

## CHAPTER NINE

### REPLY TO ROGER CRISP

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Roger Crisp's acknowledgement of my work can gladly be reciprocated, as I too have greatly benefited from his work. Indeed we may agree more widely than seemed the case, as I am a naturalist not in the sense that he rejects near the start of his paper, but in a sense with which he, as a cognitivist, could well sympathise. (See *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics*, 1995 (hereafter VOME), 208-253.)

His paper, however, concerns hedonism and perfectionism, a term used here of theories of the good that relate to the development of capacities (and not in the different sense employed by Derek Parfit: see VOME, 170). As Crisp says, my variety relates to the development of essential capacities (in the sense of "essential" that he presents). But it does not, as he suggests, relate to "perfecting" these essential capacities, as opposed to developing them. My position should not be construed as involving perfectionism in the ordinary sense of the term, about the avoidance of which seminars are these days run by University managements.

Around here, Crisp asks whether we need different accounts of the flourishing of similar creatures that happen to belong to different species, differing in the number of toes they have (his example). Here I would say "yes" if the different number of toes is matched by any difference of essential capacities, such as differences in speed of running or adeptness at climbing or rooting or sure-footedness, for these differences correspond to the availability of different skills or competences, and thus flourishings of different kinds. (More could be said about the relation of essential capacities and flourishing to species boundaries, but this is not the place to do so.)

Crisp problematises my requirement for a creature's flourishing that the development of essential capacities be harmonious (VOME, 53-54). Of his suggested interpretations, I clearly did not intend the first (a combination of elements which is pleasing to an appropriately sensitive

observer). His second suggestion is better on target: “unharmonious” capacity-development would here involve the development of one capacity hindering that of another by taking away time that could have been spent on its development; but as he says, harmony in this sense does not add to flourishing independently of the actual development of the various capacities. Yet this would not be the case if unharmonious (or disharmonious) capacity-development involved the development of one capacity taking a form that actually frustrated or prevented the development of another (or of others), as when the development of someone’s gustatory capacities produces obesity which prevents the development of athletic ones; by contrast with this, harmonious capacity-development would involve the development of each capacity taking a form consonant with the that of (at least most of) the others. In this sense, harmoniousness would contribute to flourishing. So I continue to think that this criterion of flourishing has a useful role.

Crisp now tackles my case for recognising the moral standing of all living creatures (which ties in with their good turning on the development of their essential capacities), and reports some of the thought-experiments that support this view (but omits others such as that of Donald Scherer (VOME, 23, not to mention the analogical argument mentioned on the same page and on p. 20). He then quotes an amusing passage from Jonathan Glover, representing it as supporting intuitions conflicting with mine. But there is no conflict here at all; I can readily agree with Glover that painted but unseen railway tunnels are not intrinsically better than unpainted unseen railway tunnels. (My view of aesthetic value is given at VOME, 22.) Almost certainly Glover (with his mind-dependent theory of value: see VOME, 21) would disagree with Routley, Goodpaster, Scherer and me at some stage, as generally would sentientists; but where intuitions are concerned, the examples cited in Crisp’s essay are either supportive of my view or, like the one from Glover, neutral.

However, Crisp now supplies an evolutionary argument to explain the intuitions about plants that support my view, suggesting that such “an account of cultural evolution... may have the resources to debunk the intuitions underlying Attfield’s perfectionism”. But an account like this of how people could have begun recognising instrumental or inherent value in trees does not serve to debunk current beliefs in trees having intrinsic value. (The concept of inherent value is explained in *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*, 1983 and 1991, at pp. 151-2.) One problem is that entirely different kinds of value are concerned. But another is that quite generally evolutionary accounts of tendencies to adopt beliefs fail to debunk those beliefs. A good example is our hypothetical Hypersensitive

Agency Detection Device, which inclines us to interpret ambiguous evidence as involving the presence of an agent, and would probably have been adaptive in saving us from hidden predators and assailants. This device is sometimes adduced as explaining the prevalence of religious belief, and undermining it at the same time. But a range of scholars have recently recognised that the soundness of the HADD hypothesis is fully compatible with the truth of (at least some of) the religious beliefs that some theorists take it to debunk (see Schloss and Murray, 2009); explaining the origins of a belief often fails to explain it away. (Indeed if things were otherwise, it would be open to hedonism's opponents to retaliate by supplying an evolutionary account of intuitions supportive of hedonism, in case that served to undermine people's tendency to uphold it; but actually such a move would be equally inconclusive.)

Crisp now directs attention to problems about whether my account of flourishing works with what is *good for* (say) a plant. My view is that for a plant, growing is far better than languishing from lack of nutrition or being stunted by injury or disease. Here Crisp replies that there is nothing which it is like to be a plant, because of plants' lack of consciousness, and that for this reason no one would choose the life of a plant (as opposed, even, to the life of an oyster). But these facts have no tendency to show that plants lack moral considerability. The fact that plants lack a perspective does not mean that they lack interests, cannot be injured, harmed, benefited or cured of diseases, nor alternatively that their interests are derivative interests rather than their having a good of their own. This being so, the arguments for their moral considerability (such as Routley's, Goodpaster's or mine) have good grounds to which to appeal. The more demanding sense of the phrase "good for" (meaning something like "good from the perspective of a conscious creature") needs to be carefully distinguished from its less demanding sense (meaning something like "beneficial to something with a good of its own, whether conscious or not"). So people's readiness to ask what is good for a creature, askable because of the second sense, should not be side-tracked by the requirements of the first sense, or the majority of living creatures will be disqualified from moral considerability through nothing but an equivocation. Otherwise we are driven to Glover's "mind-dependent theory of value" (see VOME, p. 21), unnecessarily and prematurely.

Problems are now raised about why the language of flourishing does not apply to species and to capitalism, entities which, like individual creatures, grow, change, face threats and either overcome them or die. However, I have explained at VOME, p.24, how we can sometimes speak of a species faring well or flourishing because we have in mind the

flourishing of its current population, the members of which have the capacities needed for flourishing, and perhaps the same applies to capitalism (at a strenuous pinch). Besides, the extinction of a species deprives possible future members of existence, as well as of flourishing, and thus harms the species (concretely conceived), while damage to capitalism (again concretely conceived) similarly spells harm to coming generations unless it is replaced with a better system, which means that capitalist societies can be harmed. But construed as abstract collections or systems, neither species nor systems have either interests or the inbuilt capacities needed for flourishing. Thus we can rule them out as having moral standing without having to rule out individual creatures at the same time.

Crisp now brings to attention the perfectionist's procedural requirement to seek an independent and impartial account of a being's essential capacities, and the way in which their conception of flourishing could possibly bias (or even distort) such an account. Aristotle's argument supplies an example of such a distortion; but Aristotle's reasoning, as W.F.R. Hardie has shown, went wrong because he was looking for distinctive as opposed to essential capacities, and because he forgot about his own criterion of self-sufficiency (and thus inclusiveness) for a conception of the good, and required instead the development of whichever capacities were "highest and most god-like" (Hardie, 1968). This is how he reached his conception of the good life as one of philosophizing; his conclusion is finally reached through abandoning the search for an inclusive account of human good.

The same charge is now tried out against my own position. "It is as plausible," he writes, "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". This remark is initially off target because I make no claims about human inclinations as opposed to human capacities. What the objection should rather claim is that they have essential capacities for seeking rest and amusement; and with these claims I can happily go along, without my claims about meaningful work needing to be discarded. His next example is philistinism, which I take to mean failure to develop aesthetic capacities (although it sometimes instead means exercising them in ways disdained by the utterer); but it is no problem for a perfectionist that people often fail to develop essential capacities, and to fulfil their nature thereby.

Yet why, he goes on to ask, should characteristically lazy and vulgar beings (otherwise like us), who also have capacities for accomplishments and aesthetic appreciation, be expected to fulfil their nature (presumably

as lazy and vulgar people)? I can get no clear handle here on what is here being imagined, but if, on the one hand, these creatures have paired sets of conflicting tendencies in their nature, then their good would surely have to involve some blended embodiment of them; whereas if they really have essential capacities for facile art and facile judgements (rather than for significant aesthetic achievement and appreciation), as perhaps some mammalian non-human species may be held to do, then their flourishing would surely include developing the active capacities that they actually have, rather than in inactivity. However, their description makes them sound more like something different again: human beings with inbuilt capacities similar to our own, but brought up in a lazy culture; and the flourishing of people such as these would be no different from our own, the main difference lying in the need to overcome the pull of that culture on the way to such flourishing.

The following challenge is the really interesting one, grounded in the pervasive human capacities to age and to die. Here I need to make a distinction between active and passive capacities. For the capacities to age with self-respect (if one reaches a sufficient age) and to face death with fortitude are plausibly essential active human capacities, the development of which genuinely contributes to human flourishing and well-being. However, passive capacities, including essential ones, such as undergoing suffering and death, are not ones the development of which makes or could make such a contribution. For suffering and dying are not in themselves actions (any more than ailing or being injured are), and thus cannot be actively developed; indeed vulnerabilities are often distinguished from (active) capacities. Perfectionism from Aristotle onwards has been concerned with (active) capacities rather than with vulnerabilities, and that, in my view, is what modern perfectionists need to make central in their theories. I am grateful to Crisp for being pressed to present this clarification.

Beyond this point, Crisp turns to a defence of hedonism. One of the arguments presented here turns on the suggestion that the things people now value were originally valued because they were enjoyable, or because of the pleasure involved. I have already pointed out that such evolutionary narratives have little bearing on what is valuable in the present. Another problem with this approach is that it is implausible that everything was originally desired for the sake of the pleasure that it would bring, and that nothing was originally considered desirable for its own sake (not even one's health, or one's making decisions independently or for oneself). (Both Joseph Butler and David Hume made this same point long ago.) It is also highly implausible that people in the present are under an illusion

when they regard accomplishment or autonomy as intrinsically desirable, and do so only because these goods were originally associated with pleasure, but have somehow become regarded as intrinsic goals by association or by mistake.

Crisp's own thought-experiment may allow us to reach a relevant judgement. We are invited to consider the contrasting cases of P, who actually writes a great novel and enjoys doing so, Q, who is on an experience machine and has P's experiences presented to her as if her own, and R, who also writes a great novel but fails to enjoy doing so. Here the hedonist, as well as claiming that if P's experience is better than Q's this is because of additional pleasures, needs to deny that what R achieves is good for her at all. One problem here is that in Nozick's experience-machine thought-experiment, Q is supposed to have exactly the same pleasures as P, and that because of this the hedonist has no reason to regard P's experiences as superior; it is not clear to me that Crisp has successfully tackled this problem. Be that as it may, I think that most people would say that R's well-being or flourishing has genuinely been furthered by R's writing the novel, despite R's complete lack of enjoyment. This could well be because developing one's capacities and fulfilling one's life-goals are valuable even in the absence of pleasure or happiness at doing so, even though pleasure and happiness enhance well-being if they are present as well.

In his penultimate paragraph, Crisp adds two further points. One is that perfectionist views tend (because of problems of perspective) to be anthropocentric, appealing to "our views about what is significant in human lives", and can even come to appear to their holders as arbitrary. But even if this is a feature of some perfectionism, it is hardly so of mine. For example, I recently contributed an address entitled 'Beyond Anthropocentrism' to the Royal Institute of Philosophy series on 'Environment' (forthcoming in the Royal Institute series volume), and have long stressed the shortcomings of anthropocentrism (in various writings) (Attfield 1991; Attfield, 1995; Attfield 2003). Besides, my stances about moral standing and about the intrinsic value of the development of essential capacities go well enough together to give this overall position some degree of stability, implying as it does an account of human well-being that includes health (whether or not the person concerned is aware of it), in parallel to its account of the flourishing of plants (without the least hint of any awareness of their part). Certainly sentientism and hedonism could also be held to go together, but sentientism does not demand hedonism (as it can instead be accompanied by, for example, belief in the intrinsic value of autonomy) in anything like

the way that biocentrism (my own stance about the scope of moral standing) virtually requires the adoption of perfectionism.

The other new point of Crisp's penultimate paragraph is the supposed problem of free-will for non-hedonists. For one thing, "both libertarian and compatibilist conceptions of freedom are notoriously problematic". But they are problematic (if at all) mainly because they are each thought vulnerable to the other, in which case at least one of them would seem probably to be defensible after all. Besides, few are the defenders of hard determinism (the only remaining possibility, if libertarianism and soft determinism have to be passed over, but one that can hardly be reconciled either with moral responsibility or with the existence of capacities for choice and for self-determination). Yet Crisp seems to leave himself no other option but this one. Thus despite his view that hedonists are not obliged to provide a defence of free will, he seems committed to occupying a position far more exposed than the disjunction of compatibilism and libertarianism. (It is hard to see how any philosopher is exempted from holding one or other position from among libertarianism, soft or compatibilist determinism and hard determinism.) Fortunately there are some capable defences available for libertarianism (Wiggins, 1987; Lucas, 1970; Ward, 2004), the stance that in my view goes best with my account of the intrinsic value of autonomy and of the development of the essential human capacities for choice and self-determination.

So I am afraid that Crisp does not persuade me of the merits of hedonism or sentientism, or of departing from adherence to perfectionism and biocentric consequentialism.

## References

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