

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### PERFECTIONISM AND HEDONISM

ROGER CRISP

I have admired and learned from Robin Attfield and his work since my days as a graduate student in the 1980s. Philosophical insight, quickness of thought, open-mindedness, and generosity are paradigmatic virtues of a professional philosopher, and Attfield possesses these, and others, in abundance. He was kind enough to examine my doctoral thesis on ideal utilitarianism in Oxford in 1988, along with Sir Geoffrey Warnock. I shall never forget the look of wonder on Sir Geoffrey's face as Attfield and I, in discussing one of Derek Parfit's thought experiments about future generations, earnestly debated whether chimpanzees could appreciate muzak. It is a pleasure and a privilege to be asked to contribute to this volume in his honour.

Attfield has developed a world view in which his ethics is situated, and I am sympathetic to several components of both, including his broadly consequentialist outlook and his cognitivism. I am more inclined towards non-naturalism than he is, since naturalism—understood as the view that the world should be understood to serve as the subject only of those properties essentially predicated of it in natural scientific explanations—seems to me to strip the world of the kind of normativity underlying the kind of cognitivism and consequentialism Attfield finds plausible. But I suspect that our differences here may be only apparent, and that Attfield may be working with a broader account of naturalism that would allow for the kinds of evaluative and normative property I prefer to characterize as non-natural. But there is one issue on which we do clearly disagree, and on which my views have over the years moved further from Attfield's: the good, and in particular the “good for”, understood as equivalent to “flourishing” or “well-being” and as what underlies the moral standing or considerability of any being in possession of it.

According to Attfield, the common restriction of moral standing to sentient creatures in the western tradition is unjustified (Attfield 1995, 20-

21; all unattributed references in the text are to this book). This is because non-sentient beings have a good of their own and can “flourish after [their] own kind”. The reference to “kind” here brings out Attfield’s *perfectionism*, according to which the good of any being consists in its “perfecting” those essential qualities that make it the kind of being it is:

One of the elements present in the flourishing of members of a species ... consists in the development of those potentials in the absence of which from most of its members a species would not be recognizable as the species it actually is in our world, rather as creatures otherwise resembling pigs but equipped to fly rather than to walk and trot would neither be recognizable as pigs nor *be* pigs. (48)

As Attfield notes, perfectionism underlies Aristotle’s position, and the question of how to define a being’s *ergon* (“function” or “characteristic activity”) was as difficult for him as those of what a species is or how to draw the boundaries of species are for us. Now the pig is in fact not usually seen as a species at all, but a genus. Imagine that the flying animals Attfield imagines here could mate with ordinary, terrestrial pigs, to produce flying offspring. I suspect we might well be tempted to conclude that the flying animals were indeed a species of pig. But imagine now that they could not interbreed, and that the flying pigs (which we must presume have legs and toes, since they do, according to Attfield, resemble the pigs we know) had an odd number of toes. That would put the flying animals into a completely different order of mammals from cloven-hoofed pigs, sheep, and so on. At this stage of zoological classification, however, it might seem that we have moved some distance from the idea of flourishing (do we really need one account of flourishing for the even-toed ungulates, and another for the odd-toed?), and I shall suggest below that this is indeed the case.

The “potentials” Attfield has in mind in the quotation above are *essential capacities*, viz., those capacities which are essential to the identity of any particular species. These may, of course, include capacities which are not *distinctive* of the species in question, but are shared across others, perhaps many other, species (49).

Also important here, according to Attfield, is that, properly to constitute flourishing, the development of essential capacities should be “harmonious” (53-4). How are we to understand the idea of “harmony” here? On one conception, it is purely aesthetic—a combination of elements which is pleasing to an appropriately sensitive observer. But this seems to me to introduce an *unharmonious* aspect into an otherwise zoologically-based perfectionist theory! On another conception, the

harmony is to be understood in terms of the relation of the capacities to one another. So the development of capacities as a whole could be said to be unharmonious to the extent that the development of one capacity hinders the development of another (so in the case of a flying pig, for example, time spent flying could stunt the growth of the muscles required for terrestrial ambulation). But here harmony does not in itself contribute to flourishing. Flourishing consists only in the development of essential capacities, and disharmony is merely an impediment to that.

What, then, does human flourishing consist in? At its most basic level, physical health, including the capacities for growth and self-motion (38-9, 75). At a higher level, the exercise of the senses (55), and mental sanity, including responsibility for one's attitudes and actions, as well as practical rationality, memory, and the emotions (56), meaningful work (57-9), autonomy (63), self-respect (65), aesthetic appreciation (67), and friendship (67-8), and self-creation (68).

Attfield's view of what is "good for" beings is unusual in contemporary ethics, which is dominated by desire theories of well-being and objective list theories which do not include "lower-level" capacities shared with plants (see Parfit 1984, appendix I). Attfield also disagrees, of course, with philosophical hedonists, and I shall come to that view later in this paper. What are Attfield's main arguments for extending moral standing to non-sentient, living beings? He suggests that drawing the line at sentience conflicts with some quite common intuitions, such as those of John Rodman:

I need only to stand in the middle of a clear-cut forest, a strip-mined hillside, a defoliated jungle, or a dammed canyon to feel uneasy with assumptions that could yield the conclusion that no human action can make any difference to the welfare of anything but sentient animals. (Rodman 1977, 89; quoted at 20)

Most people would also accept the argument—which we might call the "last person argument"—that it would be wrong for the last person on earth to cut down a tree for no good reason (21-2) (see Routley 1973; also Attfield's discussion of the Moorean "two worlds" case, at 22).

There is also some confusion about the notion of flourishing (21). If we allow that plants can flourish, we do not have to accept that cars can too, since talk about what is good for cars can be reduced to talk about what is good for their owners. This is not the case with, say, trees, and indeed their interests can conflict with those of sentient beings, as when they grow so as to obstruct footpaths.

Now, as far as intuitions go, they can equally be marshalled in favour of the sentience criterion. Consider the following from Jonathan Glover:

If, travelling in a train through the middle of a ten-mile railway tunnel, I saw a man leaning out of the window into the darkness, I might wonder what he was doing. If it turned out to be G.E. Moore spraying the walls of the tunnel with paints, because painted walls are better than unpainted ones, even if no one ever sees them, I should not be able to prove him irrational. But I should not accept his offer of the use of a second paint spray, except possibly out of politeness. (Glover 1984, 110)

How should we proceed in philosophy when fundamental intuitions conflict in this way? According to Henry Sidgwick:

Since it is implied in the very notion of Truth that it is essentially the same for all minds, the denial by another of a proposition that I have affirmed has a tendency to impair my confidence in its validity ... And it will easily be seen that the absence of ... disagreement must remain an indispensable negative condition of the certainty of our beliefs. For if I find any of my judgments ... in direct conflict with a judgment of some other mind, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two judgments necessarily reduces me temporarily to a state of neutrality. And though the total result in my mind is not exactly suspense of judgment, but an alternation and conflict between positive affirmation by one act of thought and the neutrality that is the result of another, it is obviously something very different from scientific certitude. (Sidgwick 1907, 342)

I can see a strong case for the view that, in the stand-off between Attfield and Glover here, we should suspend judgement. But on reflection I cannot help but find the sentience view more plausible than Attfield's more encompassing position, and I do think that there may be a case for suspecting error in his position. This is because there is an explanation available for the intuitions underlying his view—an explanation which as a consequentialist he should be sympathetic towards, and which throws doubt on those very intuitions. Plants are invaluable for human beings. Without them, we could not exist, since they contribute essential elements to our environment and our health. We gain great enjoyment from eating them and in some cases from contemplating them. So it is easy to see how a group of beings that placed special value on plants might do better than a group which did not and was prepared to sacrifice them for any short-term benefit. An account of cultural evolution, in other words, may have the resources to debunk the intuitions underlying Attfield's perfectionism.

But there are anyway other problems with the position. First, the same sort of problem arises for Attfield's position as for Aristotle's in the equation of well-being with flourishing as a member of a species (see Glassen 1957). We may accept that some plant is an outstanding example of its kind, and is in that sense "good". But the question remains whether being like that is good *for* the plant. There are further intuitions to which we might appeal in support of sentience here. Let me adapt an example from a book of mine on J.S. Mill:

You are a soul in heaven waiting to be allocated a life on Earth. It is late Friday afternoon, and you watch anxiously as the supply of available lives dwindles. When your turn comes, the angel in charge offers you a choice between two lives, that of an oyster, or that of a plant. The oyster's life will consist only of mild sensual pleasure, rather like that experienced by humans when floating very drunk in a warm bath. When you request the life of the oyster, the angel sighs, 'I'll never get rid of this plant's life. It's been hanging around for ages. Look, I'll offer you a special deal. The oyster's life will last ten years. But I'll make the plant's life as long as you like'. (Adapted from Crisp 1997, 24)

Now I accept that there are some difficulties here in understanding what it would be *for me* to live the life of a plant, or indeed an oyster. But all we need to grasp here is the idea of *what it would be like* to live the life of an oyster (rather pleasant) and that of a plant (nothing at all). Many will feel, when confronted with this example, that there is *nothing* to be said, in terms of well-being, for the life of the plant, however long it is.

There are also concerns about the language of flourishing extending beyond that of individual living members of species. Attfield may be right that talk of what is good for cars can be parsed into language referring to the interests only of their owners, and others. But it is far from clear to me that this can be done with, say, species themselves (24) or capitalism (27). These items flourish in ways quite similar to individual living beings: their lives begin at a certain point; they grow, develop, and change; they face certain threats, which they can overcome; they can die. I suggest that it is only appeal to the welfarist notion of what is "good for" some individual, resting on the conception of what it would be like to be such a being, that will enable us to rule out species and political systems as having moral standing, and this notion will then rule out individual plants as well.

I suggest also that there is a problem in the direction of analysis of perfectionist positions. According to the perfectionist, we should first seek an impartial, "value-free" account of a being's essential and species-specific nature. But there is a serious danger of the perfectionist allowing

her conception of well-being to guide her account of nature. Consider, for example, the remarkable number of perfectionist philosophers over the centuries (Aristotle among them) who have claimed that it is part of our nature to philosophize! This charge could be made against Attfield's position. It is as plausible to claim that human beings are characteristically inclined to rest and amusement as it is to claim that it is in their nature to engage in meaningful work; or that philistinism is typical of human beings as that it is in their nature to engage in aesthetic appreciation. Even if these accusations do not stick, we can still imagine beings *just like us* except that they are characteristically lazy and vulgar (though they have the capacity to accomplish great things and admire great works of art and nature). Why should we think their good depends in the slightest on their fulfilling their nature? Further, just as it is one of our capacities to grow, so it is also true that we all have the capacity to age and die. These are as irrelevant to our well-being as are growth, birth, and life, considered in themselves.

Let me now turn to hedonism, which is in a way at the very opposite end of the spectrum of views of flourishing and well-being from Attfield's. Not only will hedonists rule out physical health and other bodily capacities from well-being, but they will include every other component of the good listed by Attfield only in so far as they increase the pleasure or enjoyment, or diminish the pain or suffering, of the individual in question.

Here Attfield appeals to Robert Nozick's example of the "experience machine" (Nozick 1974, 42-5):

We are offered the opportunity of being wired up to a machine which gives those attached to it a series of exclusively enjoyable experiences, though in fact the experiences would be caused by stimulation of the brain, and the person having them would be passively floating in a tank. Given the chance to go on the Experience Machine for any substantial period of time, most people would refuse, disclosing that they value something other than enjoyable experiences. Their reason for this might lie in the value of autonomy, in the strong sense of the ability to act off your own bat, and for reasons of your own; and thus in the value of the exercise of practical reason, something which would be foreclosed by life on the Machine. Or the reason might lie in the loss of other powers, such as the ability to mould your own life. (38-9)

Partly because of the force of Nozick's example, hedonism suffered a dramatic decline in popularity during the twentieth century. In the remainder of this paper, I shall try to defend it against the experience machine objection, in the hope of persuading Attfield at least that hedonism cannot be dismissed as quickly as it usually is by reference to Nozick (see also Crisp 2006, 117-125).

Let us take as our example that of someone (let's call them P) *actually* writing a great novel, autonomously and through the exercise of practical reason, as compared with someone else (Q) who is wired up to an experience machine and merely has P's experiences "played back" to her. The first point to note is that accomplishing some goal of this kind is often, both in process and in outcome, hugely enjoyable for the person concerned. Indeed, most of the alleged goods cited by non-hedonists do tend to be things we usually enjoy. It would be considerably more worrying for the hedonist if certain items were considered components of well-being though entirely independent of pleasurable experience. Relatedly, we should remember that aspect of human psychology which underlies the so-called "paradox of hedonism". Someone who strongly believes in the non-instrumental value of accomplishment may well be more strongly motivated to pursue such a goal than a person who accepts hedonism. Thus we can see that, over time, cultural evolution may have led human beings to develop evaluative dispositions and understandings of goods which, though in terms of their content they are non-hedonistic, are in fact based on their capacity for promoting pleasure and enjoyment. How might this have happened? One likely source for important components of our value systems is the Stone Age of the hunter gatherers in Europe, Asia, and Africa, which ended as recently as 4000 BCE. Those who achieved more in the field—who brought back bigger bags of food—would almost without doubt have been offered esteem and status within the group. Similar accounts could be told of those who showed autonomous initiative, perhaps.

A different line of argument runs in parallel with the case of the oyster and the plant discussed above. Consider the life of someone—let's call her R—whose life is very similar to that of P, except that all enjoyment (and suffering) has been stripped out. R also writes a great novel, perhaps motivated by a strong sense of aesthetic duty, but gets no enjoyment out of what she is doing, or the accolades she receives for her work. Unlike in the case of the plant, there is certainly here *something that it is like* to be R. But is this a life which is really *good for* her, as opposed perhaps to a life which well illustrates the development of certain important rational capacities often possessed by human beings (capacities the exercise of which is often enjoyed, but need not be)?

There are also concerns about perspective in the case of many non-hedonic values, including accomplishment and the exercise of autonomy. Perfectionist views tend to be somewhat anthropocentric, appealing to our views about what is significant in typical human lives. But, as Thomas Nagel puts it, "In seeing ourselves from outside we find it difficult to take

our lives seriously” (Nagel 1986, 214). P might consider her novel “from the point of view of the Universe”, perhaps, and see its significance dwindle before her eyes. Consider all the other novels that have been and will be written; consider all the other great works achieved by humanity; then compare all this to the universe itself, with all its beauty and profundity. Or imagine that we could all write as well as Tolstoy (see Nozick 1974, 241, 245). Our benchmark for achievement is arbitrary. Now it could be that these issues of perspective can satisfactorily be resolved. But they are problematic for proponents of non-hedonistic values, and not for hedonists (who make no claims about significance or value “from the point of view of the universe”). Similarly, free will poses serious difficulties for non-hedonists. The ascription of value to autonomy or accomplishment rests on the plausibility of the idea of free will. But both libertarian and compatibilist conceptions of freedom are notoriously problematic. Again, non-hedonists are obliged to provide a defence of free will, while hedonists are not (enjoyment is valuable whether we are free or not).

Robin Attfield’s work has advanced our understanding of many of the key questions in moral philosophy. In this paper, I hope to have shown that his own answer to one of these questions—concerning the scope of moral standing and the idea of “good for”—faces certain objections, and that a more traditional hedonist answer to this question has more to be said for it than he and many others in contemporary philosophy are inclined to believe. I can think of no better words to end with than those with which Attfield concludes the ‘Introduction’ to *Value, Obligation, and Meta-ethics*:

In the end... such beliefs must each depend on their own grounds, and works of philosophy must stand or fall by their arguments. I am content for the current study to be judged on this basis.

## References

- Attfield, R., 1987, *A Theory of Value and Obligation* (London, New York, and Sydney: Croom Helm).
- , 1995, *Value, Obligation, and Meta-ethics* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi). This book is a development of *A Theory of Value and Obligation*.
- Crisp, R., 1997, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London: Routledge).
- , 2006, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Glassen, P., 1957, ‘A Fallacy in Aristotle’s Argument about the Good’, *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 29, 319-22.



- Glover, J., 1984, *What Sort of People Should There Be?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Nagel, T., 1986, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Nozick, R., 1974, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- Parfit, D., 1984, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Rodman, R., 1977, 'The Liberation of Nature', *Inquiry* 20, 83-145.
- Routley, R., 1973, 'Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?', *Proc. of the 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Philosophy*, Varna, Bulgaria: XVth World Congress of Philosophy, 205-10.
- Sidgwick, H., 1907, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: Macmillan).