Reply to Griffin, Raz, and Wolf

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I am honored that Jim Griffin, Joseph Raz, and Susan Wolf, all of whose work I greatly admire, have thought my ideas on welfare and care worth engaging, and I am very grateful to them for doing so. Each has raised searching and difficult questions. Rather than attempting to respond to them *seriatim*, I propose to discuss the issues under three broad headings: questions about the concept of welfare, questions about care or sympathetic concern, and the question of whether welfare claims have agent-relative or agent-neutral normative force. These issues are, of course, interconnected, but it may nonetheless be helpful to divide them up in these ways.

THE CONCEPT OF WELFARE

Raz queries the precise aim and character of the rational care theory as a metaethical account. As he surmises, I intend it as an account of the *concept* of welfare. I agree with Raz that saying that a person's good is 'constituted' by what one should want insofar as one cares for her is misleading (p. 402). In addition to the reason he gives, there is also a familiar sense in which, when we say that someone's good 'consists in' or 'is constituted by' certain things, we make a substantive normative judgment rather than a metaethical claim. (More about this below when I consider Griffin's remarks about a 'list account' of welfare.) In addition, although I also say that what it is for something to be good for someone or to be part of his welfare 'just *is* for it to be something one should desire for him for his sake', I do not mean that the relevant phrases express concepts that are realized by the same property. (I actually don't discuss property identity in *WRC*.) Rather, I intend these remarks to be understood in conceptual terms, as claims about the identity of concepts. (See, e.g., *WRC*, pp. 4, 11–12, 14, 17, 23, 31, 52.) I mean that phrases like 'someone's welfare' and 'well-being', at least as they usually function in ethical philosophy, should be taken to express the same concept as is expressed by the phrase 'what one should want for that person were one to care for him'. (I can agree with Raz that these terms and others like 'flourishing' or 'happiness' sometimes have different meanings.)

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Although I am still inclined to accept this conceptual thesis, nothing I care much about would be lost by accepting Susan Wolf's helpful suggestion that we regard my claims 'not as an attempt to identify the concept of welfare with that of rational care, but rather as a proposal to shift our attention away from the former and toward the latter in both our philosophical and practical thought' (p. 415). I do think that philosophers normally understand welfare as a normative concept. And a major thesis of my book is that there is no plausible normative concept for welfare to be other than the one I identify (what one should want insofar as one cares for someone). In particular, if we agree that a person can coherently, if mistakenly, hold that he has no reason to desire or pursue his own welfare without betraying confusion about the concept (if, say, he is depressed and thinks that he and his welfare are not worth anyone bothering with, not even him), then 'welfare' and 'what it is rational for someone to desire (for himself)' obviously cannot express the same concept.

Suppose that we were to use 'welfare' to express some non-normative concept. It would then follow that welfare claims are not substantive normative claims. That something would enhance someone's welfare or good could still, of course, be a normative reason for some action or attitude, say for wanting that thing for him for his sake, or for his wanting it, or whatever. But the welfare judgment or fact would not itself be a normative judgment or fact. On this supposition, therefore, the relevance of welfare claims to any normative or ethical question would depend on a further normative premise, say, that the fact that something would enhance someone's welfare, so understood, is some reason to want it for him for his sake, or some reason for him to want it, or whatever. The issue of whether something would or would not promote someone's welfare would not be a normative or ethical issue itself. Two people could agree about the welfare facts and still be in complete disagreement about any normative or ethical issue.

As an analogy, consider the concept of pleasure. On most people's understandings, whether something would give someone pleasure is not an ethical or normative question, even if pleasure is intrinsically desirable (such as there is reason to desire just by virtue of what it is). What gives pleasure facts ethical relevance, on this understanding, is a further normative fact. And the distinctive ethical question is whether such a fact obtains. Were we to understand 'welfare' to express some non-normative concept, the situation would be substantially similar. Welfare facts would leave all ethical questions conceptually open in the same way.

Or suppose, alternatively, that we agree to use 'welfare' to express some normative concept other than that of what there is reason to want for someone out of concern for her. Suppose we use it to refer to

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what someone herself has reason to want (either period or from her own point of view). Then welfare facts would be normative or ethical facts all right, and the question of whether something would promote someone's welfare would be a normative or ethical question. But they would nonetheless not be the distinctive normative facts and questions that are relevant when we consider what to want for someone (or she considers to want for herself) from the perspective of benevolent concern *for her*. There the issue is what to want for her *for her sake*. It does not follow from the fact that something would promote someone's welfare in this assumed sense that it is anything we (or she) should want for her for her sake, that is, out of concern for her. The point would remain that there is a distinctive normative question that is raised for us when we care for someone: what it makes sense to want for her from the perspective of that concern. The answer to this normative question is not settled by the answer to the different normative question of what someone herself has reason to want (either period or from her own point of view).

I don't think I can put the bottom line of these reflections better than Wolf does:

> '[W]hat it is rational, as one who cares about someone, to want for him' *is* significant – whether we identify that concept with the concept of welfare or not. This is a different concept from what that person wants for himself and from what it is rational for us to want for him, period. Often it is just the concept we need to describe and discuss what to aim for. (p. 426)

Only if we identify the concept of welfare with that of the object of rational care will determining what instantiates that concept amount to determining an answer to the question of what to want for someone for her sake.

Accepting Wolf's suggestion at this point might enable me simply to sidestep many of the questions that Griffin, Raz, and Wolf raise about a rational care theory of *welfare*, but I would like to try to respond to some of them nonetheless. First, Griffin notes that although the rational care theory can respond to the 'scope problem' that is faced by rational desire theories, a list account can as well (p. 431). As I understand them, however, a rational care theory and a list theory operate at different levels and so are not in competition. The rational care theory is an account of the concept, and a list theory is a substantive normative claim, a thesis concerning the kinds of experiences and activities that make a life good for someone rather than an account of the concept of welfare.

A rational desire theory of welfare might be advanced at either of these two levels, and each level brings its own distinctive scope problem. When we judge, as in Parfit's case, that satisfying someone's rational

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desire for the welfare of a stranger met on a train does not necessarily enhance the desirer's welfare, we are making a substantive normative judgment. It seems more plausible, as a substantive thesis, that what enhances a person's welfare are experiences and activities in the person's own life rather than the realizing of whatever he rationally desires.

Now if welfare is a normative concept, it is a virtue of a rational desire theory of the concept that it can explain this (assuming, of course, that rational desire is a normative concept itself). Nonetheless, I have argued that a rational desire theory cannot explain the distinctive normativity that the concept of welfare seems to have. On the same assumption, however, explaining welfare's normativity is a challenge that list theories must also face if they are to be understood as accounts of the concept. Either the items on the list are characterized in normative terms or they are not. If they are not, then it is hard to see how the list can comprise an account of welfare as a normative concept. And if they are, the question will remain whether they have the same normativity as the concept of welfare.

We can put the argument for the rational care theory as an account of the concept of welfare in two stages. The first is the argument that Raz discusses (pp. 406–9). For any non-normative features that someone puts forward as putative criteria of welfare, it seems that we can imagine someone coherently questioning or rejecting them without betraying confusion about the concept. Similarly, we can imagine two people agreeing that something instantiates any non-normative features we like but coherently disagreeing about whether it is welfare-enhancing without either betraying any conceptual confusion. But if the question of whether something is welfare-enhancing cannot be settled by anything non-normative, then the question at issue must be normative. So the concept of welfare must be a normative concept.

At the second stage, we continue to press what questions are conceptually open or closed when we attempt to identify the concept of welfare with different normative concepts, in order to see *which* normative concept welfare is. So we see, as I have argued, that the concept of welfare cannot be identified with that of what the person himself rationally desires, since we can grant that someone rationally desires something but question whether or deny that it enhances his welfare without betraying confusion about the concept. Similarly, we can grant that something is excellent or intrinsically admirable and coherently question or deny that it would enhance someone's welfare without conceptual confusion. And so on. The only normative question that seems conceptually closed is whether one ought to desire someone's welfare were one to care for him, that is, whether one should desire

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it for him for his sake. And this yields the rational care theory of the concept as a conclusion. The concept of welfare is identical with the concept of what there is normative reason to want for someone from the perspective of care or sympathetic concern for him.

Raz objects to arguments of this form. If I read him correctly, he believes that the kind of radical normative disagreement I have just described is possible only if it is rooted in a disagreement 'about the concept of welfare' (p. 408). Clearly no such disagreement is possible if two people disagree about the concept in the sense that they are employing different concepts. To disagree in the relevant sense, they must be employing the very same concept of welfare and disagree about whether something described non-normatively instantiates it. Of course, they might have different understandings of a concept they share, but I can't see how that is necessary for them to be radically disagreed normatively. For example, they might both share a rational care account of the concept, and still radically disagree normatively about what it makes sense to want for someone out of concern for him. Raz seems to disagree. He says that 'those who agree about the concept of well-being cannot agree about all non-normative propositions and disagree about what serves the welfare of this person or that' (p. 409). But why should this be so?

Consider the concept of a normative reason for acting. What does this concept involve? According to Scanlon, a reason to do something is a consideration that 'counts in favor' of the action.[1] In a similar vein, I once wrote that a reason is a fact 'rational consideration' of which would lead someone to prefer an action, other things being equal.[2] The general idea of remarks like these, I take it, is that the most general idea of a reason for acting is of something that plays a certain role in answering the most general normative questions about deliberation, intention, and action, and that this is all that is determined by the concept. In particular, no answer to any substantive normative question about what there is reason to intend or do, or what considerations bear on what one is to or should do, follows from the concept alone. So two people could share the concept of a reason for acting with radical disagreement about what considerations are normative reasons. The same, I am saying, is true of the concept of welfare.

Raz seems to think that unless we include some specific non-normative application conditions as part of the concept of welfare we will be left without any concept (p. 408). But I can't see why that should

[1] T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 17.

[2] Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 81.

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be so any more than it should be true that unless we include some specific non-normative criteria as part of the concept of reason for acting we will not have a concept of reason for acting. What considerations actually are normative reasons for acting is a substantive normative question that is left open by the concept of a reason for acting. And what features make for a better life for someone and enhance her welfare, in my view, is also a substantive normative question that is left open by the concept of welfare.

This means that the rational care conceptual account is not meant to 'sustain' the Aristotelian thesis of *WRC*'s chapter 4, namely, that the best life includes activities and experiences that involve appreciation of agent-neutral values. So, contra Raz, I don't take it as an objection to the theory that it cannot do so, any more than it is an objection to Scanlon's or my account of the concept of a reason for acting that it does not support any particular substantive normative reasons claim (p. 408). I do think, as I argue in chapter 4, that, once we see that the concept of welfare is conceptually connected to desire for someone from the perspective of concern for her, we should be more inclined to accept the Aristotelian thesis, since the perspective of care or benevolent concern is itself agent-neutral. But that claim is like Scanlon's saying that once we understand that the psychological state of desire itself involves seeing certain features of its object as reasons, we will be disinclined to affirm the normative claim that normative reasons are based on the fact of desire itself.

WHAT IS CARE OR SYMPATHETIC CONCERN?

The general shape of the rational care theory is that of a warranted-attitude, buck-passing account of a normative concept according to which the concept is to be understood in terms of an attitude of some sort being justified toward something. Thus Scanlon holds that to be good or valuable just is to have properties that provide normative reasons 'to respond to a thing in certain ways'.[3] According to such an approach in general, different normative concepts are distinguished by the different attitudes, responses, or psychological states that the concepts distinctively involve. Thus the concept of the choiceworthy is that of an object of justified choice, that of the desirable, an object of justified desire, the estimable, an object of warranted esteem, and so on.[4] Following this pattern, what distinguishes welfare as a normative concept is the distinctive attitude of care or benevolent

[3] *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 97.

[4] For this general approach, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

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concern and desires for someone's sake that are motivated by such concern.

An 'obvious objection' to the rational care theory, as Griffin notes, is that it is circular, that we need to understand the idea of welfare before we can understand the concept of care. In reply to this objection, I have argued that we do not require a definition of care or 'sympathetic concern' if it is a natural psychological kind that can be identified by paradigm examples (*WRC*, pp. 12, 15). Moreover, it seems clear that care is not identical to a desire for someone's welfare (although I think it is a conceptual truth that someone who cares for someone desires her welfare). Whereas desires, as philosophers understand them, have some proposition as object, the object of care or concern is some individual herself (*WRC*, p. 2). Second, we can easily imagine someone having an intrinsic desire for another's welfare without having any real concern for her, for example, if the former desire were to arise by the kind of associative process that Mill describes causing an intrinsic desire for money (*WRC*, p. 2). And third, care or sympathetic concern can be identified by its role in our overall psychic economy, through its relations to empathy and emotions like fear, joy, sadness, and grief that need not be triggered by an intrinsic desire for someone's welfare.

The general issue here is one that is faced by any warranted-attitude theory. For example, although Scanlon holds that for something to have value is for it to be such as to provide reasons for responding to it in certain ways, including desire, he also says that a desire for something normally 'involves having a tendency to see something good or desirable about it'.[5] The same seems to be true of any attitude that one might seek to employ in a warranted-attitude account. For example, such an account seems almost inevitable for concepts like the disgusting, which seem by their very nature to be tied to distinctive responses like disgust. But it is hard to see how it can be other than a conceptual truth that to feel disgust for something is for it to seem disgusting (such as to warrant disgust), at least to persons who have the concept. At the very least, therefore, the rational care theory has numerous partners in crime.

But is there a *single* kind of care or benevolent concern available for a rational care theory to utilize? Parents, friends, bachelor uncles, and strangers all seem to care in different ways. The kind of care or benevolent concern I have in mind, however, is one that is independent of any assumed relationship and so can show itself when we are engaged by strangers and their plight, as in Mencius's example of a child on the verge of falling into a well, or in Batson's experiments

[5] *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 38.

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where subjects are moved altruistically by vividly imagining another individual's needs (*WRC*, pp. 50, 60–8).

Parenthetically, I agree with Griffin, of course, that sympathetic concern is not the only motivation for benefiting others nor the only thing that Batson's subjects were likely moved by. Griffin observes 'that we learn certain of our standards of behaviour by learning about the needs and interests of persons' (p. 429). However, the psychic 'force' of accepting such a standard is restricted to governing conduct and, perhaps, to liability to certain responses when we live or fail to live up to it. It seems plausible that at least some of Batson's subjects became concerned for Carol and her plight in a way that would have made them susceptible, in addition, to responses of fear, hope, joy, sadness, etc., on her behalf, so that, if, for example, there were nothing they could have done about her plight, they might still have felt bad for her. Lawrence Blum once made a similar point about what he called 'direct altruism', which I take to be the same thing that I am calling 'care' or 'sympathetic concern'.[6] He imagines a thoroughly principled NASA official he calls 'Manny' attempting to do everything he can to rescue Joan, an astronaut, who is in danger in space. However, Manny lacks sympathetic concern, so he is unmoved by what happens to Joan otherwise. In the event, Joan is lost, and when she drops off the radar screen, she also drops off *his* radar screen. Blum's point, which is surely right, is that normal human beings also have another source of motivation, what I am calling sympathetic concern, that would show itself in responses like sadness and grief in this case. And surely it is plausible that some of Batson's subjects were so motivated also.

Although sympathetic concern of this kind requires no context of relationship, I believe that it is also in play in personal relationships, although these typically also involve forms of motivation and concern that are different from benevolence and that can, indeed, be in tension with it. Thus Raz points out that the kind of concern that friends have for one another includes desires to support each other in their goals and dreams, even at cost to their friends' well-being. This seems right. However, such concern also seems to me essentially *relational*; it intrinsically concerns how friends relate to one another. Supporting just *is* a way of relating to someone. Caring, or benevolent concern, in the sense I have in mind, however, neither requires the context of relationship nor essentially involves any such relating. Readers of a novel or viewers of a film typically experience at least imaginative concern for characters and their plights, but unless they put themselves into the action they can't feel the sort of desire to support that a friend

[6] Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 146–8.

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might. Moreover, it is possible for love and friendly concern to come into tension with benevolent concern. This seems true in my Sheila case, which Griffin discusses. As Sheila's friend, one wants to support her in her desire to rebuild a ravaged city even at great personal cost to her (including continuing loss of memory) although one might at the same time wish, out of sympathetic concern for her, that she were willing to use some of her money so that she could at least have the satisfaction of knowing what good she was doing.

Raz points out that friends want to share their lives with one another and that this is part of caring for each other as friends. Somewhat similarly, Wolf remarks that parents often want things for their children, such as beauty, athletic success, or carrying on a family heritage, where it is questionable whether what is wanted would benefit their children even if the desires were justified. In all these cases, however, although these kinds of concern are not self-directed, they nonetheless seem relation-specific and self-involving in some way. It seems essential to the first, for example, that the other is viewed as one's friend, and to the second, that these are one's children. When, however, we are moved by the plight of a child on the verge of falling into a well, no relationship of any kind is necessary background, not even that of fellow human being. By the same token, however, this latter, non-relationship-specific benevolent concern is typically present in personal relationships also. And, as in the Sheila case, it can be in tension with these more relation-specific forms of concern. Wolf suggests that parental concern may differ also from sympathetic concern for strangers in a different way, namely, that we only desire that strangers enjoy basic goods. But this seems wrong to me, although we no doubt think we appropriately concern ourselves with strangers less.

To sum up, then, my claim is that the concept of welfare or a person's good should be understood as the idea of what one should want for someone out of care or sympathetic concern for him. And I understand benevolence of this sort to be a kind of concern for others, like that apparently involved in Batson's experiments, that is non-relationship-specific but that nonetheless is also typically present in personal relationships of various kinds.

AGENT-RELATIVE/AGENT-NEUTRAL

In this final section, I want to say something about two different kinds of questions which Susan Wolf raises about my claim that considerations of welfare are typically agent-neutral rather than agent-relative reasons. Welfare gives rise to agent-neutral reasons, according to a rational care theory, because the perspective of benevolent concern is not that of the person whose welfare is in question himself, but that

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of an observer viewing him with concern. Of course a person can regard himself from this perspective also, but when he does his perspective on himself is not essentially *de se*; his concern is for the individual he is. As I see it, what makes welfare considerations reasons is the individual's value – that he is worthy of (anyone's) concern. So considerations of one's own welfare are (*pro tanto*) reasons for one if, and only if, they are also reasons for anyone (anyone, at least, who is capable of benevolent concern).

Wolf doubts that to have sympathetic concern for someone is to see her as worthy of concern. I agree that it need not involve any such explicit thought or belief. (So there need be no thoughts 'too many'.) However, I doubt that it is true, as Wolf says, that when we care for someone we normally take the fact that we care as the reason to want the person's welfare (pp. 419–20). If that were so, then it would be consistent with the way we are viewing the person that there would be no reason for us to want the person to fare well in a hypothetical case in which we did not in fact care for him. Consider, again, the child Mencius describes. When we view him with sympathetic concern we see a reason to desire his welfare and to do whatever we can to promote it by preventing his fall. Do we think that this reason to prevent his fall is conditional on the fact of our caring for him so that, if we were hard-boiled or even just ignorant of his condition, the reason would not exist? As I view the case, it seems clear to me that I do not. Though I am aware of and appreciate the reason in caring for him and might not otherwise, I don't see the reason as itself being conditional on my care. In caring for him, I see him as valuable and worthy of care.

Finally, although Wolf is attracted to the thought that there is a significant normative question of what to want for someone from the perspective of concern for her, she wonders whether the person herself does not nonetheless have some privileged status in determining her own good (pp. 416–19). To focus the discussion, she considers the question whether it is better for someone to know the truth.

> [W]e might hold that whatever the answer turns out to be – whether it is better for someone to know the truth or not to know it – the answer will be the same for everyone. This seems to be the answer we are committed to if we understand the concept of a person's good as completely agent-neutral. On the other hand, we may think that this is a case in which there is no right agent-neutral answer to what is in a person's interest. And we may think that, in light of this, the views or the values of the person whose life is in question are determinative of what counts as good for her. (p. 417)

Even if we think that welfare is tied to rational care, we might think that what matters is what someone would rationally want for herself were she to care for herself rather than what anyone would want for her were he or she to care for her (p. 416).

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First, let me clear up a possible misunderstanding. Even if welfare provides an agent-neutral reason, and even if, as I argue in chapter 4 of *WRC*, experiences and activities that involve appreciating agent-neutral values are a substantial component of a good life, it does not follow that what is for some particular person's welfare will not depend on facts about her in particular, including her own tastes, preferences, and values. So, to take Wolf's example, if knowing and living in the truth has merit or agent-neutral value in itself, then this will, of course, be true regardless of one's particular preferences and tastes. But it doesn't follow from this, taken together with the thesis that someone's welfare is what it would make sense for anyone to want for that person out of concern for him, that knowing the truth would make the same contribution to the welfare of two different individuals, say, S and T. To determine the latter, we need to consider what it would make sense to want for S and T respectively, in light, not just of the agent-neutral value of knowing the truth, but also of what that knowledge would mean for S's and T's lives respectively. In particular, if T will appreciate the value of knowing the truth less than S will owing to their substantially different personalities, then this is relevant to what it makes sense to want for them respectively. The general point is that even if on a rational care theory, a person's own desires and values don't determine his welfare directly, as they do on a rational desire theory, they are nonetheless among the things to be taken account of by rational concern. They come into the theory as features of the *object* of concern, rather than as partially defining the perspective of practical judgment itself.

But what if there is no fact of the matter about what anyone would most justifiably want for an individual out of concern for her? Or, more plausibly, suppose that there is no fact about which of various different alternatives within some range would be best for her, with everything within the range being better than everything outside of it. Should we 'think that, in light of this, the views or the values of the person whose life is in question are determinative of what counts as good for her' (p. 417)? Supposing that what the person herself values is within the range, the rational care theory will already give the result that what the person herself values is as good for her as anything else. This wouldn't yet mean that what she values is better for her because she values it, but perhaps the rational care theory might deliver that result in a case of this kind also. If, when we keep all else equal, there is no justification for preferring something else to what the person herself values, then there is arguably a reason to give some weight to the agent's own values, not just from the perspective of her as an independent agent, but also from the perspective of concern for her for her sake.

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