence and absence of general ethical or practical principles (Broadie, \textit{Ethics with Aristotle}, 248).

But this begs the question. What \textit{is} this ‘play of intelligence on the particulars’? It cannot be reading the situation in such a way as to bring out one action over others since animals too are capable of this. For the Balancing View to succeed, it must provide an account of intelligence and explain how the man of practical wisdom determines his behavior in an explicitly intelligent way. Moreover, given the considerations in Part III, “animal response” and “deliberated choice” must be differentiated without appeal to a comprehensive end.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{V. A Necessary Condition on a Positive Account of Practical Wisdom}

How should we understand practical wisdom? In Part II, we saw that the analogy of practical wisdom with craft gives rise to two logically complementary views on practical wisdom’s relation to the end: (\textit{i}) the Grand End View, which says that practical wisdom consists in having and deliberating from a comprehensive end, and (\textit{ii}) the Balancing View, which says that practical wisdom does not require such end. In Part III, we saw that there are problems in saying that practical wisdom consists in having a comprehensive End. The most decisive, (C), explained that insofar as practical wisdom is something valued as a necessary component of the good life, a comprehensive End would include a vision of practical wisdom itself, making it logically circular for practical wisdom to require a conception of the good life. Thus, it would seem, Aristotle’s practical wisdom must be closer to the Balancing View which says: the practically wise agent has some ends given in wish; these wishes then present a few viable means; practical wisdom helps the agent discern relevant particu-


\textsuperscript{25} Broadie, \textit{Ethics with Aristotle}, 251.
lars and, swayed by these, make an intuitive decision on which means is best. A problem remains: how is an intuitive selection of means as such intelligent?

It is tempting to appeal to some aspect of deliberation to differentiate human from animal behavior. Only men, and not animals, wish, decide, pursue ends, select means, and are capable of practical wisdom (cf. 1111b13). The problem is that these terms are all defined by their role in deliberation, and deliberation is defined as a desire-based activity with a structure identical to animal desire-based movement—differing only in that deliberation is intelligent. Any attempt to explain intelligence in deliberative terms will thus be circular. And, until this circle is broken, practical wisdom on the Balancing View looks no different than animal responsiveness.

This is a large problem for the Balancing View. But, as I have argued, the Balancing View is the more promising since it avoids the circularity intrinsic to the Grand End View. What an adequate positive account of practical wisdom requires, then, is an account of intelligence that is not quite rule-governed but more than mere animal response. Without this, practical wisdom devolves to nothing more than responsiveness to particulars leaving excellent deliberation essentially nondifferentiated from simple desire-based responsive mechanisms like a bird’s flying south upon feeling a certain cold wind.

How should we go about defining intelligence? I would like to agree with Samuel Scheffler’s statement: “Questions about the preferred place of moral principles in our thoughts and practices do not admit only of the two extreme answers represented by the idea of a decision procedure on the one hand, and by a particularism that denies them any role on the other”.26 To me, one of the most essential contributions Aristotle makes to ethics is his skepticism about the practical validity of ethical rules (II.2, 1104a3-10). But just because this skepticism questions the possibility that ethics can be exhausted in a complete list of moral principles does not mean that the only alternative can find no place for them at all. If practical wisdom is an intelligent skill that affords doing the right thing intuitively, perhaps it is a skill that—though it does not have to appeal to moral principles—may somehow take them into account in its formation.

26 Scheffler, Human Morality, 47.
References


Mi-Hwa Saunders
“Rawls on Justice” Revisited
John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* offers a comprehensive theory of justice that reflects values such as egalitarianism, care for the worst off, and fairness. This essay will focus on but one notion in Rawls’ theory: the original position. Implicit in Rawls’ theory is a commitment to neutrality, the idea that a theory of justice should be neutral among all persons with their varying and sometimes incompatible values. The primary question of this essay is whether Rawls’ construction of the original position treats all parties neutrally after the parties in the original position have agreed upon Rawls’ principles of justice. That said, I have three aims. The first aim is to explain what the original position is. The second aim is to consider an objection to the original position presented by Thomas Nagel. The third and final aim is to consider possible responses to Nagel’s objection.

First, here is an account of the original position. As a preliminary definition, the original position is a hypothetical thought experiment where parties—whose knowledge of certain facts has been limited—assess different theories of justice and unanimously agree to principles of justice that will apply to the basic structure of society. One motivation for employing the device of the original position is to have a society in which people with seemingly irreconcilable moral, religious, and philosophical convictions can harmoniously live amongst each other. Such convictions are often integral to a person’s conception of the good. A conception of the good is a view about what a good life is, and from that view individual people pursue different means to realizing a good life. Rawls utilizes the original position to specify conditions in which people would unanimously agree to principles of justice. Rawls attempts to achieve this unanimous agreement by viewing people as free and equal, which he thinks any reasonable theory of justice must do. In an attempt to make certain that the parties are regarded as free and equal, Rawls takes away their knowledge of morally irrelevant social features, and allows them access to information that, in general, stresses commonality. Here is a list of things that the parties in the original position do and do not know.

A party in the original position does not know:
- His own conception of the good
- His talents and natural endowments, such as strength and intelligence
- His social position, including race, sex, and wealth
- The stage of development in his particular society

A party in the original position does know:
- That he has some conception of the good
- That he has a personal commitment to certain individuals

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• General knowledge of economics, politics, sociology, and the circumstances of justice, e.g. conflicting interests and scarcity.
• That interests can be advanced by basic primary goods, such as money and material resources
• General knowledge of moral psychology

Parties are denied information about their conception of the good, natural endowments, social position, etc., because knowing such information would lead to unfair bargaining power when picking principles of justice. We can see why knowing, say, your social position in the original position might create unfair bargaining power. Imagine a party in the original position knew that she was very well off. With that knowledge, she might not agree to pick principles of justice that other parties favor if those principles had an effect on those that are very well off. Because she might not want to pick such principles, she would threaten the need for a unanimous agreement when picking principles of justice that are to apply to the basic structure of society. Therefore, to ensure that parties do not have unfair bargaining power, such social facts are suppressed. Because parties are deprived of knowledge of these social facts, it is said that principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. As noted, parties are aware that they have a conception of the good. Since they are unaware of which conception of the good that might be, parties are to consider all conceptions of the good as if each conception of the good might be their own. In this sense, parties are said to be representatives of free and equal persons, and hence, the principles of justice they pick will be fair to all differing and reasonable conceptions of the good.

Here, then, is a more precise definition of the original position. The original position is a hypothetical thought experiment between parties that specifies a point of view from which a fair agreement on the principles of justice can be achieved between persons regarded as free and equal.

Now I will concentrate on Nagel’s objection. Consider someone

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5 “It seems reasonable to suppose that the parties in the original position are equal. That is, all have the same rights in the procedure for choosing principles; each can make proposals, submit reasons for their acceptance, and so on. Obviously the purpose of these conditions is to represent equality between human beings as moral persons, as creatures having a conception of their good and a sense of justice” (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* 20).

Note: It is important to mention that the parties will only consider reasonable conceptions of the good when picking principles of justice. I cannot, however, address arguments for why this is so in this paper.
with a communitarian conception of the good. A communitarian conception of the good is difficult to define, so for the purposes of our discussion, it will suffice to give examples of communitarian conceptions of the good. Maintaining a commune, creating a Mormon community in Utah, and living in a Quaker society are some examples. I will consider an example of a person, Kathy, whose means to pursuing her conception of the good is to maintain her own commune. Also, consider Ned, whose means to pursuing his conception of the good is to be a playwright. Kathy’s conception of the good involves many material items, some of which include a plot of land, resources for housing, and money. Also important to Kathy’s communitarian conception of the good is that the community survives and does well, since her means to living a good life depends on her relation to those in her community. Ned’s conception of the good, on the other hand, involves materials such as a collection of books, paper, and a computer. Ned’s conception of the good, in comparison to Kathy’s, primarily involves goals that extend to, or are dependent on, his individual life. Kathy’s conception, on the other hand, includes her relation to others and creating community. Kathy and Ned will both get the same basic liberties, such as free speech and freedom of religion. They will also get income and wealth, although it is not guaranteed that they will receive equal amounts. The basic liberties, along with income and wealth, are among the primary goods that all people receive.

In his paper “Rawls on Justice,” Nagel asserts that Rawls’ list of primary goods will not be equally valuable in pursuit of some conceptions of the good, like Kathy’s communitarian conception of the good, in comparison to those that have individualistic conceptions of the good, such as Ned.6 Take, for example, the primary good of free speech. In the case of Ned, free speech seems important to his goal of becoming a playwright. Ned might, knowing he is guaranteed free speech, write on controversial topics that he feels passionate about, such as giving women equal rights in the Middle East, and in doing so feel gratified and fulfilled by his work. In addition, free speech might protect him from people who disapprove of his writing and wish to do him harm. The primary good of free speech, in this instance, is of value to Ned and his individualistic conception of the good. Consider, however, how the primary good of free speech might be of value to Kathy. In our example, suppose Kathy has a son named Victor.

6 “The suppression of knowledge required to achieve unanimity is not equally fair to all the parties, because the primary goods are not equally valuable in pursuit of all conceptions of the good. They will serve to advance many different individual life plans (some more effectively than others), but they are less useful in implementing views that hold a good life to be readily achievable only in certain well-defined types of social structure, or only in a society that works concertedly for the realization of certain higher human capacities and the suppression of baser ones, or only given certain types of economic relations among them” (Nagel, “Rawls on Justice,” 28).
Victor expresses opinions of dissent about the commune, and wishes to withdraw from the community and take fellow dissenters with him. Victor expresses his opinions using the primary good of free speech. Victor is guaranteed this primary good because the parties in the original position agreed to Rawls’ two principles of justice, and the first principle provides Victor with this freedom. Victor’s free speech, however, disrupts the community for two reasons: i) his dissenting opinions might influence others and cause them to leave, to the point where the community is compromised, and ii) Victor’s involvement with the community is important in that the community needs members to sustain itself when older members perish. In this case, the primary good of free speech might actually hinder Kathy from realizing her communitarian conception of the good. Because part of Kathy’s communitarian conception of the good is that the community survives and does well, Victor’s exercise of free speech may be harmful to her. In addition, not only might free speech hinder Kathy from realizing her conception of the good, but free speech might be of no value to her. Kathy’s communitarian conception of the good involves fostering a sense of community amongst group members. In order to do this, she might only stress communal values that all members uphold in order to create a more cohesive and connected group. Consider, however, if Kathy were to value her individual free speech. This might highlight and stress individual values and make differences salient between individuals, which would bring Kathy further away from her goal of fostering community. Since part of Kathy’s conception of the good is to create community amongst group members, she will not value her own individual free speech, but rather, will value speech that brings members of the community closer together. The primary good of free speech, therefore, will not be valuable, but harmful to at least some communitarian conceptions of the good. In conclusion, because there are primary goods that are useful in the case of individualistic conceptions of the good and harmful in the case of communitarian conceptions of the good, “the primary goods are not equally valuable in pursuit of all conceptions of the good.”

Having given an account of the original position and Nagel’s objection to it, the subsequent discussion will be devoted to possible responses.

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7 We can imagine a case where individual free speech might stress differences between community members. If, for example, Kathy was Christian and used her free speech to espouse her opinions on Christianity, this might create tensions in the community if other members were of a different religion.

8 “Why should parties in the original position be prepared to commit themselves to principles that may frustrate or contravene their deepest convictions, just because they are deprived of the knowledge of those convictions?” (Nagel, “Rawls on Justice, 228-229).

9 Ibid. Note: It also seems plausible that the primary good of freedom of religion might yield the same result of being useful to some individualistic conceptions of the good while being harmful to some communitarian conceptions of the good.
to the objection. The first will, in effect, attempt to alleviate Rawls of the objection levied against him by Nagel. The second will suggest that Rawls cannot adequately respond to Nagel, and hence that Rawls does not treat all people with differing conceptions of the good neutrally. The first proposal is to attempt to reformulate the original position so that it is neutral with respect to all reasonable conceptions of the good, including communitarian conceptions. This might be achieved by allowing people with communitarian conceptions of the good to know their conceptions of the good behind the veil of ignorance to ensure that communitarians can better negotiate for a list of primary goods that will serve all parties equally, communitarian or not. If communitarians have this knowledge, they can better bargain with other parties to pick principles of justice that ensure that their conceptions of the good will be equally realizable after the principles of justice have been chosen in the original position.

This, however, is not a satisfactory proposal for two reasons. The first reason is that reformulating the original position in this manner might do away with primary goods that would enable others to achieve many other conceptions of the good. We saw that suppressing the primary good of free speech might better ensure the survival of Kathy’s community. Consider, though, how Ned might be affected. If free speech is no longer a primary good, Ned might be less successful in pursuing his conception of the good. The government could, for example, limit Ned from writing about content that might make it difficult for some people to realize communitarian conceptions of the good. If someone’s communitarian conception of the good entailed that women play a particular role in the community that made them equivalent to servants, the government might ban Ned from writing plays about giving women equal rights. Women could, upon seeing Ned’s plays, realize that they wanted to revise their conceptions of the good instead of living a life like a servant. However, women help ensure the survival of the community, and ensuring that the community survives is important to some people’s communitarian conceptions of the good. Because Ned’s writing frustrates some people’s ability to realize their conceptions of the good, the government might limit the content of what Ned can write about. Although Ned can still pursue his goal of becoming a playwright, he would be unable to write about a topic that is deeply meaningful to him. Excluding free speech from the list of primary goods, then, might deprive someone like Ned from fully realizing his life-long goal, since he cannot write on a topic that is important to him.

The second reason the proposal is unsatisfactory is that reformulating the original position would give parties with communitarian conceptions of the good unfair bargaining power over other parties in the original position, which might result in the parties agreeing to unjust principles, or not arriving at a unanimous agreement on principles of justice. Since

10 See pp. 3-4 of this paper.
11 It is unlikely that parties would agree on unjust principles if parties with
parties with communitarian conceptions of the good have knowledge of their conceptions, those parties might persuade other parties to pick their preferred principles of justice. This would not yield a unanimous agreement on principles of justice that all can live by. If communitarian parties, for example, propose to exclude free speech from the list of primary goods, and those that do not know their conceptions of the good imagine themselves as those with conceptions of the good that will be negatively affected by not having free speech, they would not arrive at a unanimous agreement on principles of justice. To be a morally acceptable choice in the original position, a choice must be unanimous. Because the reformulation of the original position would not yield a unanimous choice, it is not morally acceptable.12 Thus, reformulating the original position to allow parties knowledge of their communitarian conceptions of the good is not a satisfactory proposal.13

Another way to respond to Nagel’s objection is to state that Rawls cannot alleviate himself of the objection because Rawls presupposes that some conceptions of the goods, in particular, some communitarian conceptions of the good, are not to be treated equally. Such a response requires explanation, and I will begin with a discussion about the two moral powers. Rawls states that free and equal persons are regarded as having two moral powers. The first is “the capacity for a sense of justice.”14 The second, which our discussion will focus on, is “a capacity for a conception of the good: it is the capacity to have, to revise, and rationally to pursue a conception of the good. Such a conception is an ordered family of final ends and aims which specifies a person’s conception of what is of value in human life, or, alternatively, of what is regarded as a fully worthwhile life.”15 The pursuit of some conceptions of the good requires preventing

12 “For the result of such a choice to be morally acceptable, two things must be true: (a) the choice must be unanimous; (b) the circumstances that make unanimity possible must not undermine the equality of the parties in other respects” (Nagel, “Rawls on Justice,” 224).
13 “There does not seem to be any way of redesigning the original position to do away with a restrictive assumption of this kind” (Nagel, “Rawls on Justice,” 229).
15 Ibid
people from realizing their second moral power.\textsuperscript{16} We can illustrate this point with our example. Part of Kathy’s communitarian conception of the good is that the community survives and does well. Victor expresses dissent against the community and wants to leave to pursue business, his means of realizing his conception of the good. For Kathy to realize her conception of the good, Victor would have to stay in the community, and the only way to ensure that this happens is to suppress his second moral power of realizing his own conception of the good. In this regard, the two conceptions of the good conflict. There is, then, a possibility that Victor might be deprived of realizing his second moral power in that he must stay in the community and not pursue his means of living a good and worthwhile life. If Rawls were to allow all conceptions of the good to be realizable by making the primary goods equally valuable to all reasonable conceptions of the good, he would have to condone at least one of the following options. First, Rawls might condone not allowing some people to exercise, and therefore realize, their conception of the good. Second, Rawls might condone denying people the capacity to form a conception of the good. It could be the case, for example, that because Victor has only been exposed to his community and has been denied the primary good of free speech, he is incapable of forming his own conception of the good.

Rawls, however, does not condone either option, since his theory presupposes that people should be regarded as free and equal. The minimum requirement for people to be regarded as free and equal is that they have the two moral powers.\textsuperscript{17} Since Rawls upholds valuing people as free and equal, he can only be neutral towards those conceptions of the good that themselves regard others as free and equal. Such conceptions of the good that \textit{do} respect people as free and equal do not interfere with people’s abilities to form i) the capacity for a sense of justice, or ii) the capacity for a conception of the good. Individualistic conceptions of the good might not interfere with either capacity. As previously stated, individualistic conceptions of the good primarily involve goals that extend to, or are dependent on, one person’s individual life. They do not, in general, call for the suppression or sacrifice of individual liberties in order to realize more communal values.\textsuperscript{18} Communitarian conceptions of the good, however,

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16 Subsequent discussion will be limited to preventing people from fully realizing their conceptions of the good, meaning that people \textit{do} have conceptions of the good, yet they are unable to realize those conceptions. I will not include a discussion about denying people the capacity to form a conception of the good, although I will mention it on occasion.

17 “Let’s say they are regarded as equal in that they are all regarded as having to the essential minimum degree the moral powers necessary to engage in social cooperation over a complete life and to take part in society as equal citizens” (Rawls, \textit{Justice as Fairness}, 20).

18 “The original position seems to presuppose not just a neutral theory of the good, but a liberal, individualistic conception according to which the best that can
might not respect people as free and equal. We saw that realizing Kathy’s conception of the good might entail denying Victor the opportunity to realize his conception of the good. In the example, Kathy, with her communitarian conception of the good, is not respecting Victor’s second moral power, and thus, is not respecting him as free and equal. Since at least some communitarian conceptions of the good, like Kathy’s, do not regard people as free and equal, Rawls cannot treat such conceptions of the good neutrally because it goes against his presupposition that all people are to be regarded as free and equal. Therefore, Rawls cannot be neutral to all conceptions of the good.

In this paper, I have given an account of the original position and Nagel’s objection that the primary goods are not equally valuable in pursuit of all conceptions of the good after principles of justice have been chosen in the original position. Two responses to the objection were considered. The first attempted to alleviate Rawls of the objection by reformulating the original position; however, the proposal was unsuccessful. The second response argued that Rawls cannot alleviate himself of the objection, and hence, is not neutral between all reasonable conceptions of the good.

In conclusion, we saw that Rawls does not treat communitarian conceptions of the good equally in comparison to individualistic conceptions of the good, and is therefore not neutral towards all reasonable conceptions of the good. Being neutral, as we have seen, prevents some people from realizing their life long goals. One implication of this paper, then, is that in order to regard people as free and equal, we should not commit ourselves to neutrality. Instead, we should uphold only those principles of justice that allow people to realize their second moral power only if this does not suppress the liberties of others. This suggests, however, that at least some people with communitarian conceptions of the good might be less successful in pursuing and realizing their goals under just principles. However, if we no longer uphold neutrality and recognize the harmful consequences of suppressing a person’s liberties in order for others to realize their conceptions of the good, this should not be a problem.

be wished for someone is the unimpeded pursuit of his own path, provided that it does not interfere with the rights of others” (Nagel, “Rawls of justice,” 228).
References

DANIEL SHARP
Unreflective Action and Moral Normativity
One of the great strengths of recent ethical philosophy is that it has begun to examine anew the relationship between ethics and action. The idea behind this turn to action is intuitive: if we want to know what it is to be ethical, we need to look at the structure of what it is to be an agent. It is often argued that an answer to the normative question - why should I be moral? - can be derived simply from the correct description of what it is to act as a human being. One particularly fruitful effort to derive a normative moral theory from the structure of agency can be found in Christine Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity*. Korsgaard argues that human beings are reflective, self-conscious beings and this fact about us is both the source of our normative quandaries and the answer to them.

While Korsgaard’s account is deep and intricate, it relies, at least partially, on a cognitivist theory of action. On the cognitivist view, all action is conducted by the agent for reasons. In what follows, I want to present a phenomenological objection to this component of Korsgaard’s view of action. According to the phenomenological tradition, everyday action is not characteristically governed by the reflective mind of the agent. Instead, human beings respond directly to affordances provided by the world without the mediation of mindedness. On the basis of this objection, I will examine how an objection to Korsgaard’s account of action has consequences for the success or failure of her normative moral project. Given the structure of Korsgaard’s argument for normativity, it seems plausible that if Korsgaard is wrong about action, then she cannot establish effectively the authority of morality. After presenting this objection, I will present two very different responses which are open to Korsgaard. First, I will provide a partial construction of a hybrid phenomenological-Kantian account which has both the correct account of action and the correct account of ethics. Second, I will explain how Korsgaard’s phrasing of the normative problem as a problem exclusively for the reflective mind helps her avoid the weight of the objection. Finally, I will close with some more general thoughts about the relationship between ethics and action.

**Korsgaard’s Theory of Normativity**

According to Korsgaard, the normative problem and the normative solution stem from the same source, reflection. She writes: “if the problem springs from reflection then the solution must do so as well.”\(^1\) Ergo, it is necessary to first look at how Korsgaard states the problem in order to understand if her solution is workable. “The human mind,” Korsgaard writes, is “essentially reflective.”\(^2\) Korsgaard qualifies her claim care-

\(^1\) Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 93.
\(^2\) Ibid., 92.
fully: reflection is not after all an “individual property” of some human beings who are thoughtful, but a “structure of our minds” which makes thoughtfulness possible. Korsgaard clarifies this point by contrasting humans with lower animals:

“A lower animal’s attention is fixed on the world. Its perceptions are its belief and its desires are its will. It is engaged in conscious activities, but it is not conscious of them….But we human animals turn our attention to our perceptions and desires themselves, on to our own mental activities, and we are conscious of them. That is why we can think about them.”

Human beings can turn their attention to their mental states, and that is what makes us different from other animals. Anyone who surveys their experience – simply by the fact that they are able to do so – would be forced to agree. Korsgaard also is committed to a stronger claim about the nature of action and the primacy of reflection; however, I will turn to this point later.

The normative problem is “a problem no other animal has” because it is a problem that originates from the unique human capacity for reflection. The basic ‘problem’ comes into our lives when we turn our attention to our own minds: “our capacity to turn our attention on to our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them, and call them into question.” We can step back from our involvements in the world and ask “why” questions about our mental states and desires, which concern the status of such states and desires as reasons for acting. When asking such a question, we are not asking about what moral standards are right; rather, we are asking “why should I be moral?” Or, asked differently, the normative question is “what justifies the claims that morality makes on us?”

The type of justification Korsgaard thinks we must find if the normative question is to be successfully answered is partially dictated by the way she sees the normative question emerging. The question arises for a subject in action. She writes,

3 Ibid., 92.
4 Ibid., 93.
5 Ibid., 93.
6 Although, this may be part of the question: if one is skeptical about the foundations of morality, one is certainly more likely to be skeptical about its content.
7 Ibid., 9.
8 Ibid., 10.
“I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn’t dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a reason to act?”

The normative question therefore fundamentally concerns our reasons for action. A way to rephrase the question is therefore: does my reflective mind have a justified reason to act in the world? The normative question can only arise for a human agent in action, a human being who is free and must decide what to do. Though normativity should concern everyone, it addresses each of us individually, as involved agents.

Recall that, for Korsgaard, the normative problem and the normative solution have the same source: “if the problem is that our perceptions and desires might not withstand reflective scrutiny, then the solution is that they might.” For Korsgaard, withstanding reflective scrutiny and having a reason for action are both the same thing: reflective success. Reflective success concerns what happens “when you deliberate.” When you deliberate, Korsgaard thinks, “it is as if there were something above all of your desires, something which is you, and which chooses which desire to act on.” Korsgaard isn’t staying committed to a strong view about ontology here; she is merely describing how deliberation works from the practical standpoint. When we are engaged in the activity of choosing, we don’t just seem to be picking out desires; rather, we choose them, and choose them based on a “principle or law.” These principles you regard as “being expressive of yourself,” of who you are. This action governing self-conception Korsgaard terms a “practical identity.” Practical identity emerges from reflective self-consciousness: “the reflective structure of human consciousness requires that you identify yourself with some

9 Ibid., 93.
10 “Free,” used here, does not mean that one is ‘theoretically’ or metaphysically in possession of freedom. Rather, the species of freedom Korsgaard has in mind is purely practical. From the first person perspective, we cannot but think of ourselves as free when we decide between reasons for action. This is an adaptation of Kant’s claim that human beings “cannot act except under the idea of freedom” (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:447).
11 Ibid., 93.
12 Ibid., 97.
13 Ibid., 100.
14 Ibid., 100.
15 Ibid., 100.
16 Ibid., 101.
law or principle which will govern your choices”.17 When we act, we are *required* to give ourselves (or ‘endorse’) a principle or law under which we act. Obligation emerges from the practical identity we all must have in order to act, which in turn emerges from reflective self-consciousness.

Korsgaard has so far shown we have obligations, but still “need[s] another step” to show that there are moral obligations.18 This step comes from the argument that “there are particular ways in which we *must* think of our identities,” if we are to act.19 Korsgaard turns to Kant’s Formula of Humanity to prove this point. The identities under which we usually think of ourselves –woman, teacher, mother, etc. – are contingent. However, behind this fact, lurks a deeper one. While one’s identities are contingent, “what is not contingent is that [one] must be governed by some conception of [one’s] practical identity.”20 Unless one has some conception of practical identity, one would have no reason to act at all. A practical identity is a principle under which one values oneself. If one lacked such a principle, one would have no reason whatsoever to act.

It is from this argument that Korsgaard presents her final answer to the moral question:

> Unless you are committed to some conception of your practical identity...you will not have any reason to live and act at all. But this reason... is a reason that springs from your humanity itself, from your identity as simply a human being, a reflective animal who needs reasons to act and to live.21

To act, we must take something as normative. Since our identity as a human being lies behind our particular identities, we must presuppose it in any choice. What we must take as normative is a practical identity. But to do that, we must take our own ability to give ourselves an identity (to be a source of value) as valuable. And this, for Korsgaard, is the source of moral obligation.22 The “why” question stops with the value of humanity presumed in all our choices. Or, at least, it stops when we start to act.

While Korsgaard takes herself to have given both a transcendental argument and a practical argument (what I will call an “argument from ac-

17 Ibid., 103-4.
18 Ibid., 113.
19 Ibid., 113.
20 Ibid., 120.
21 Ibid., 121.
22 Korsgaard also needs a step to universalize her position: why we must take the humanity of others as valuable. I will not give her answer here, but I find her argument persuasive.
tion”), I think the two are in some ways inseparable. Both rely centrally on action, and use action as a way to get at moral obligation. This, of course, raises the question: if Korsgaard is to be correct about her answer to the normative question, doesn’t she first need the right account of action?

Is Korsgaard Right about Action? Are We “Essentially Reflective”?

Korsgaard is correct about the weaker claim that human beings can be, at times, reflective. However, Korsgaard makes a stronger version of the same claim: “the reflective mind cannot settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a reason” to act. Korsgaard is not merely arguing that we can reflect, but that we must, if we are to be acting agents at all. We cannot simply act on a desire. Instead, “the reflective mind must endorse the desire before it can act on it, it must say to itself that the desire is a reason.” Korsgaard’s theory of action is, in essence, a theory about reflective deliberation.

This comes out most clearly in Korsgaard’s discussion of the moral skeptic. Korsgaard seems aware that her view seems to place her in a very extreme position of arguing that a moral skeptic cannot act as an agent at all. Therefore, Korsgaard finds herself asking an extreme question: “does the moral skeptic have to commit suicide?” Of course, the moral skeptic does not have to do anything. However, Korsgaard’s answer is paradoxical and puzzling:

Practical normative skepticism is the view that there is no such thing as rational action. And there really is a sense in which, being human, and as long as we go on living, we have to engage in rational action. Animal action, unreflective action, is not open to us. So does the moral skeptic, after all, have to commit suicide? There is no way to put the point that

23 Therefore, I have collapsed Korsgaard’s two arguments into each other to some extent.
24 Ibid., 93.
25 Ibid., 94.
26 It is important to note that Korsgaard is not simply a traditional cognitivist, as the following passage makes clear: “The human mind is self conscious. Some philosophers have supposed that this means that our minds are somehow internally luminous, that their contents are completely accessible to us – that we can always be certain what we are thinking and feeling and wanting – and so that introspection yields certain knowledge of the self. Like Kant, and many other philosophers nowadays, I do not think this is true” (Ibid., 92). However, she nonetheless holds that all action is reflective and deliberative, as will be discussed below.
27 Ibid., 161.
is not paradoxical: yes and no.\footnote{Ibid., 164. The empirical fact that relatively few people who consider themselves to be moral skeptics have killed themselves through inaction seems to speak against Korsgaard’s idea that we are essentially reflective. Either people who say they are skeptics are not in fact skeptics (which, of course, is a possibility) or moral skepticism just isn’t a problem for everyday action in the way Korsgaard thinks it is.}

This is an extremely strong point: as human beings, we can only act rationally and reflectively. Other ways of action are just not possible for us, as rational beings.

Is this stronger claim about the deep link between being human, rationality and action a legitimate one? Surely, “rational action exists, so we know it is possible.”\footnote{Ibid., 123-4.} However, that rational action exists does not prove that human beings exclusively act in a rational way. Korsgaard’s claims to the validity of moral judgment hinges on a description of what it is like to be a subject in action from a first personal standpoint. Consequently, in order to evaluate Korsgaard’s conception of action, we should examine closely what this practical standpoint of action is like. If it turns out that human beings are not predominantly reflective animals – that such beings do not predominately act for reasons, Korsgaard’s attempt to ground morality in reflection seems wrongheaded. For how can normativity be derived from reflection, if we do not act in a predominantly reflective manner? However, what could be more natural than thinking of oneself as reflective?

A whole body of philosophical thought aims to take issue with precisely this way of thinking about ourselves. Like Korsgaard, the phenomenological tradition from Martin Heidegger to Hubert Dreyfus aims to look at human beings in action; however, unlike Korsgaard, the phenomenological line of thinking disputes the idea that what is essential to being human is simply reflection and rationality alone. Rather than thinking of human beings first and foremost as reflective minds, this line of thinking aims to recast human beings as embodied subjects who navigate the world unreflectively\footnote{I will not argue for one account of action and against another in this paper. While I believe there are compelling arguments for both theories, I think only the phenomenological account can make sense of the phenomenon of skillful coping. Any cognitivist theory must add in a conceptual or rule governed account of how such action occurs; however, such a description is not true to the phenomenon.} by looking at the phenomenon of everyday action.\footnote{Heidegger Being and Time, 16. Heidegger also has an explanation of why and where Korsgaard’s theory goes wrong: it is a distortion of the phenomenon based on a second-order description inherited from the philosophical tradition. It takes}
everyday action, Heidegger thinks, cannot be rightfully called reflective, in the Korsgaardian sense. When involved in skillful coping, everyday human beings handle things in a non-cognitive fashion, exhibiting a “kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use.”32 The subject’s conceptual apparatus does not come into play; instead, “consciousness is nothing but the dialectic of milieu and action.” Human beings absorbed in the flow of action respond directly to solicitations to affordances with which we are familiar.

Motivated by this picture of basic human action, the phenomenological view of action takes issue with the moral psychology which underlies Korsgaard’s moral theory. According to Korsgaard’s Kantian moral psychology, whenever we act, we must do so under a “principle or law”, which has the structure of a maxim.33 Every maxim, for Korsgaard, has “two parts…the act [or means] and the end.”34 Korsgaard builds the rest of her moral theory on this foundational assumption that our action obeys structured laws which we give to ourselves. But everyday action, according to the phenomenologist, does not have this structure at all. Nothing like a ‘maxim’ or a reason for action is present, though such things can often be given after the fact. To borrow Dreyfus’ example, a chess grand master who can play at intense speeds does not act on maxims. She merely responds to affordances in the correct manner based on a rich experience of having played the game. If this is right, the type of skillful mastery exhibited by the grand master calls in to question Korsgaard’s claim that “being human we must endorse out impulses before we can act on them.”35 This type of coping, furthermore, is the primary reason why moral skepticism – described by Korsgaard as a special species of paralysis – does not play a crippling role in the lives of almost anyone. Everyday action simply lacks the rational reflectiveness that prompts such skepticism to emerge.

**Defending Korsgaard’s Theory; Explicating the Relationship between Ethics and Action**

Just how damaging would it be for Korsgaard’s normative moral theory for her to be wrong about the phenomenon of everyday action? The answer is mixed. As Dreyfus argues, “We are clearly animals who are ca-

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32 Ibid., 67.
33 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 100.
34 Ibid., 108.
35 Ibid., 122.
pable of both involvement and detachment...[and] [t]here is no reason one has to pick [one of these ways of being] as our defining characteristic.”36 If this claim is correct, then one obvious assumption is that Korsgaard’s theory should be capable of explaining the moral dimensions of both types of action. As it stands, her theory fails this test. However, my concern here is not simply Korsgaard’s theory of action, but how that theory determines the success or failure of her moral philosophy. Accordingly, in lieu of defending a position in philosophy of action, I want to examine if Korsgaard’s moral theory has the resources to respond to the phenomenological objection. I will now argue that it does.

One way for Korsgaard to respond to this objection is to utilize some component of the phenomenological account itself. In particular, examining Korsgaard’s thinking about ethics and action in dialog with Heidegger’s claim that we are beings for which our “being is an issue” offers a productive avenue for exploration.37 When Heidegger defines the essence of who we are as care [Sorge] and notes that our being is an issue for us, he is not suggesting that we explicitly cognize ourselves as sources of value. Heidegger ventures that such explicit, reflective concern is always bit on the bedrock of non-thematic forms of concerns with our being. He notes that “to the everydayness of being-in-the-world there belongs certain modes of concern,” modes which do not rely a reflective understanding of the self38. Such unreflective concern certainly would not qualify as giving oneself a ‘reason for action’ in the strict sense; however, Korsgaard’s argument could be adapted to suit the embodied, non-cognitive self-valuation of everyday existence. In some sense, the same basic argument holds: in order to act, we must (inexplictly) take ourselves to be valuable, and therefore must also value the same sort of being in others.

Korsgaard might not need to take such a route. Instead, it is possible, given the way she poses the normative question, for her ignore every day, non-cognitive action altogether. Normativity is a problem exclusively for the reflective mind: it is only when we step back from our absorption in the flow of skillful coping and reflect on ourselves that the question ‘why act in such and such a way’ (or, why be moral) is an issue. Dreyfus calls these disturbances “breakdowns” and notes that when “the going gets difficult, we must pay attention and so switch to deliberate, subject/object intentionality.”39 Our modes of thinking switch and our

36 Dreyfus, “Detachment, Involvement, and Rationality: Are We Essentially Rational Animals?”
37 Heidegger, Being and Time, 191.
38 Ibid., 73.
concern with our actions becomes explicit as everyday existence presents obstacles with which we must deal. This is, in fact, something Korsgaard has in mind when raising the normative question: normative questions emerge when “what morality commands…is hard.” Korsgaard can be wrong about action, but right about normativity: if the normative question only emerges from reflection then it is only a problem for the reflective self. The unreflective skillful coper finds herself in a world already full of meaning and significance; however, that meaningfulness can melt away as reflection unfolds.

**Concluding Remarks**

What does all of this say about the relationship between ethics and action? If Korsgaard is right about normativity, which I think she is, it produces an interesting division of philosophical work to be done in ethics. The normative question is both asked and answered by the reflective mind engaged in action, and it is this particular, narrow facet of human existence that is the source of normativity. This is one way of thinking about Kant’s statement that “morality serves as a law for us only as rational beings.” Insofar as we act rationally, we are normatively committed to some form of morality; insofar as we act in a non-rational, embodied manner, we lack that normative commitment. This is not to say that unreflective action lacks a moral dimension; certainly, an action done unreflectively can be either moral or immoral. However, it is to say that only a particular species of human action can be the source of moral normativity. This ‘moral dualism’ isn’t a problem, since “when we do reflect we cannot but think that we ought to do what on reflection we conclude we have reason to do.” Morality has authority for us, but only if we reflect and deliberate.

Such a ‘dualist’ theory about action and morality, of course, raises some fundamental questions. Such questions are new versions of age old problems about moral motivation, and the role of rationality in action. To list just a few: how can we make ourselves moral, if we are imperfect and irrational? What prompts the self to take an interest in morality? How do our reflective capacities and our moral existence emerge out of our embodied, involved, unreflective everydayness? I do not have – nor will I propose – complete answers to all these questions here. They are difficult ones, and will take lots of time and thought to answer. The crucial point,
however, is to get clear on just how the relationship between ethics and action should be thought of. Ethics can be derived in a normative fashion only from a particular species of human action that makes up one part of our existence. Moral philosophers would do well to examine how the reflective dimension of human life interacts with the unreflective bedrock on which it is built, rather than to presuming rationality and reflection are primary. Though there are other persuasive objections to Korsgaard’s theory, normativity can be derived effectively from reflective action. However, what’s missing from this account is an explanation how this special type of human action relates to our overall experience. Such an account is necessary in order make morality applicable to the entirety of human experience, rather than just a part of it.
References


Nader Shoabi

In Defense of Kantian Moral Theory
In this paper, I will argue that Kant provides us with a plausible account of morality. To show that, I will first offer a major criticism of Kantian moral theory, by explaining Bernard Williams’ charge against it. I will explore his understanding of the Kantian theory, and then explain what he finds objectionable about it. This criticism will make up the first part of the paper. In the second part, I will attempt to defend the Kantian theory by appealing to Christine Korsgaard’s alternative reading. This reading, I will argue, accommodates Williams’ worries by avoiding the charge altogether. Finally, I will attempt to show that in avoiding Williams’ charge this alternative reading does not lose sight of the greater task it claims to undertake, namely, to provide a plausible account of morality.

Williams believes that there is a reading of Kantian moral theory that is characterized by an “Impartiality and … indifference to any particular relations to particular persons.”\(^1\) He further believes that this reading “Requires abstraction from particular circumstances and particular characteristics of … the agent, except in so far as these can be treated as universal features of any morally similar situation.”\(^2\) Exactly what it is in Kant’s moral theory that lends itself to such reading, Williams does not make clear. However, it is not hard to speculate about such a feature.

After offering his first statement of the categorical imperative, Kant examines three examples that are aimed at demonstrating its practical application.\(^3\) In these three examples one can detect a pattern, a sort of procedure for evaluating the actions open to the agent, emerging. First, the agent has to state the decision she is deliberating about in the form of a maxim. Then, she must generalize her maxim in the form of universal law. Finally, she must decide whether or not it is possible to will such a maxim as a “law of nature.”\(^4\) Now, there is no doubt that there are obscurities involved with this procedure as I just put it. For instance, one might wonder what the “possibility to will” in the third step is supposed to amount to; or, precisely how the “stating in the form of a maxim and then a universal law” is to be undertaken. However, allow me, for the purposes of this paper, to leave these questions aside and only note that this procedure obviously involves in one way or another some sort of abstraction or generalization. As I just said, it is this feature that Williams focuses on. According to him, since the Kantian procedure requires that the agent regard the situation from an impartial standpoint and make a decision that would be binding on any arbitrary rational being, it inevitably requires that the agent abstract from who she is as a particular human.\(^5\)

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2. Ibid.
4. Kant, Groundwork, 4:422.
Williams further claims that this outcome is undesirable. To illustrate the point, Williams uses the following example:6 Imagine two people who are equally in danger. A man has the opportunity to help one of them. It seems obvious that the man has to be completely impartial in his decision about which person to help. But, there is more to the story: One of the two people who are in danger is the man’s wife. Now, Williams thinks that it is hard to doubt that the man should resolve to favor his wife over the stranger. Of course, this is exactly what the Kantian account would require of the man. However, although a Kantian would say that such a decision is permissible, Williams thinks that there still is a problem. The idea is that the Kantian theory, in an often quoted phrase from Williams, would “Provide the agent with one thought too many.”7 I will elaborate on this shortly, but before doing that, allow me to take a quick detour and define a central term in Williams’ moral discourse that would help us in getting a better grasp of the idea.

Williams considers one’s “projects” and “commitments” as reasons that, “Constitute conditions of there being … a future” for the agent.8 That is, “projects” and “commitments” are things that make one’s life worth living in the first place and thus are fundamental to one’s existence. Now since the choice to continue living is the most fundamental choice one could make, it follows that any choice that one would make is subordinate to one’s “commitments” and desires. One’s “commitments”, in other words, give a framework or a general guideline, so to say, in which one’s choices in life, including one’s moral choices, take shape. For instance, my choice to spend my evenings working on a new bike project is shaped by my “commitment” in this somewhat technical sense to, say, be a productive individual in life. It is important to emphasize that one’s “commitments” are thought to be “fundamental” in the sense that one does not have other more fundamental reasons to hold them. They are, in short, the bedrock from which one’s choices and decisions begin.

Now with this fundamental notion of “commitment” we can go back to clarify what Williams’ charge really is. Since, as we have seen, the Kantian account requires the agent to engage in a sort of thought experiment to make any choice, it also requires her to deliberate about her most deeply held “commitments”. According to the Kantian account, that is, I must begin on the above three-step procedure even in regards to my “commitment” to be, say, a productive human being. In extreme cases, where it is “impossible to will” some “commitment”, this could mean that the agent ought to give up her “commitment”. Given what has been said here, one can see that this is the case because if it is impossible to will some choice from the Kantian impartial viewpoint, then the choice ought to be forgone. Williams thinks this is a problematic possibility: No theory

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6 Ibid, 17.
7 Ibid, 18.
8 Ibid, 11.
of action can require of an agent to give up her “commitments”, for recall that, for Williams, one’s “commitments” after all “constitute conditions of there being … a future” for the agent in the first place.\(^9\)

What is more, the less extreme cases, in which there is no impossibility in “willing” or adopting some “commitment”, are no less problematic. What I have in mind is the sort of case where, as in our rescue example above, there are no conflicts between what morality requires and what one’s “projects” are, and therefore, there is no threat of “impossibility of willing” one’s “commitment” or “project”. Even in these cases, the problem seems to persist. The agent would still have to abstract from her “projects” and assume an impartial view of the situation. In the above case, the Kantian theory would require the man to take a moment and think whether it is permissible to rescue his wife or not and to will such a decision as a universal law. With the central or (ironically) categorical role that Williams attributes to one’s “commitments”, this seems objectionable. That is, Williams wants to say that the man shouldn’t save his wife because he can universalize a maxim that makes it permissible; rather he should save her because she’s his wife! Thus, Williams concludes, “Such things as deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view, and they also run the risk of offending against it”.\(^10\)

Up to this point, I have characterized a certain reading of the Kantian theory that Williams found objectionable. Further, I have shown what it is about this reading that Williams objects to. In what follows, I will use Christine Korsgaard’s reading of the Kantian moral theory to show that a deeper understanding of the theory avoids the charge Williams makes altogether.

Before setting out to do that, though, I would like to note that Korsgaard, like Williams, holds that our “projects and commitments”, what she calls our “identities”, are at the center of morality. Your “identity”, she writes, is “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”\(^11\) As such, our identities are things that oblige us unconditionally.\(^12\) Consider the following:

Suppose that I identify myself with being a king. This means that I take myself to be an instance of king-hood. As such, I commit myself to doing anything that would constitute being a king. What gives being a king normative authority for me is the fact that I take myself to be truly a king. Now, if for some reason I fail to comply with an obligation that

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid, 18.
12 Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, 102.
is involved in being a king, then I would not be a king. I would fail myself in my determination to be what I chose to be, a king. And that is an undesirable thing: After all, what good is my “commitment” if I myself don’t find it valuable enough to want to keep it? Thus, Korsgaard and Williams justifiably agree on this much: “Projects” and “commitments”, or one’s “identity” in Korsgaard’s language, are the foundational motives for action. If there is anything that has normative force, it must be one’s commitments.

The question to ask, then, is this: How is Korsgaard’s agreement that one’s “identity” is central to any account of morality consistent with Kantian moral theory, if Williams’ understanding of the Kantian moral theory is correct? In responding to this question, Korsgaard offers an alternative reading of Kantian moral theory. I will attempt in the rest of this paper to explain what this reading is, and how it allows Korsgaard to, on the one hand, be committed to the Kantian moral theory, and, on the other, consistently hold, with Williams, that one’s “commitments” are the sort of things that give one reasons to continue living and thus are foundational.

Let us ask: What is it to will something?14

Kant began his project in the *Groundwork* by examining the authority of our reflective thinking about the choices we face in our lives. He thought that this authority could be partly explained by imperatives that are aimed at some end. For example, I resolve to drink a glass of water, because I want to satiate my thirst. However, he realized that those ends themselves need to derive their authority from somewhere. Thus, he proposed there must be imperatives that derive their authority from themselves. As such, these fundamental principles cannot be aimed at yet another end themselves. The categorical imperative is absolute in the sense that it derives its authority from itself.15Kant wrote,

“There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this: Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law.”16

There is nothing in this statement that reveals what the content of the law is. All that this statement of the categorical imperative says is that the agent has to act according to *some* law.17 That is, if there is to be any decision, there has to be some reason for it. That is explained by the fact that human beings, the kind of agents that we are discussing when talking

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 93.
16 Ibid, 4:421.
17 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 120.
about morality, are reflective agents. If that is true, we think and wonder about the situations we face, and in order to get ourselves to act we need some kind of principle on which to base our reflections. In other words, Kant tells us that the structure of our reflection is such that we need laws to act.

What is more, these laws cannot gain their authority from outside of the agent. If a law exists outside of the agent, it has no force on the agent unless the agent herself consents to a law, the law has no binding effect on her. Thus, the categorical imperative, if it is to have any force, must be represented in the agent. In other words, the categorical imperative is the law that the self formulates for itself.

What we have established is that there is a structure to the way we will things. When we face a decision to will something, we first ask ourselves a normative question. Then, we set out to answer the question according to the kind of laws we have. Central in this picture is that there is something special about this set of laws. They are strictly personal, or in the Kantian language, autonomous. They are not imposed on the self from the outside, and they are not formed based on the kind of ends that one might have. With this, we have established what these laws might look like. So, the question now is this: What is the content of the categorical imperative? What is there that is wanted categorically?

According to Korsgaard the representations of the laws that the self requires in order to make judgments and resolutions are to be found in our “identities”. She writes, “it is the conceptions of ourselves that are most important to us that give rise to unconditional obligations.” Thus, for Korsgaard the conception one has of oneself, what and who we think we are, is the representation of the laws that bind us unconditionally, or in the Kantian language “categorically”. In other words, Korsgaard’s reading of Kant seems to provide us with an account of how we will something that fits the criteria we just defined above: First, one’s “identity” provides the self with norms and standards to judge and make decisions, and thus it satisfies the condition to be an imperative; second, one’s identities are the representations that one adopts for their own sake and for no greater end, and therefore they are categorical; and third, one’s “identity” is not imposed upon the self from the outside and thus it satisfies the condition

18 Ibid, 93.
19 Ibid, 100.
20 Ibid, 102.
21 That is not to deny that they may be socially constructed, but that they are adopted in a very personal way and further that the combination of these identities is an amalgamation of conceptions that are unique in each individual. Thus, bits and parts of one’s “identity” may be constructed by society and imposed on the individual. However, it is still open to think that one organizes these bits and pieces by its own volition, and thus makes up an “identity” that is completely personal and
to have normative authority on the individual. Our identities, in short then, are the will’s way of devising laws to govern itself.

Now that we know what Korsgaard’s account of Kantian moral theory is, we can see that it indeed avoids the problem Williams raised. Let us recall that Korsgaard agrees on two issues with Williams. First, she agrees that one’s “projects” and “commitments”, one’s conception of oneself, is what gives one reason to continue living in the first place and thus she agrees that they have a central role in one’s decision-making processes. Second, she agrees with Williams that the Kantian theory involves some level of abstraction. By that, I mean the abstraction involved in stepping back from one’s situation and reflecting on one’s options. Indeed she thinks this abstraction just is what constitutes a human being: we are “essentially reflective.”

However, what separates her from Williams is this: she disagrees that this abstraction translates into the problem Williams points to, because she takes Kant to have positioned one’s “identities” rightly in the center of morality. Thus, although there is abstraction involved in one’s asking oneself the normative question, one still provides the answer to this question by appealing to one’s “identity”, “projects”, and “commitments”. Thus, it would be impossible for one to come up, in his Kantian reflective exercise, with a decision that is in conflict with one’s “projects”. That is because it is precisely one’s “projects” that provide the grounds for a response to the normative question. If this is how we reach our decisions, then how could one, as Williams’ Kant claims, abstract from one’s “identities” and still be able to act at all?

Let us return to the case of the man who faced the dilemma to save either his wife or the stranger. There, according to Korsgaard’s reading of Kant, if he did abstract from his “identity” as a human being, then it would have been impossible for him to make a decision at all. In other words, he would ask the normative question, and then, nothing; he would be paralyzed, so to say. We might say, with Korsgaard, that as a rational being he acts at all because he has some principle in him that tells him to do one thing rather than another. Now since we know that he can make a decision and that he can act in this sort of situation, it follows that it is impossible for him to abstract from, at least, his “identity” as a human being.

Korsgaard’s account of Kantian moral theory, then, while deeply aware of the problem raised by Williams, manages to avoid it altogether. What is now in order is a general examination of Korsgaard’s account to make sure that in responding to this charge it has not fallen short of its original aim of being a viable account of morality.

One worry that could be raised is this. If it is an agent’s mere endorsement of an “identity”, whatever it might be, that gives it its authority,  

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22 Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, 92.
23 Ibid, 121.
then what prevents an agent from justifying obviously impermissible acts by simply endorsing an “identity” that would accommodate such acts? The answer to this question cannot be simply “nothing.” Obviously, there must be something wrong with a moral theory that would allow an individual to, say, torture innocent babies on the condition that the individual’s “identity” is to torture babies. If Korsgaard’s account is to have any force, it must have some way of introducing limits on the kind of identities that one is allowed to adopt.

We have already seen that a law can have a binding force on an agent only if the agent has some representation of the law. That is, a principle that is not endorsed by the agent has no authority over him. For instance, if I do not identify with being a good soldier, then I would feel no urge to wax my shoes every morning. It is true, I might do it, because I would, say, get into trouble if I didn’t, but that would be only conditionally imperative for me. That is, I would attempt to wax my shoes only in so far as I see the prospect of getting into trouble hanging over my head. For the willing to be unconditionally binding on me I would have to identify myself with being a soldier. Only then would I will to wake up every morning and wax my shoes even if there were no outside force coercing me into waxing my shoes.

Interestingly one can think that this is also true in case of being reflective itself. I am subject to the principles that come with being reflective, only if I identify with being reflective.\(^\text{24}\) Further, if we assume as Korsgaard does, that being a human being just is being reflective, then it would only make sense to expect reflectivity of me, if I endorsed being a human. In other words, the first statement of the categorical imperative that requires of any rational being to “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which [he] can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law,” has binding force on any being insofar as it identifies itself as a rational being.\(^\text{25}\) To put that in a language by now familiar, let us simply say, since every decision we make implies reflective thinking, it also implies that the agent identifies with being a human. Humanity, then, is a fundamental “identity” that precedes others.\(^\text{26}\) In so far as we value our identities, if it is true that the most fundamental of our identities is our “identity” as a human being, then being a human is one thing we can surely claim to be universally valuable for all human beings.

Thus, there is a universal “identity” that defines fundamental boundaries for the kind of “commitments” or “identities” that we may adopt. For example, since it would be contra humanity to adopt torturing little babies as one’s “project” in life, it would be immoral to adopt such a “project”, no matter what. Since you would have to commit to being a human being before committing to any other “identity”, you would

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Kant, Groudwork, 4:421.

\(^{26}\) Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, 121.
not just do anything that that “identity” requires of you, because your “identity” as a human being, that is, a reflective agent, requires of you to value humanity over all other considerations, and that means refraining from adopting a “project” like torturing babies, and therefore refraining from a heinous act like torturing babies.

In these last few pages, I have examined an important consequence of the Kantian theory: Humanity is valuable unconditionally. Suddenly, it seems like Williams’ charge has regained its force again. That is, one might wonder if it is true that to act morally one has to value some things or some “commitments” unconditionally (like humanity), then is that not just to say that there is an impartial view from which morality is determined? And is that not just an expression of the worry onto which Williams constructed his criticism of the Kantian moral theory? Strangely enough the answer to these questions is “yes”. However, what I have established in this paper is that our “commitments,” and with them, our humanity’s, demands on us are not, although they certainly can seem to be, outside of ourselves. With this caveat we have seen that although to act morally at all is to, in a particular sense, take an impartial stance, it does not follow that one’s “commitments” or “identities” are open to rational scrutiny like Williams supposed. Thus, we have seen that Williams’ worry does not gain any momentum, given Korsgaard’s reading of Kantian moral theory. Our “identities”, in short, engage the will by standing as categorical or unconditional principles of action, determining the will from the inside. In case of humanity, too, as we have seen, one might say it is our humanity that requires of us to value humanity, and with that to regard as immoral principles and “projects” that stand opposed to it.
References


ALEX SETZEPFANDT

Priority and Well-Being
I. Introduction

It is a common thought that when making moral decisions one should give priority to those who are worse off. If given the choice, one should aid the poor over the rich and the sick over the healthy. Even when the amount of benefit would be equal, it seems clear in some cases that it would be better to benefit the person in the worse position. There are several moral theories that could account for this fact: telic egalitarianism, sufficientarianism and prioritarianism. These theories can be contrasted with pure utilitarianism, which fails to consider how well off people are when distributing benefits. I will discuss two types of cases that pose problems for the utilitarian. Afterwards I will explain the egalitarian, sufficientarian and priority views, which are better able to handle these cases. After giving reasons for rejecting egalitarianism and sufficientarianism, I explain why a utility-based prioritarianism is also subject to problems. I end by offering a more plausible version of prioritarianism that values well-being instead of utility.

II. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, like many moral theories, has both a criterion of benefits and a principle of distribution for those benefits. The former explains what it means to benefit someone, while the latter explains how benefits should be distributed between people. For the utilitarian, to benefit someone is to increase that person’s utility (roughly, pleasure minus pain). When deciding how to distribute utility, one should choose the option that maximizes it. It does not matter who gets the benefits, but rather only the size of those benefits. There are two problems that the utilitarian faces. First, utilitarians do not differentiate between benefitting a badly off person and a well off person. Though the law of marginal utility generally holds that it will be better (in terms of utility) to aid the worse off, it does not hold in all cases. One may have a choice between helping an average Berkeley student become popular at Cal and treating a patient suffering from a rare disease. Though the disease causes the patient pain, it is not fatal. As it turns out, given the great cost of treating the disease, aiding the student would actually benefit her more (in terms of utility) than would treating the patient. In this case the utilitarian would be committed to giving to the student. We might think, however, that giving to the patient is the better option. The student is so well off already that it is not as important to benefit her as it is to benefit the patient.

Second, the utilitarian does not distinguish between greatly benefitting one person and trivially benefitting many. For the cost of treating the patient’s illness, you could buy music for a large number of audiophiles. No
singular person would benefit greatly from the music, but the aggregate increase in utility to the audiophiles would be greater than the increase in utility that would result from treating the patient. Thus, a utilitarian would be committed to giving to the audiophiles, though treating the patient would clearly be the better option. Reducing a person’s pain is more important than giving people access to music.

III. Telic Egalitarianism
Telic Egalitarianism is not committed to a theory of benefits, but rather to a principle of distribution. It holds that benefits should be distributed between people in an equal manner. The telic egalitarian should do what will most reduce inequalities between people.\(^1\) If given the choice between donating to the Cal student or the patient, the egalitarian would suggest donating to the patient. By helping the person who is relatively worse off, she would be decreasing inequality between them and so distributing benefits correctly. Similarly, the egalitarian would choose to benefit the patient over giving music to the audiophiles—since the patient is worse off than them, only giving to the patient will reduce inequality.

There are three problems with egalitarianism. First is the leveling down objection (LDO).\(^2\) If our only goal were to create states of affairs where people are equally well off, helping the worse off would work just as well as harming the better off. Infecting the Cal student with the patient’s disease, for example, would decrease inequality between them just as much as curing the patient would. Yet it would clearly be bad to infect the student.

Of course, pure egalitarianism is a radical position and a pluralist egalitarian could respond by noting that egalitarians do not only care about reducing inequality, but also about benefitting people.\(^3\) Nevertheless, even the pluralist egalitarian is subject to a form of the leveling down objection. In particular, she is still committed to saying that infecting the Cal student would be in some ways good. Because inequality matters, infecting the student will be good in terms of reducing inequality. But this is quite strange. How could it be in any way good to infect people with a disease, making some people worse off and no one better?

The second objection to egalitarianism is that the scope of the inequality that egalitarians care about is too broad.\(^4\) If the world were a much better place, and there were only millionaires and billionaires, the egalitarian

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2 Ibid., 211.
3 Ibid., 219.
would still be concerned with the inequality between these two groups. But there is not actually any moral reason to reduce inequality in this case. Though the billionaires are better off than the millionaires, both groups are so well off that there is no reason for concern. The inequality between them does not matter, yet the egalitarian is committed to saying that it does.

The last problem with egalitarianism is that it holds that the importance of benefitting someone changes depending on whether other people are around. For the egalitarian, there would be less reason to aid the patient if the Cal student did not exist. This is because helping the patient in the world where the Cal student exists is important both for the patient and for the purposes of reducing inequality. As such, in the world where the Cal student does not exist, there is less reason to help the patient. But this is not right. It does not become less important to benefit the needy just because there are no people around who are better off than them. Rather, regardless of whether there are normal people in the world, it is just as important to help those in need.

**IV. Sufficientarianism**

For the sufficientarian, it is important to ensure that people have *enough*. In itself, the sufficiency view has neither a criterion of benefits nor a clear principle for how to distribute benefits. What sufficientarianism does have, however, is a qualification on whatever criterion of benefits one picks. Namely, the sufficientarian says that benefits only matter until a certain point, after which the person is sufficiently well off. In terms of our case, the sufficiency view can give us an abstract idea of what to do. We know, in particular, that what matters is bringing people to the point of sufficiency. Therefore, if we know that one person is below the point of sufficiency and the other above it, it is clear that we should aid the person below the point of sufficiency. If the Cal student is above the point of sufficiency and the patient below, we will know to give to the patient. Similarly, if the audiophiles are above the point of sufficiency and the patient is below it, the sufficientarian would recommend giving to the patient. It does not matter how much benefit a person gets above the point of sufficiency, and so greater aggregate benefits to the audiophiles need not outweigh smaller benefits to the patient.

The problem with a bare sufficientarian view is that it does not explain

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6 Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 32.
7 Though sufficientarianism does not have an explicit theory of distribution, I will assume for the purposes of the paper that the sufficientarian values doing what matters most to people, at least when all else is equal.
how to aid people when they are both below or above the point of sufficiency. For this reason the principle of sufficiency cannot stand by itself. To remedy this problem, we could try to combine the sufficiency view with utilitarianism. On this account, benefits matter equally below the point of sufficiency, but do not matter above it. The utility-sufficiency hybrid is not as vulnerable to the objections raised against pure utilitarianism. In terms of the first objection, the sufficientarian does not always treat benefits to the better off as equal to benefits to the worse off. At a certain point, the better off reach the point of sufficiency, after which benefitting them does not matter. For this reason, the sufficientarian need not worry about giving to a sufficiently well off person over a person who is badly off. She also need not worry as much about the audiophile case: If the audiophiles are at the point of sufficiency, giving to them will not be preferable to aiding the patient.

The problem with the utility-sufficiency hybrid, however, is that it will run into difficulties in choosing whether the point of sufficiency is high or low. If the point of sufficiency is too low, we could have no reason to donate to the Cal student over a millionaire. Namely, if both the student and the millionaire were above the point of sufficiency, it would be irrelevant which one to aid. Yet we would clearly want to help the student. If the point of sufficiency were too high, on the other hand, we could be compelled to donate to the audiophiles. Assuming that the point of sufficiency were high enough that most of the audiophiles in the world had not reached it, we would have to give trivial benefits to a large number of audiophiles over helping the patient. Whether with a low or high threshold of sufficiency, then, the sufficiency-utility hybrid is problematic.

Another problem with the sufficiency-utility hybrid is that it is unclear whether a point of sufficiency could adequately be stated in terms of utility. As Joseph Raz points out, utility is an insatiable concept. It is theoretically possible for a person to have an infinite amount of utility and at no given point be completely satiated in terms of it. If we use utility as our criterion of benefit, we would have to determine a specific utility \( x \) such that people at that utility are sufficiently well off and are no longer in great moral need. There are two problems, however, with determining utility \( x \). First off, because utility is a continuous concept it would be arbitrary to pick a point to call sufficiency when the point just before and the point right after are so similar. Why would we call utility \( x \) sufficient when utility \( x+1 \) is essentially the same? The second problem is that we

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might think people can be sufficiently well off at different levels of utility. Being a socialite may be necessary to satisfy one person; another may be satisfied by a quiet life at home. If we think of utility in terms of pleasure and pain, the first person may be higher in utility than the second, though we could plausibly think both are sufficiently well off.

V. Prioritarianism

According to the priority view, “Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are.”\(^{10}\) Like sufficientarianism, prioritarianism has neither a criterion of benefits nor a strict theory for how to distribute those benefits.\(^{11}\) Instead, it has a qualification on how to treat benefits. In particular, the prioritarian gives “more weight” to benefitting people the worse off they are. While the sufficientarian says that benefits matter only up to a certain point, the prioritarian says that benefits matter more the worse off one is. For this reason the prioritarian would be committed to giving to the patient over the student, and so is not subject to the first objection against utilitarianism.

Unlike the egalitarian, prioritarians do not give priority to benefitting the worse off because they are worse off relative to others. Instead, the prioritarian holds that benefits matter more the worse off one is relative to a scale of objective badness. The patient is at an objective point on this scale of badness. If we benefit him a certain amount, that benefit will matter a certain amount regardless of whether he is worse or better off relative to others. For this reason prioritarianism is not vulnerable to the same criticisms as egalitarianism. It is not subject to the LDO because it does not hold that there would be anything better about a world where the better off were made to be worse off. Benefits to all people matter and there is nothing good about taking benefits away from people and benefitting no one. A prioritarian also is not subject to the objection that it is less important to aid the patient when there are not people better off than him. For the prioritarian, benefits matter a certain amount regardless of who else is around, so benefitting the patient would matter the same regardless of whether there are people better or worse off relative to him.

Though I have showed how prioritarianism differs from egalitarianism and sufficientarianism, it is still unclear how the theory works in practice. Since prioritarianism is not committed to any criterion of benefits, I will assume for now that it treats benefits in terms of utility. On this account,

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 213.

\(^{11}\) Just as with sufficientarian, though prioritarianism does not have an explicit principle of distribution, I will assume for the purposes of this paper that the prioritarian values doing what matters most for people, at least when all else is equal.
prioritarianism is a modified form of utilitarianism. Instead of comparing benefits to determine the best action, the prioritarian compares weighted benefits. When deciding whether to help the student or the patient, we would first take the benefit that would be given to the patient and add weight to it in accordance with how badly off he is. Next, we take the benefit that would be given to the student and add weight in accordance with how badly off she is. Finally, we compare which donation would result in more weighted benefits. The person we could help more in terms of weighted benefits is the person our aid would matter more to. Since the prioritarian values doing what matters more, she would recommend helping the patient because he will benefit more in terms of weighted benefits.

Unlike the utilitarian, the prioritarian need not aggregate benefits across multiple persons. For this reason she is not necessarily vulnerable to the second objection to utilitarianism. The prioritarian holds that “benefits to the worse off could be morally outweighed by sufficiently great benefits to the better off.” It is unclear, however, whether Parfit means “worse off” and “better off” to signify groups of people or singular persons. The non-aggregating prioritarian should aid the person who will increase the most in terms of weighted benefits. An aggregating prioritarian, however, would instead seek to impersonally maximize weighted benefits. To see the difference, we can look at a case where people with disease $B$ are slightly worse off than people with $A$. If we can only benefit one, and the benefits will be equal, the prioritarian would recommend treating the person with disease $B$, since it will result in greater weighted benefits. It may be the case, however, that we have a choice between treating two people with disease $A$ over treating one person with disease $B$. If we add the weighted benefits of treating each person with $A$ together they would be greater than the weighted benefits of treating the one person with $B$. Since aiding people with $A$ will maximize impersonal weighted benefits, the aggregating prioritarian should aid the two people with $A$. The non-aggregating prioritarian, however, should aid the person with $B$, since that action results in the greatest weighted benefit for an individual. I will consider both aggregating and non-aggregating prioritarianism in the discussion to follow.

The problem with a prioritarianism based on utility is that it will ultimately be vulnerable to the same kinds of objections as utilitarianism. Assuming that prioritarianism allows for aggregation, the prioritarian could, like the utilitarian, be committed to giving music to audiophiles over helping the patient. The prioritarian gives more weight to people who are worse off, not infinite weight. For this reason there will be some

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12 Ibid., 213.
$n$ number of audiophiles such that the weighted benefits given to them would outweigh the weighted benefits given to the patient. Benefitting the patient in our situation would result in $y$ weighted benefits, while benefitting a single audiophile would result in $z$ weighted benefits, where $z$ is much smaller than $y$. Given that $y$ is finite, the sum of some $n$ amount of $z$’s must be greater than $y$. If the number of audiophiles is $n$, then, benefitting them will outweigh benefitting the patient. For example, if $y = 1000$ and $z = 2$, then an $n$ of 501 audiophiles would outweigh benefitting the patient. This is because giving 501 audiophiles music will result in 1002 weighted benefits, while benefitting the patient will only result in 1000. Yet we might think that there is no $n$ that would make it acceptable to give the audiophiles music over helping the patient.

One might object that the weighting mechanism could be rigged so that $n$ would be a gigantic number, bigger than all of the people in the world. Because our imagination breaks down when thinking about large numbers of people, perhaps it really would be the case that we should give the audiophiles music over treating the patient. In response, I think that in some cases we really can know that benefitting a large $n$ would be the wrong decision. Imagine instead of being able to cure the patient’s suffering we could save someone from starving to death, allowing him to go on to live a successful life. The alternative is to give an extraordinary large $n$ a brief, but unmistakably enjoyable, chocolate sensation. The utility-based aggregating prioritarian is committed to, for some $n$, giving the large population this brief sensation. But it could not possibly be right to allow someone to starve to death for the sake of a chocolate sensation, no matter how many people are experiencing that sensation. We have, then, determined that aggregation poses a problem for a prioritarianism based on utility.

Non-aggregating prioritarians, as well, face the problem of having to benefit the better off in intuitively implausible cases. On the utility-based priority view, there must be some amount of benefit a millionaire could receive that would outweigh the benefit given to the sick patient. As in the case of aggregation, there is some $y$ amount of weighted benefits that the patient will receive by benefitting him in our situation. Because $y$ is a finite number there must be some amount of $n$ unweighted benefits to the millionaire that will be greater in terms of weighted benefits than $y$. Thus, the prioritarian would have to hold that for a large enough benefit, helping the millionaire would be better than treating the patient. We may think, however, that there is no point where it would be better to give to the millionaire over the patient. Thus, prioritarianism with utility as a value is more compatible with our intuitions than utilitarianism, but it is nonetheless subject to similar problems.
VI. Priority & Well-Being
Given the problems that result from using utility as a criterion of benefits for both sufficientarianism and prioritarianism, I think it would be helpful to use a different criterion. In particular, I think that turning to a satiable principle could allow us to avoid the problems that we have found so far with utility. A satiable principle is one that, at a certain point, can be satisfied.\footnote{Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 235.} Hunger is satiable, for example, because there is a point at which one is no longer hungry. Utility is insatiable because one could always have more pleasure. When we turn to a satiable principle we will naturally build a level of sufficiency into our theory; namely, the point at which our principle is satisfied will be a point of sufficiency because it is impossible to benefit a person further in terms of the principle. It is, for example, impossible to further satisfy someone’s hunger after she is full.

Joseph Raz offers a satiable principle, well-being, which we could use for determining how well or badly off someone is. One’s well-being is primarily determined by the success or failure of one’s goals, broadly construed.\footnote{Ibid., 305.} One’s goals include relationships, jobs, hobbies and ambitions. If someone always wanted to practice medicine, becoming a successful doctor would fulfill one of her goals, contributing to her well-being. If she wanted to have friends and children, she would improve her well-being by becoming a good friend and mother.

In terms of our scale, we will say that a person is worse off the farther she is from fulfilling her goals. The closer one is to fulfilling her goals, the closer she is to the point of satiety (well-being), and thus the less it matters to benefit her. On this account, how badly off someone is does not depend on one’s resources or utility. People have different goals, the fulfillment of which is of just as much value as the fulfillment of other goals by other people. One person might have the goal of becoming an avid chess player. If that is his only goal, and he fulfills it, we would say that his life is just as good as the life of a socialite who fulfills her goals.\footnote{Though Raz may disagree, on my view the level of well-being of different people is commensurable. One’s well-being is determined by her distance from fulfilling her goals. If two people have satisfied their goals they are equally well off in terms of well-being (namely, they are at the highest possible point on the scale of well-being). Similarly, two people who are equally far away from fulfilling their goals are equally badly off in terms of well-being.} For this reason well-being does not map on to any point of utility. In terms of net pleasure minus pain, the socialite may be better off than the chess player. The socialite is probably well-fed, goes to social events and experiences a greater amount of pleasure at any given time. Yet, in terms of well-being,
the socialite’s life is not actually any better than the chess player’s.

Now that we have determined a new criterion of benefit to use for prioritarianism, we can see whether it falls prey to the same objections leveled at a prioritarianism based on utility. Since our goal is to satisfy well-being, not to increase utility, we no longer have to worry about helping the student become popular or giving music to a large number of audiophiles. Though increased popularity and free music might bring pleasure to people, they do not necessarily contribute to the fulfillment of their goals. Relieving the pain of a sick patient, however, would open up opportunities for him that he would otherwise be unable to pursue.

While the well-being-based prioritarian does not care about improving popularity or giving away music, she still cares about the well-being of people who are better off than the patient. Nevertheless, she need not worry that large benefits to the better off could outweigh smaller benefits to the patient. Because the maximum benefits one can receive are limited by the point of satiety, the prioritarian can hold that sometimes benefits to the better off cannot outweigh smaller benefits to the worse off. In the case of the student and the patient, for example, the prioritarian could hold the following: Under the weighting mechanism it would take \( x \) amount of unweighted benefits to the student in order to outweigh the \( v \) amount of unweighted benefits given to the patient. I control the weighting mechanism, so I can effectively choose the numerical value of \( x \). The weighting mechanism I pick makes it so that \( x \) is greater than the distance the student is from satisfying her well-being. It is impossible to benefit someone past the point of satiety (in terms of well-being), so it would be impossible to give the student a benefit large enough to outweigh the benefit given to the child. For example, let us say that we can benefit the patient 2 well-being units. Since we control the weighting mechanism, we can say that it requires 1000 well-being units for a person as well off as the student to outweigh 2 well-being units for the patient. If the student is 500 well-being units away from reaching the point of satiety, and requires 1000 well-being units to outweigh 2 well-being units for the patient, it would be impossible for benefits to the student to outweigh benefits to the patient. Therefore, if the prioritarian uses well-being as a criterion of benefits, she need not worry about giving to the better off in implausible situations.

Though we have answered the problems with non-aggregating prioritarianism, we have not completely settled our worries about aggregating prioritarianism. We know that the prioritarian need not be committed to giving audiophiles music over ending the patient’s suffering, but there are harder choices she may have to face. You have a choice between saving someone’s life and educating 1000 people. Should you greatly improve
the well-being of the worse off or moderately improve the well-being of a large number of people?

It is unclear to me what to do in the above situation. Perhaps educating 1000 people would not be enough to outweigh someone’s life. I do think, however, that one person’s life can be outweighed by benefits in well-being to many people. Imagine that you know about an incoming alien invasion. The aliens do not intend to kill humanity but rather to make us their pets. As owners, they will be relatively benevolent. They will satisfy our biological desires and give us downtime to do some things that we like. We will be able to, for example, read books and watch old television shows. If we want to play games, we will be allowed to play with their children. But we will not be able to see other humans or make real friends.

You have created a substance, a small amount of which could be released into the atmosphere. Humans and other organisms on our planet would be unaffected by the resulting chemical composition of the air. But it would be toxic for the aliens, thus preventing them from invading. To release the substance, you must go to a high altitude. Upon climbing the mountain, however, you hear a radio report of a trapped climber who is starving. You have no food but could use the substance as sustenance. Do you let the climber starve or allow the aliens to take us as their pets?

Though the choice is certainly difficult, I think that releasing the substance would be the right decision. If the aliens were merely coming to raid our planet of its current supply of chocolate, depriving people of massive amounts of pleasure, it is clear that you should save the climber. But when we are talking about depriving people of relationships that they otherwise need in order to satisfy their well-being, it seems plausible to me that we can weigh the two benefits against each other. We are not talking about trivial pleasures or pleasures to people who have already satisfied all of their life goals. Instead, we are talking about helping people live fulfilling lives. Nevertheless, if you cannot accept the idea of letting the climber starve to death or otherwise are not compelled by aggregation, you could always deny that prioritarianism aggregates benefits. On this account, prioritarianism would only require you to aid the person that it would matter the most to. If it turns out that saving the climber’s life would matter more to her than stopping the alien invasion would matter to any other singular person, then the non-aggregating prioritarian would suggest that you save the climber’s life.

Of course, one could both agree that protecting humanity from alien invasion is the right choice and disagree that an aggregating prioritarianism is plausible in all cases. One may wonder, in particular, whether the prioritarian is still vulnerable to the objection that trivial benefits to the
many could outweigh large benefits to the singular person. I think the well-being-based prioritarian is not subject to this objection because there is no such thing as a trivial benefit in terms of well-being. Improving someone’s well-being involves contributing to the fulfillment of her life goals. Given the importance of fulfilling one’s goals, it seems strange that we could call any benefit in terms of well-being ‘trivial’.

One could reply, however, that even if benefits in terms of well-being cannot be trivial, some are certainly small. Would helping a large amount of people with their resumés, allowing them to work at moderately more fulfilling jobs, outweigh the life of one person? In the case of the chocolate sensation it was clear that we should save one person’s life over giving a large $n$ the sensation. In this case, however, I am less certain. Maybe if the $n$ really is incredibly big we should help people with their resumés. If we think that a person’s life can be weighed against the well-being of six billion humans in the case of an alien invasion, maybe for some large $n$ it really would be acceptable to help people with their resumés over saving someone’s life. For those who do not believe in aggregation, this conclusion can be avoided by accepting a non-aggregating prioritarianism. But for those who do believe in aggregating benefits, if this is a bullet to bite, then it is certainly a smaller bullet than that faced by the utilitarian or the utility-based prioritarian.

**VII. Conclusion**

In conclusion, a prioritarianism based on well-being seems like a plausible alternative to utilitarianism. Utilitarianism faces the objections that it treats equal benefits to the better and worse off in the same manner and allows for trivial benefits to large amounts of the better off to outweigh substantial benefits to the worse off. Egalitarianism and Sufficientarianism are better at accounting for the importance of benefitting the worse off, but they have problems of their own. Prioritarianism weighs benefits to the worse off higher than benefits to the better off, and so is seemingly not subject to the first objection to utilitarianism. The priority view is also not necessarily subject to the second objection because it is not committed to aggregation. Nevertheless, both aggregating and non-aggregating prioritarians will be subject to similar objections if they hold utility as a criterion for benefits. At a certain point, even the prioritarian will allow large benefits to the better off to implausibly outweigh smaller benefits to the worse off. A prioritarianism that holds well-being as a criterion of benefits, however, is not subject to the first objection because it is based on satiable principle. An aggregating prioritarianism based on well-being is also more resistant to the second objection because well-being does not
allow for trivial benefits.
References


Notes on the Winners

Charles (Chuck) Goldhaber graduated from UC Berkeley in summer 2011 with a B.A. in Philosophy and Japanese Language and is currently applying to PhD programs in philosophy. He is primarily interested in practical philosophy—philosophy of action, ethics, mind, metaphysics and the intersection of these fields—as well as central figures in the history of philosophy, especially Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. He is currently expanding his New Crop Prize winning paper (appearing in this journal pp.1-14) and plans on making a revised version available online in early 2012. Chuck believes that philosophy is a humble and resolute posture in which we stand firm, choosing not to flee from the difficult questions that originate in our nature as beings that give rise to our own action and understanding. He welcomes any questions, comments or requests for the revised paper; please feel free to e-mail him: cgoldhaber@gmail.com.

Mi-Mi Saunders is currently teaching English as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Cape Verde, an archipelago off the West coast of Africa. She graduated with a B.A. in philosophy in 2011 from UC Berkeley. Her philosophical topics of interest are Rawlsian political philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, existentialism, and epistemology.

Daniel Sharp is a philosophy and interdisciplinary studies double major at Berkeley, originally from Houston, Texas. Although he is broadly interested wide gambit of philosophical questions, his research attempts to satisfactorily address at one question from a variety of paths: namely, who are we, what sorts of beings are we, and how can we make sense of ourselves at this current moment in our history? He finds himself pulled towards a historical-critical mode of inquiry, exemplified by the work of Michel Foucault, and his current research focuses on the significance of the concept of neuroplasticity as a manner of understanding the self in the contemporary Western world. He welcomes feedback and questions of all forms: sharpdaniele@gmail.com.

Nader Shoaibi is a senior undergraduate at Cal. He is currently looking to apply to graduate school in philosophy. Besides moral philosophy, Nader’s interests lie in epistemology and history of philosophy. He is an amateur squash player, and enjoys eating out frequently.
Alex graduated from Berkeley in May 2011, receiving the Departmental Citation for the Philosophy Department. His philosophical interests include ethical theory, applied ethics and legal philosophy. He is currently taking a year off before starting law school in August 2012.