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Consequentialism, Part II

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Finite Beings, Finite Goods: The Semantics, Metaphysics and Ethics of Naturalist Consequentialism, Part II

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3. Adams on Counterfactual Accounts of Well-Being.

3.0. *Well-being as a Challenge to Naturalism.* In Chapter Three Adams discusses and criticizes those accounts of a person's well being which characterize it in terms of counterfactuals regarding (idealizations of) her actual desires and preferences. These criticisms are important for the question of ethical naturalism because any plausible naturalist position will have to portray a person's well-being as *somehow or other* supervening on features of her psychology and her environment. The sorts of analyses Adams criticizes are the most prominent analyses consistent with this constraint, so it is important to see whether or not Adams' criticisms of them undermine the prospects for ethical naturalism generally.

As it happens, I agree that analyses of the sort Adams criticizes don't work, so this is another case in which I believe that he has raised crucial questions for the ethical naturalist. I do not have a fully worked out alternative naturalist account of well-being. Instead, I'll sketch the direction in which I believe such an account should be developed. I'll begin with a distinction which will prove important.

3.1. *Two Kinds of Dispositional Properties and the Semantics of Anti-Reductionism.* I'll assume that the properties and relations which are involved in our understanding someone's well-being—like the property of being a constituent of her well-being, or the (relational) property which obtains between two outcomes when the first is more conducive to her well-being than the second—are all complex (perhaps higher-order) dispositional properties of some sort. This follows from the assumption that they are all natural properties, if the analysis of natural kinds and properties I have offered here is right; it follows as well from Shoemaker's (1980) analysis of properties; and it seems consonant with the main strategies for the analysis of well-being deployed in the naturalist tradition.

Interestingly, dispositional properties seem to fall into two distinct categories: *force-like* and *algorithm-like*. A force-like property is like the property which an object has if it is being acted on by a *particular sort* of force (say an electromagnetic force) of a given magnitude. Such a dispositional property can be accurately defined in terms of the response of the object in question under a *single* (perhaps counterfactual) condition. In the case of forces we have the following: The total force of sort *S* operating on object *o* has magnitude *M*, just in case *o* would exhibit acceleration M/m , where *m* is *o*'s mass, *if no forces other than those of sort S operated on o*. Force-like dispositional properties thus have *single-case* counterfactual definitions.

By contrast, algorithm-like properties are like the property of being an instantiation in hardware of some particular computer algorithm. There is no single test-condition, even a counterfactual one, which defines such a property. Instead, an object exhibits an algorithm-like property in virtue of its (actually and counterfactually) exhibiting the appropriate responses to a wide variety of different conditions. Algorithm-like dispositional properties thus lack single-case counterfactual definitions.

The distinction between these two sorts of dispositional properties will be familiar from discussions of behaviorist vs. functionalist analyses of mental states. The standard (and correct) functionalist criticism of behaviorist analyses is that they mistakenly treat mental states as force-like rather than as algorithm-like.

Ordinarily, when a dispositional property lacks a single-case counterfactual definition, it will lack a reductive definition as well: it will not be possible to define the property without reference to properties in the same ontological category. This point is illustrated by the transition between behaviorist and functionalist conceptions of mind. Recall that the behaviorist conception of mental states was part of an anti-metaphysical reductionist project which was a curious admixture of, on the one hand, a verificationist rejection of metaphysics altogether and, on the other hand, a reductionist materialist metaphysics of mind. The behaviorist conception that each mental state had an analytic "operational definition" in terms of physical behaviors could be interpreted *either* as a component in the reductive "elimination of metaphysics" by "rational reconstruction" (in which case the important fact about physical behaviors is their observability) *or* as a component in a reductive "physicalist" treatment of all empirical phenomena (in which case the important fact about physical behaviors is that they are physical).

The move to functionalism undermines each of these reductionist projects. First, since the functional definitions of mental states quantify over other mental states, no elimination of metaphysics is accomplished. Second, since the functional definitions are not framed in physical language, a *reductionist*

materialist treatment of them is impossible. If the functionalist is to be a materialist, she must advocate a non-reductionist version of materialism.

Finally, if the functionalism involved is what Block (1980) calls “psycho-functionalism,” the version according to which the functional definitions of mental states are non-analytic, an additional blow is dealt to the anti-metaphysical reductionist project of the behaviorist. The general verificationist strategy reflected in many defenses of behaviorism involves the replacement of apparently metaphysical issues about mental states with issues about their (alleged) reductive analytic definitions. Psychofunctionalism denies that mental states have *analytic* definitions of any sort.

3.2. *Reductionism, Anti-Reductionism, and the “Naturalistic” Approach to Semantics.* It is important for our purposes to see that, in an important sense, “naturalistic” approaches to the semantics of scientific (and moral, and theological,...) terms represent a generalization of, and a foundation for, the sort of non-reductionist approach to metaphysical questions of which psychofunctionalism is an example.

According to “naturalistic” approaches, the referent of a scientific (moral, theological,...) term is defined by the properties necessary to underwrite a particular causal (or quasi-causal) role associated with the use of that term. On the conception I defend and, I think, on Adams’ conception as well, the relevant role is not fully specifiable *a priori*, nor is it an *a priori* question whether anything fulfills the role in question, or what properties underwrite its fulfillment when it is fulfilled. So naturalistic conceptions of reference share with psychofunctionalist conceptions of the referential semantics of mental terms a rejection of analytic definitions for the terms in question.

There is a deeper similarity. Ordinarily (although this is not demonstrable *a priori*) the role associated with a (scientific, moral, theological, ...) term will involve inferential connections to lots of other terms associated with it in the same body of discourse. So, the defining nature associated with a term will ordinarily be specified in terms of a role which is *itself* specified by the relation between the term’s referent and the referents of those other terms. There is thus ordinarily no prospect for turning the definitions provided by a naturalistic account of reference for terms within a domain into a *reductionist* treatment of the discourse within that domain, one which eliminates reference to its apparent subject matter.

This is evident in the case of forces discussed above. We can, indeed, provide a counterfactual definition, even a single-case counterfactual definition, for the predicate “is operated on by a net electromagnetic force of magnitude, M,” but that definition refers to the general category of *sorts of forces* in specifying the relevant test conditions. No metaphysical commitment to forces or to kinds of force is avoided.

Even when the family of properties which constitutes the definition of a term is somehow specifiable without reference to other terms in the domain in question, the scientific (or philosophical, or ethical, or theological) justification for identifying it *as* its definition will ordinarily involve reference to (the referents of) the other terms in the relevant body of discourse, so the identification of the definition cannot be part of a reductionist project, whatever form a specification of the definition might take. This is, of course, made explicit in the account of reference and kinds I offer here.

Similarly, there is ordinarily no prospect for turning the naturalistic definition in question into a single-case counterfactual definition, since ordinarily the complex causal/quasicausal relations which define the relevant inferential/explanatory role will not be capturable by reference to a single sort of test condition.

Thus the application of “naturalistic” approaches to reference (and to the natures of things) within a domain of discourse is associated with a realist, and at least *prima facie* a nonreductionist conception of that discourse and, again *prima facie*, with an algorithm-like conception of the relevant “natural” definitions. This is a point which Adams makes very clear in his first chapter where he explores the relation between semantic theories and metaethics, and where he emphasizes (especially on pages 35 and 36) that the defining natures of moral items sought by a realistic moral theory need not be non-circular, since they are not offered as introducing definitions but as accounts of the natures of things presumed to exist.

What I want to suggest is that just this insight about natural definitions, which Adams rightly emphasizes, provides the resources for an adequate naturalist (in the ontological sense) treatment of the notion of a person’s well-being.

3.3. *Counterfactual Analyses as Reductive.* Consider again counterfactual analyses of a person’s well-being which define that notion (or some closely related notion) in terms of the choices or preferences which the person would exhibit under suitably idealized conditions. Such analyses treat well-being (or whatever—I’ll stick with well-being for the sake of argument) as force-like and, usually but not always, specify the idealized conditions in (what appear to be) non-moral terms. Thus such analyses are often reductionistic—they purport to define the morally relevant notion of well-being in terms which are less obviously central constituents of moral discourse.

There are reasons for this sort of approach of course. Some such analyses are *intended* to be reductive because they reflect the now (properly) unfashionable view that, in order to provide for a naturalistic understanding of moral properties, reductive definitions are required. Others reflect a concern for a practically manageable conception of well-being: a formula that could guide

actual moral judgments. Finally, attempts to define well-being reductively (that is: in largely non-moral terms) have often been motivated by important political concerns about the dangers of underwriting inappropriate paternalism in persons or institutions charged with protecting the well-being of others.

There is, of course, no reason why an ethical naturalist should be moved by these considerations in the light of the plausibility of non-force-like, non-reductionist, definitions of other related notions, and of the philosophical implications of naturalistic approaches to semantics. Moral terms need not possess reductive definitions in order to refer to natural kinds, properties, relations, etc. As lots of scientific examples show, in order for a term to be associated with reasonably manageable and fairly reliable criteria of application, it need not have a simple natural definition (species names in biology provide a good example). Finally, there is no reason why the correct solutions to political problems about the limits of paternalism need to be founded on an independently implausible metaphysics of well-being.

Thus,...

3.4. *A Non-Reductionist Proposal.* Of course, what I now propose is that the naturalist moral realist should think of the notion of a person's well-being, and related notions, as corresponding to natures determined according to the general account of kind definitions offered in section 2.3. The basic idea of that account is that the assignment of referents (and thus of natures) to terms within a body of discourse is to be understood, not as a piecemeal matter in which the referential semantics of each term is determined independently, but as a matter of assigning referents (and natures) to all (or most, in the cases where some of the terms fail to refer) of the terms used within the discourse so as to explain the practical and theoretical achievements within it. In the particular case of the terms used to describe aspects of well-being this would entail that the natures to which they refer could be characterized not only in terms of features of the psychology of the individuals whose well-being is at issue, but also in terms of the relation between well-being and other morally relevant phenomena like goodness, fairness, sympathy, justice,... in whatever combination is required by the task of explaining the achievements of moral practice. The reduction of well-being to (just) individual choices and preferences under suitably idealized counterfactual circumstances would no longer be part of the naturalist's philosophical project.

I don't propose to attempt a full-blown analysis here, only to indicate why non-reductive analyses of the sort indicated are the sort which a sophisticated naturalist should propose, and to indicate some advantages such analyses would have over the counterfactual analyses Adams rightly criticizes.

In the first place, of course, nonreductionist analyses need not appeal to counterfactuals with bizarrely counter-legal antecedents. There is no need, for

example, to employ counterfactuals about the choices persons (or their surrogates) would make under nomologically impossible idealized conditions, like possession of perfect information, or deployment of perfect reasoning skills. It will be informative to see how the role of such idealizations in standard counterfactual analyses would be played by more plausible considerations in a non-reductionist naturalist account.

First, a methodological digression: Recall that I differ with Adams' apparent position on the extent to which conceptual analysis can uncover the roles which the natures assigned to terms in a body of discourse must play. I emphasize that sometimes the achievements within a body of discourse can differ very significantly from what conceptual analysis would suggest. Still, beginning with the results of conceptual analysis can often be the right strategy for formulating hypotheses about the natures of the things we refer to. For the purposes of the present exercise, I'll adopt that strategy.

Returning now to the question of idealizations in counterfactual accounts, suppose that your conceptual analysis of the notion of well-being is such that it would lead you, were you to put forward a single-case counterfactual analysis, to make reference to the choices an agent would make if she had perfect information about relevant issues. How would the same concern be handled if you were instead to offer a non-reductive analysis of the sort we are considering here? What I suggest is that you would incorporate, into your preliminary hypothesis about the causal/explanatory role of well-being, assertions about the ways in which agents' judgments about their own well-being tend to be improved (in respect of accuracy) as they become better informed about (what your analysis takes to be) relevant facts.

Similarly, if you would be inclined, in offering a counterfactual analysis, to make reference to the choices the agent would make if she were not only fully informed, but also in a suitable state with respect to her self concept, you would include, in your tentative account of the role of well-being, assertions about the ways in which the reliability of judgments about one's well-being tend to be enhanced by the relevant sort of self concept, and compromised by its absence. You would, in general, recognize that the extreme idealizations built into typical counterfactual analyses of well-being are attempts to incorporate, into the single counterfactual condition of a force-like definition, qualifications corresponding to *all* of the logically possible ways in which someone can be wrong about her own interest, and *all* the logically possible ways in which her judgment can be improved.

Instead of thus formulating counterfactual conditions, some of which could not be met by anyone in any world remotely like our own, and others of which could be met by some agents only if they underwent almost unintelligible transformations in personality and character, you would incorporate the relevant epistemic claims about agents' knowledge about their own well-

being into the causal role which you tentatively assigned to well-being. You would eventually inquire whether or not there was a nature which (relevantly approximately) fit the role you identified and you would seek to learn more about that nature supposing that there is one.

Of course, this approach would involve abandoning one strategy for finding out about the nature of well-being, namely trying to evaluate the profoundly counterlegal counterfactuals with which you started. You would not, for example, try to glean some insight into the nature of human well-being by inquiring what a feeble-minded person with pathologically low self esteem would choose were he to be perfectly rational, to know all the relevant facts, and to be equipped with the ideal level of self-esteem. Given the borderline intelligibility of such a counterfactual, this methodological deficit would be no loss, and you could console yourself with the knowledge that even in the case of force-like phenomena (like forces) we are not ordinarily able to explore their natures, either experimentally or computationally, by anything like a direct application of their force-like definitions.

Another advantage of the non-reductionist approach we are considering concerns the moral relevance of the natures identified through analyses of well-being. One way in which proposed single-case counterfactual analyses have often been challenged has been the identification of possible circumstances under which the phenomenon they define does not have the properties which would underwrite moral inferences or conclusions regarding well-being in which we have considerable independent confidence. For the non-reductionist, there is no attempt to characterize well-being independently of the moral properties which we *prima facie* expect it to have: it is perfectly reasonable to *begin* with the (*tentative*) assumption that, among the roles the nature of well-being will play, will be the underwriting of (most of) our most secure moral judgements involving the notion of well-being. The non-reductionist will (as we have seen in section 2.3), in effect, seek simultaneous and interrelated definitions of a large family of moral notions of which well-being will be only one.

Now it is not *a priori* that any nature exists which plays the sort of explanatory role appropriate to the semantics of the expression “well-being,” nor is it *a priori* that if there is such a nature it will be natural rather than supernatural. Nevertheless, by adopting the sort of non-reductionist semantics which Adams himself rightly advocates, the naturalistic moral realist stands a reasonable chance of obtaining an analysis which avoids the weaknesses which Adams rightly recognizes in standard counterfactual analyses.

4. Adams Against Consequentialism.

4.0. *Critiques of Consequentialism as Critiques of Naturalism.* As I indicated earlier, Adams raises several important criticisms of consequentialism. They are interesting in their own right, but my primary concern with them here lies in the fact that I am concerned to defend ethical naturalism, and some version or other of consequentialism has seemed to many to be the best candidate for a non-debunking naturalistic conception of morality.

4.1. *Consequentialism and "Narrowly Moral Concerns."* Adams takes as one of his key targets the conception of morality with which he was brought up according to which "...the well-being of persons and the quality of personal relationships [are] its primary (and it sometimes seemed only) concerns (4)." He is concerned, for example, with the obvious ethical values of artistic and intellectual pursuits, which are not in obvious ways matters of valuing the well-being of others, and which he thinks the consequentialist will have a hard time accounting for.

As I have indicated, there is some apparent ambiguity in Adams' position. Some of the time his target seems to be just the position he calls "act consequentialism," whereas at other times he seems to have a broader target including what he calls "indirect consequentialism." I certainly agree that act consequentialism cannot account for the ethical status of artistic and intellectual pursuits but, for reasons I have offered earlier, I don't think that it is a serious candidate as a version of consequentialism.

Adams is not explicit about just what doctrines constitute indirect consequentialism. I assume that its relation to act consequentialism is approximately that of rule utilitarianism to act utilitarianism. I assume that indirect consequentialism directs us to lead the sorts of lives, develop the traits of character, and favor the sorts of social arrangements which can be expected to contribute to human flourishing and that the indirect consequentialist will consider norms to be moral norms just to the extent that they reflect that long-term concern for human flourishing.

What Adams says in Chapter 13 suggests that he may not think of indirect consequentialism as being vulnerable to the criticisms he has directed primarily against act consequentialism in the earlier chapters. Nevertheless, if anything worthy of being called "indirect consequentialism" is an adequate foundation for moral thought, then morality does, contrary to a central theme in Adams' book, have "...the well-being of persons and the quality of personal relationships" as its primary concerns. So, I assume that Adams' overall position is meant to challenge the capacity of indirect consequentialism to explain, for example, the moral standing of concerns for matters intellectual and artistic.

Of course, I think that at least the homeostatic property cluster version of indirect consequentialism (and, I would suppose, lots of other versions as well) can provide an at least *prima facie* adequate solution to the problem Adams raises. Indeed, I assume that any plausible version of indirect consequentialism can mimic the sorts of responses which a rule utilitarian would offer to the claim that utilitarianism requires that one devote all one's time to explicit attempts to optimize net happiness. In particular, I assume that an indirect consequentialist would base her defense of the moral appropriateness of intellectual and artistic concerns on such eminently plausible (but plainly *a posteriori*) claims as the following:

1. Under ordinary circumstances, it is not a psychological possibility for someone to effectively contribute to human flourishing by making that goal—or any other narrowly specified set of goals—her overriding aim. Participation in one's culture—including its artistic and intellectual aspects—is, ordinarily, part of the sort of life likely to make a contribution to human flourishing.

2. Moreover, *among* the effects of the development of the arts and sciences are the production of cultural products central to the enhancement of human flourishing. So, participating in the production of artistic and intellectual products *can* make a direct contribution to human flourishing.

3. Even participation as a consumer rather than as a producer in intellectual and artistic endeavors can enhance one's prospects for contribution to human flourishing because:

a. Such participation is usually itself a social activity which may make a, perhaps local, contribution to the flourishing of others, and

b. Even when the activity itself is conducted individually, appreciation of artistic or intellectual achievements is characteristically associated with an appreciation of others' achievements which is, in turn, *sometimes* associated with the sort of enhanced sympathy for others which can enhance someone's contributions to human flourishing,

c. *Sometimes* appreciation of intellectual or artistic achievements enhances one's understanding of others, or of oneself, or of one's environment, in such a way that one's capacity to contribute to human flourishing is enhanced,

d. *Sometimes* such appreciation makes a positive contribution to the development or sustenance of an appropriate moral personality or charac-

ter and thus contributes indirectly to one's capacity of contribute to human flourishing.

I don't mean to suggest that this list is complete or that I have chosen the very best sample items. I do want to insist on three quite general points about the proposed (indirect) consequentialist strategy. First, there is every prospect that some significant participation in some significant artistic and intellectual activities can be defended along these lines. Second, the qualifications which I have included in propositions on the list are crucial if the defense of intellectual and artistic concerns is to be plausible in the light of the very profound ideological role played in stratified societies by the arts, sciences, and letters. Finally, if no defense of some particular artistic or intellectual endeavor were possible along the lines indicated, then it would be perfectly reasonable (for a consequentialist *or anyone else*) to insist that, even if such an endeavor is morally permissible, it is not an important component of the (moral) good. Thus it is by no means clear that the moral naturalist, equipped with a plausible version of consequentialism, would have any trouble responding to the challenge we have been considering.

Three more concrete moral considerations regarding artistic and intellectual work will be important when we turn, in the next section, to the second of Adams' challenges to consequentialism. In the first place, given that artistic and intellectual pursuits, and even the enjoyment of the results of those pursuits, requires a certain level of leisure and of physical health, there certainly is a pressing moral question about such activities in a world where a huge number of people lack not only leisure but the basic necessities of food, housing and medical care.

Second, although those of us who produce and consume artistic or intellectual works are likely to be first struck by the question of how much of our time, effort and money should go towards those works, it is by no means clear—especially concerning our role as producers of art and culture—that this question is any more pressing morally, in the light of widespread poverty and inequality, than the question of what *sort of* art or intellectual work we should devote our efforts to producing (more on this below).

Finally, once we see the special seriousness of these and related questions *about the distribution of resources and of cultural products* it's not at all clear that adopting a consequentialist approach puts one at a moral disadvantage in investigating them. In fact, given the reasonable worry that we might underestimate our duty to address those questions in our own lives, it might well be that a rule *utilitarian* would be especially well equipped to appreciate the real issues, the serious weaknesses of utilitarianism notwithstanding. Whatever weaknesses consequentialism may have, it's unlikely that they are best illustrated by its applications to questions about artistic and intellectual endeavors.

4.2. *Consequentialism and the Fragmentation of the Good.* According to Adams, an advantage of his conception over ethical conceptions grounded in consequentialism, and thus in “narrowly moral concerns,” is that it avoids a fragmented conception of the good. A consequentialist conception, with an emphasis on issues about the welfare of persons, will have to see moral goods (so understood) as competing (with respect to motivation and with respect to rational choice) with *non*-moral aesthetic, intellectual (and other) goods. This is neither psychologically desirable nor metaphysically accurate. It underestimates the unity of the good in a way that Adams’ excellence-based theistic conception does not.

The basic response which I propose to offer on behalf of “indirect consequentialism” depends on the homeostatic property cluster formulation which I prefer, but its basic resources could be employed by someone who did not assign as important a semantic (and thus “nature” determining) role to property homeostasis as I do. Here is that response:

The unity which the various aspects and dimensions of the moral good enjoy is *causal unity*. That unity has two dimensions. One is psychological. We ordinarily find it possible to integrate desires for, and concerns about, the various dimensions of the good into a single moral personality incorporating a sympathy with and concern for others, and we do this, in large part, by weighing the importance of our less narrowly “moral” concerns in the light of our overall moral conceptions.

In doing so we are deceiving ourselves unless the morally relevant goods also enjoy significant *homeostatic unity*: unless instantiation or practice or implementation (depending on the nature of the particular good in question) by an individual of one of these goods will, *in an environment which embodies morally relevant homeostatic mechanisms*, tend to enhance the prospects for the enjoyment of the same and other goods by others as well as by the agent in question. Thus, to the extent that our social environment embodies homeostatic mechanisms of the right sort and strength, we need not always be deceiving ourselves when we achieve a psychological unity in our appreciation of the good.

Two points about this response should be made clear. Suppose that there is some good or other—excellence in some sort of endeavor, or in the products of some endeavor, let us suppose—such that participation in, or enjoyments of, it do not enter significantly into homeostatic unity with goods that are obviously central to human flourishing. In such a case the account I am offering of the unity of the moral good would treat it as not—or as only marginally—part of that good, even if it would be morally permissible to participate in or enjoy the good itself. It’s moral status might, for example, be like the moral status of the enjoyment of a particularly excellent variety of gum drop. Such enjoyment is ordinarily morally permissible, and it’s (mor-

ally speaking) *nice* that people who enjoy such gum drops get pleasure from them. Also, the fact that someone especially appreciates this sort of excellence may provide an opportunity for our display of the moral virtues of kindness and generosity through gifts of especially fine gum drops, but that's about it.

It seems to me that this diagnosis of the situation is exactly right and thus that it is no defect of the (homeostatic property cluster version of) indirect consequentialism that it does not underwrite a judgment of greater unity of the good in such cases.

The more important point concerns the role of homeostatic mechanisms in the social environment in establishing the unity of the good. In a very very (morally and metaphysically) important sense the unity of the good is *up to us*. Let's return to the vexing question of artistic and intellectual pursuits. We are rightly concerned about the moral status of artistic and intellectual work in a world in which so small a percentage of the population is able to participate in or enjoy them.

We recognize that artistic productions and the appreciation of them is an important component of human flourishing *for those who get to participate in them* and that *for those people* artistic goods participate in a homeostatic unity with other goods central to flourishing.

Similarly, we recognized that intellectual work has often produced knowledge that has the *potential* to contribute to the flourishing of everyone, both through practical applications and through the pleasure derived from intellectual understanding. We are aware, however, that the leisure to appreciate intellectual understanding is available to only a few and (more importantly) that the applications of knowledge often have a devastating effect on the well-being of large numbers of people, both through intentional destruction in warfare and from the myriad adverse effects (some intended and many of the others foreseeable) of industrial "progress," especially when the economic exploitation of vulnerable and oppressed workers is part of the (explicit or all but explicit) plan for "progress."

Finally, if we are concerned to explain why such conditions persist, we will recognize the fact that artistic and intellectual productions have always played the ideological role of rationalizing the sorts of oppression and exploitation which limit the extent of the homeostatic unity of the good, and of directing the frustrations of the oppressed in directions harmless to their oppressors.

So, artistic and intellectual endeavors exhibit a real and important homeostatic unity with the other moral goods but that unity is painfully limited, in part because they exhibit a similar sort of unity with certain systematic evils.

In fact, somewhat similar situations almost certainly obtain with respect to other moral goods, where the enjoyment of those goods by some people

tends to contribute to the well-being of some significant number of others, but fails to contribute to (or even undermines) the well-being many others.

So, what should we say about the unity of the moral good in the light of such facts? Two things: it's not now very unified, and it's our moral duty to work towards the establishment of social conditions in which the homeostatic unity is greatly enhanced. The unity of the good is, for those reasons, largely *up to us*.

I want to situate these points within the broad theory of reference and of "natures" to which both Adams and I subscribe. I'll use Adams' formulation in terms of natures suited to roles determined by practices, since it's less cumbersome and since the disagreements we have about the determination of roles is probably not important to the present discussion.

I'm assuming here that the achievements we ordinarily associate with moral discourse—those that enhance human flourishing rather than manipulation and exploitation—arise from our pursuit of a central aim of that discourse: answering the practical question, "How can we care for one another?" I assume as well that a number of factors associated with our moral practice, including the ways in which the psychology of sympathy and related emotions work, and our recognition of the practical advantages of mutual aid, lead us to tend to interpret that question broadly, so that the well-being of people generally, and not *just* of those with whom we have special relations, is *among* of our central moral concerns. I propose to think of the natures of moral categories, relations, etc. as being specified by the properties necessary to fill the moral-discourse-determined roles in achieving the well-being of people generally.

Some such assumptions as these must underlie any consequentialist approach to morality, and—importantly—such assumptions are compatible with a theological foundation for morality, provided that one has the right sort of theology. So, I am not rejecting the most basic theological foundations of Adams' metaethical position in adopting this approach. What is important about the approach in question, in so far as the unity of the good is concerned, is that it identifies, as central aims of moral discourse, things such that we have not yet been able to come even close to fully achieving them. So far we have always operated morally within social structures which lacked the resources (*technical or social or economic or political*) to achieve the sort of (homeostatic) unity of the good towards which our moral concerns aim, and which possessed lots of features "designed" as it were (often literally *designed*) to prevent the emergence of such resources.

My approach thus situates moral discourse in the same category as that to which philosophers of science discussing the natures of the elements usually situate chemistry prior to the discovery of nuclear structure and atomic numbers. In each case (1) practitioners aimed to achieve things they then lacked

the resources to achieve, but (2) because their practice was on the track, so to speak, of the relevant properties, relations, etc., it is appropriate to think of the terms they used as corresponding to such natures as would satisfy the roles associated with their longer-term aspirations, in so far as those aspirations are satisfiable in a nomologically possible future of their practice.

That's why I insisted earlier that moral terms might partially denote even if we consider only their role in achieving human flourishing. According to the homeostatic property cluster version of consequentialism, the natures they refer to correspond, at least roughly, to aspects of (humanly) possible future moral regimes in which both the level of human flourishing and the extent of the homeostatic unity between aspects of flourishing far exceed what we have so far achieved. It is not entirely obvious that there is a single moral conception which would characterize such regimes, so moral terms may partially denote aspects of different sorts of morally desirable future regimes.

In any event, what this implies about the moral question of the unity of the good is that we are properly concerned, in moral discourse, with two different sorts of unity. When we are concerned to produce good consequences in the immediate future, or to prevent bad ones, our interest is properly directed towards such homeostatic unity as the good currently enjoys. When we try to suit our actions, policies, characters, etc., to the longer term (equally moral) goal of changing social arrangements so that (roughly) the flourishing of one will enhance (and partly consist in) the flourishing of all we are properly concerned with such homeostatic unity of the good as is humanly achievable.

To put the matter more "metaphysically," the conception I advocate has it that the unity of the good is an historical phenomenon over which we can exercise some control, that *right now* although the good enjoys considerable homeostatic unity, it is still profoundly fragmented, but that there exist one or more humanly possible prospects for social conditions under which we could achieve a unity of the good which pretty closely accords with our fundamental moral aims.

If the factual claims which I have presupposed in articulating this version of indirect (homeostatic property cluster) consequentialism are right, then the account it provides of the future possible unity, *and of the current and historical fragmentation*, of the good would be fundamental to any account of the metaphysics of morals. Even if it turns out that there is a still deeper theological unity of the good, this version of consequentialism would have gotten it basically right about the (multiple) dimensions of unity which must concern us in moral practice.

I conclude therefore that, absent independent arguments for such a theological conception which he is not concerned to provide, Adams has not shown that sophisticated consequentialism entails a false conception of the good as fragmented. Instead, even if his theological conception is correct,

sophisticated consequentialism may well get it right, at the level of description appropriate to moral practice, both about the unity, and about the fragmentation, of the good.

4.3. *Non-Consequential Moral Considerations: Alliance and Symbolic Value.* In Chapter 9 (“Symbolic Value”) Adams considers “hopeless” cases: those in which what he takes to be the right (or the morally preferable) thing to do seems to have no good consequences, because no choice open to the agent has good consequences. Such cases include those in which symbolic opposition to tyranny seems the right action to take even though it can be expected to have no effect on the political situation or the conditions of the oppressed. Adams understands symbolic opposition in such cases as special cases of loving the good, in his sense of *being for* the good, and he doubts that moral theories according to which ethics is a matter of guidance *for action*, can explain the moral value of symbolic action in such circumstances.

This is one of those cases in which it is not clear whether or not Adams understands his criticisms to apply to “indirect consequentialism.” I’ll indicate in any event how the resources of a plausible consequentialism might be employed to handle symbolic opposition, and I’ll try to say something informative about consequentialist approaches to helplessness in general.

Adams does not explain what he understands by indirect consequentialism, but as before I’ll assume that it is something like rule utilitarianism in that it advises us to adopt rules, standards, features of character, attitudes, etc. just in case they are likely to foster human flourishing. It is easy then to see why indirect consequentialism might imply the desirability of developing a moral personality which would incline one to symbolic opposition in hopeless political situations. As Adams indicates, being symbolically for the good in such cases especially involves being for those who suffer, and it is enormously plausible that an indirect consequentialism, informed by the actual facts of human existence, would recommend just such an attitude towards those who suffer political oppression.

Nevertheless Adams might respond that even if indirect consequentialism commended to us the development of a moral personality which would incline one towards symbolic opposition, it would not entail that someone who recognized a situation as hopeless with respect to the consequences of symbolic opposition would still be doing the right, or at least the better, thing by symbolically (but entirely ineffectively) opposing oppression.

I am inclined to think that this is right: the indirect consequentialist would be obliged to be more generous than Adams in her moral evaluation of someone who refrained from symbolic opposition under circumstances in which

she was morally certain that there would be no favorable consequences. But, I think that *that* is right also. We should be more generous in this way.

I suspect that intuitions to the contrary arise from two different sources. In the first place, I suspect that we import into our judgment regarding such matters a doubt that the agent could be certain that her symbolic gestures would fail to have any favorable effects. Secondly, in the case of someone who does act symbolically in circumstances of apparent hopelessness, we have reason to admire her moral character because her symbolic acts provide evidence of her love of the good. When an agent does not act symbolically under such circumstances we are not provided with any additional evidence (one way or another) regarding her moral character.

Once it is recognized that neither of these considerations actually addresses the question of how we should evaluate the choices people make under hopeless conditions, the indirect consequentialist position that I have indicated is, I think, quite plausible—certainly plausible enough that the case of decisions under hopeless conditions do not constitute a major problem for consequentialism.

It will be useful, I think, to say a bit more about what else the (indirect, homeostatic) consequentialist should say about the morally appropriate responses to politically hopeless situations. Without at all minimizing the moral significance of the anguish which choices in such situations causes—and which Adams portrays with great skill and insight—I think that the main point about such situations which the consequentialist should address is their *prevention*.

I have already explained why, given existing social arrangements, a primary moral concern dictated by consequentialism should be the establishment of better social arrangements, especially ones in which the homeostatic unity of the good is greatly enhanced. Arrangements aimed at inhibiting the emergence of fascist regimes and the like, and with overthrowing existing ones, would be an especially important goal in this regard. With respect to the question of what one should do in genuinely helpless political situations, one obvious recommendation which the consequentialist might offer is to *study them* in hopes of contributing to our understanding of how such situations can be prevented or reversed.

Of course this recommendation could be made from the perspective of any even remotely plausible moral conception, so it is no especial merit of consequentialism that it can endorse it. Still, I think that the issues of prevention of political and social evils, and of the morally relevant study of social, economic and political processes, may prove indicative of two additional dimensions of Adams' critique of consequentialism.

4.4. *Consequentialism and (Religious?) Pessimism.* I have suggested that the consequentialist would be right, in responding to questions about how one should act in hopeless situations, (a) to adopt an attitude of generous charity in evaluating possible responses rather than making fine grained distinctions between them, and (b) to emphasize instead the importance of preventive policies or actions.

I am inclined to think that consequentialist approaches generally—and certainly the sort of consequentialism which I have been advocating—are best thought of as resting on a somewhat optimistic conception of human potential: roughly on the idea that eventually we'll be able to get it together so that our social arrangements will make caring concern and mutual aid automatic features of human life. If you have something like this level of optimism about human potential, then it will probably seem reasonable to you that our *main* response to politically hopeless situations should be a concern to prevent them in the future.

If, on the other hand, your conception of human potential is considerably less optimistic, then it may seem reasonable to you that the a main concern of moral theorizing should be with making the sort of fine grained distinctions between different responses to helplessness that Adams makes. Indeed, with a little effort you can map this difference in judgments about the reasonable concerns of moral theorizing onto differences in the *roles* which the referents of moral terms are able to play, and thus onto differences about the natures of those referents. So, differences in optimism about human potential may reflect themselves in differences about the metaphysics of morals.

One question which this observation raises is whether or not Adams' critique of conventionalism might reflect a difference between his own estimate of the human condition and that which would comfortably sustain a consequentialist approach. Many thinkers in the religious traditions cited by Adams, and certainly many Christian thinkers, have emphasized the extent of human moral failings in ways incompatible with the sort of optimism appropriate to an exclusively consequentialist moral conception, as have some philosophical naturalists including those influenced by the excesses of contemporary human sociobiology (see Kitcher 1985, Boyd 2001a, for discussions of those excesses).

If Adams' concern about the adequacy of modern ethical theory to address questions about hopelessness stems from this sort of pessimism, then it does indeed raise fundamental issues about the metaphysics of morals, issues which may well lie in a contested area where both scientists and theologians may claim competence regarding "human nature." Note that the semantic and metaphysical resources he developed in Chapter One are fully adequate to explain how differences about human potential get reflected in differences about the metaphysics of morals.

4.5. *Consequentialism and the Subject Matter of Ethics*. The apparent difference between Adams' position and that of the consequentialist about the extent to which moral theorizing should be concerned with choice in hopeless situations illustrates another point on the borderline of ethics and metaethics which has, it seems to me, not been adequately explored in the literature. When we think of moral theorizing we ordinarily think of efforts to articulate, and to defend or criticize, versions of standard moral conceptions: consequentialist, deontological, theological, virtue based, etc., and to apply such conceptions in addressing particular moral issues.

In particular, we usually expect that the vocabulary within which moral theorizing takes place will be primarily the vocabulary of morals, and that the fundamental metaphysical questions in moral theorizing will concern the natures of goodness, justice, fairness, duty, and other such distinctly moral phenomena. In this setting it may seem *prima facie* perfectly reasonable, even to a consequentialist, that we should be concerned to investigate in detail the duties which we have in politically helpless situations, and the relative moral merits of different responses to them, even when there are no differences in rationally expectable consequences.

It is important, therefore, to recognize that a truly consistently developed consequentialism would underwrite a very different conception of the dimensions of appropriate moral theorizing. To a good first approximation, moral theorizing should be mainly about the psychological, social, and economic dimensions of human flourishing, and especially of the mechanisms which underwrite the unity of the flourishing of individuals within a society, rather than mainly about the distinctively moral categories referred to in the "vocabulary of morals," as it is normally understood.

I do not mean that the consistent consequentialist should not concern herself with the goods and virtues (and evils and vices) referred to in moral discourse. What I mean instead is that, given that the components of human flourishing are homeostatically united, and that a fundamental aim of moral practice is to enhance the extent of their homeostatic unity, the outstanding theoretical questions central to the *practice* of morality are empirical questions about the ways in which flourishing can be encouraged by individual practices and, especially, by changes in existing social and economic arrangements.

In this regard, moral practice, and the relation between moral theorizing and moral practice, should, if homeostatic property cluster consequentialism is right, resemble engineering practice and the relation between theoretical engineering work and engineering practice.

Consider automotive engineering and the question of the design of passenger vehicles, for example. There is a family of desiderata for passenger vehicles: comfort, safety, handling, acceleration, responsiveness, fuel economy,

etc. These factors are capable of participating in significant homeostatic unity provided that a designer does not focus excessively on any few of them. Part of the aim of good automotive engineering research is to enable that homeostasis to be realized at greater levels of the various desiderata.

For example, given the state of the art in suspension and tire design in the 1950s and 1960s there was a pretty serious trade off between handling and road comfort for passenger cars: better handling could be purchased mainly at the expense of stiffer suspensions and consequent degradation of ride comfort. This limitation was largely overcome mainly by developments in tire design and construction which emerged from research and experimentation on racing cars in the late 1960s. The consequence is that there are now passenger cars which exhibit greater ride comfort than any vehicles of the 1950s and 1960s, but whose handling characteristics approach those of the racing cars of the late 1950s and early 1960s (as measured by potential cornering forces, for example, or by responses to transient steering inputs).

What was achieved in this case was a very considerable enhancement in the homeostatic unity of automotive desiderata. The relevant research however was focused mainly on physical and chemical property of tire compounds and on the physical interaction of new tire configurations with suspension configurations, not on the highly abstractly characterized properties of handling, ride comfort, responsiveness, etc.

I do not mean that there was no research on such factors. Indeed there were attempts made to model customer preferences which involved studying how the various more physically characterized features of tire and suspension design influenced drivers judgments of comfort, responsiveness, etc., and this research was important to design at least in so far as marketing considerations were concerned. Still, what made the progress in the achievement of homeostasis possible was research into the supervenience bases, so to speak, of those more abstractly characterized desiderata.

I suggest that a consistently developed consequentialism would have the analogous consequence about the relation between theoretical research and the achievement of homeostatically unified human flourishing. The main, but not exclusive, topics of moral inquiry lie within the domains we now associate with the social sciences rather than those we now think of as peculiar to moral philosophy, which is not to say that institutionalized social scientific research as it is now conducted is likely to be at all helpful. Indeed, given the ideological role of such research in stratified societies, exactly the opposite can be expected.

I think that recognizing this component in a fully developed consequentialism may make more palatable the idea that the consequentialist will probably not be concerned to address many questions about the preferability of various choices in hopeless situations. Consider the following theoretical

question in automotive engineering: “What is the best sort of handling for a car whose braking system has completely failed?” It is no criticism of a conception of automotive engineering that it has the consequence that this question probably lacks an answer, and is, in any event, not very important. In fact, engineering practice has offered a quite different sort of solution to the problem: the dual-diagonal braking system which makes it all but impossible to sustain a complete loss of braking power.

Properly developed consequentialism entails a similar “solution” to the questions about choice in hopeless situations which Adams raises. It counsels that we, *prima facie*, exhibit sympathy and concern for those who are facing such situations, and it *may*, when supplemented with relevant psychological theories, entail that *sometimes* there may be a best choice *for a particular individual* in such a situation. But the general solution it offers is that we should seek to establish social arrangements which minimize hopelessness.

Of course I do not mean to suggest that the engineering task of minimizing brake failure is comparable in difficulty or importance to the moral task of minimizing helplessness. Nor do I suggest that one should accept the consequentialist approach to hopelessness as casually as one does the engineering solution to handling in situations of brake failure. What I do suggest is that the proposed solution represents a *prima facie* adequate consequentialist response to Adams’ challenge about moral choice in helpless situations. The proposed solution depends on optimistic assumptions about human perfectibility, but that is—for reasons I have indicated earlier—as it should be.

4.6. *Footnote: Moral Epistemology and the Role of Intellectuals and Artists.* I suggested earlier that sophisticated consequentialism did have the resources for justifying a certain level of involvement with intellectual and artistic work, despite the profound poverty and inequality which currently prevails, and I suggested that the interesting question from a consequentialist point of view may not be *how much* intellectual and artistic work is morally permissible but, instead, *what sorts* of work are morally appropriate for intellectuals and artists. I can now make that point more clearly.

If the version of consequentialism which I have sketched out here is correct, then the main theoretical issues in moral theory are about the workings of human social, political, and economic systems and the ways in which such systems have an impact on the homeostatic unity of human flourishing. The main barriers to successful theoretical work in this domain are ideological.

Thus, I would suggest, if there is some moral imperative regarding intellectual and artistic work it enjoins intellectuals and artists to devote *some* of their talents to the task of exploring these theoretical issues, to the articulation (artistic as well as scholarly) of radical critiques of the ideology which blinds us to our human potential, and (mainly) to the building of political

movements capable of radically changing the social and economic regimes under which we live.

5. Postscript.

5.0. *Religion.* Adams' argumentative strategy for defending his theistic moral conception does not involve an initial explicit defense of theism. Instead, he sees the relationship between his project and the issue of theism differently. He indicates how a conception of ethics can be established on a theistic basis and argues that the resulting ethical conception has advantages over competing conceptions, especially naturalistic and consequentialist ones. These advantages, he maintains, constitute *part of* the case for theism, since it counts in favor of a theory, like theism, that it is a component in the solution to outstanding problems, especially when the no solution seems compatible with alternative theories.

I completely agree with the basic methodological and metaphysical point. Metaphysical theories (like theism and atheism, naturalism and supernaturalism) are—like scientific theories—properly evaluated by examining the relative merits of the broader conceptions of which they are important constituents.

I conclude, however, that neither naturalism in ethical theory nor consequentialism is clearly faced with difficulties for which theistic ethics provides the basis of a solution. Of course, if there is a Creator who is a perfect being and who has some interest in us, and who issues commands, then no version of consequentialism or naturalism will get at the deepest metaphysical foundations of morals.

If there is such a being and for some reason She has created a world in which our human potential for cooperatively and lovingly seeking each other's well being is more limited than consequentialism tacitly presumes, then consequentialist naturalism will not provide us with even a good approximation to the content of the divine commands. So, naturalism and consequentialism might be mistaken in just the ways which point to the adequacy of Adams' alternative metaphysical conception.

Still, I think that an appreciation of the resources available to the naturalist and to the sophisticated consequentialist show that Adams has not yet made a successful case that these positions are compromised in the ways he indicates. What he has done, in my view, is to raise extremely important questions about the role of normative considerations in semantic theory and about the metaphysics and epistemology of ethical naturalism and of consequentialism—questions whose answers require a serious reconceptualization of contemporary naturalism in semantic theory and in ethics.

5.1. *The Bible*. One of the truly delightful things about Adams' book is that he situates the more technical of his arguments for theistic ethics in the context of the articulation of a moral vision which addresses important practical questions about the moral standing of interests and endeavors which are not "narrowly moral." He seeks an alternative to the conception of ethics according to which "...the well-being of persons and the quality of personal relationships [is] its primary (and it sometimes seemed only) concerns (4)."

In Chapter Seven, in the course of arguing that the ethics of motives should be organized around the love of the good (=God), Adams indicates that the embrace of this ideal is common among theists. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Adams, indicating a continuity between Judaism and Christianity on the love of the good, points out that Jesus identified this passage as expressing the first commandment of all. Of course Jesus said more on that occasion. Here is Matthew 22: 37-40:

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

I always liked the second of these commandments. Taken by itself, it emphasizes the moral vision against which Adams is concerned to move. What I claim here is that a consistently developed sophisticated naturalistic consequentialism can advocate (approximately) what it commands, and it can do so without underwriting a "narrowly moral" conception of ethics. That's sort of neat.

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