

# Comments on Krister Bykvist 'Prudence for Changing Selves'

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I very much enjoyed reading and thinking about Krister Bykvist's interesting and carefully written paper.<sup>1</sup> My comments will not be criticisms. I will not challenge the conclusions the paper draws about the complicated examples of conflicts between preferences that it discusses. For example, I will not attempt to defend any of the views criticized in section IV of the paper. And I agree with the positive solution presented in section V, when that solution is characterized in the broadest possible way. In cases where a choice that I must make now will create one or the other of two possible future 'selves' whose preferences would conflict over the question of which choice I should make, prudence tells me to create the self that will experience a higher level of well-being or welfare.

In explaining and assessing various possible solutions to this problem of choice the paper sometimes seems to suggest that the question involves an issue of fairness to the relevant future selves. I am thinking of the comments about avoiding so-called 'cross-world intervention' on p. 278 at the end of the criticism of 'the survival of the strongest preference' view, the similar comments on p. 279 at the beginning of the explanation of the positive view, and especially the beginning of the section called 'Conclusions' on p. 283 where Krister comments that the idea behind the positive solution is that both possible future selves deserve to have a say in the decision that is made. However, I think that this is a somewhat misleading way of presenting the issue about cross-world intervention. By rejecting cross-world intervention Krister is actually recommending two different things. The first is that we should consider both possible future selves and their preferences or desires before making the decision. The second is that we should suppose that the well-being of each self depends only on its own desires and preferences and not on the desires of the other possible self. But it seems to me that neither point literally involves considerations of fairness. In the case of the second point it is not that allowing cross-world intervention – for example, supposing that a desire that was only

<sup>1</sup> Krister Bykvist, 'Prudence for Changing Selves', *Utilitas* 18.3 (2006). The page references in the text and notes are to this article.

felt by self S2 was somehow relevant to determining the level of well-being of self S1 – would be unfair to S1, or would amount to ignoring a claim that S1 possesses. It would be a mistake simply because it involves a misunderstanding of the nature of well-being and the factors that do contribute to a person's well-being.

More importantly, I think the emphasis on avoiding cross-world intervention tends to draw attention away from the ideas that are arguably doing the most important work in Krister's treatment of his examples and in his positive view. Consider the example on p. 264. I will suppose that S1 is the unmarried future self and S2 is the married future self. It does indeed matter to reaching the apparently correct conclusion about this example that we should not think the desires that would only be felt by S2 influence the well-being of S1. But this by itself is not sufficient for reaching that conclusion. When we consider the well-being of S1 we have to take into account two different desires or preferences or attitudes on the part of S1: S1 loves being unmarried, but S1 nevertheless prefers being married to being unmarried. On the face of it the first desire makes some sort of positive contribution S1's well-being while the second comparative preference seems to be a negative factor with respect to the well-being of S1. So to assess the well-being of S1 – before we compare the well-being of S1 to the well-being of S2 – we must first combine those two factors. The elimination of cross-world intervention is irrelevant to that task, since both the desires that we are dealing with are desires of S1 and not desires of S2.

Krister thinks that when we do compare the well-being of S1 with that of S2, who hates being married and prefers being unmarried to being married, it is clear that S1's level of well-being is higher. This seems right because both S1 and S2 have a comparative preference that tells against their actual life, but S1 loves his actual life in the non-comparative sense while S2 hates his actual life in that sense.

However, there is at least one reason for thinking that the well-being of S2 might be higher than that of S1. The comparative preference felt by S1 against his actual life is more intense than the comparative preference felt by S2, and that fact might be thought to be relevant to comparing the well-being of S1 and S2. I am not suggesting that this should make us reverse Krister's conclusion about the example. Nevertheless, I think it is a relevant and important question whether and how we should take into account both comparative preferences and non-comparative desires in assessing a person's well-being.

In thinking about the answer to this question it might help to vary the example in one respect. Suppose that S2 hates being married but hates being unmarried even more; that is, S2 prefers being married

(which is his actual state) to being unmarried. Given this change S1 loves his actual state but loves the alternative state even more, while S2 hates his actual state but still prefers it to the alternative state. S1 favors his actual state – desires it in what Krister calls the ‘one-place’ sense – but also has a comparative preference that counts against it, while S2 disfavors his actual state – hates it rather than loves it in the one-place sense – but nevertheless has a comparative preference that counts in favor of his actual state. Given these facts about desires what should we conclude about the well-being of S1 and S2?

I expect that Krister would say about this variation on his example that it is still the case that S1 has the higher level of well-being, and I would agree with him. But what explains this conclusion? Presumably it must be some view about the respective importance of one-place desires and comparative preferences as factors in determining well-being, and not the avoidance of cross-world intervention.

One strong view might claim that only one-place desires (favorings and disfavorings, loves and hates) matter for well-being while preferences in the comparative sense are completely irrelevant to our judgments of well-being. I think there is some evidence that Krister might sympathize with this explanation.<sup>2</sup> But this view seems implausible. The fact that S1 loves being married even more than he loves being unmarried, so that his strongest desire is frustrated rather than satisfied, does not seem to be irrelevant to the well-being of S1. Compare S1 to a third self S3 who is unmarried and loves being unmarried with a one-place desire equal in intensity to that felt by S1, but who also prefers being unmarried to being married. Intuitively we would think that S3 enjoys more well-being than S1.

Another possible way of explaining our judgment about Krister’s original example on p. 264 would hold that when we consider a person’s well-being the only one-place desires and favorings and disfavorings that matter to well-being are those that concern the actual features and circumstances of that person’s life. So S1’s love of being unmarried counts, since S1 is unmarried. But S1’s even stronger desire to be married does not count, because he is not actually married. And we should make the same judgments about the well-being of Krister’s original S2. Since S1 loves his actual life while S2 hates his actual life the well-being of S1 is higher than that of S2. Their loves and hates

<sup>2</sup> I am thinking of the discussion of the Dominance view on p. 279. In the example both possible future selves have a comparative preference for being married over being unmarried, but the future married self would hate his actual life while the future unmarried self would love his actual life (although he would love being married even more). Krister takes it to be obvious that prudence tells the agent to remain unmarried. This might stem from a belief that comparative preferences have no weight at all when weighed against one-place desires in determining well-being.

directed towards non-actual possibilities are irrelevant to their actual well-being.<sup>3</sup>

However, the principle behind this explanation also seems intuitively objectionable. Suppose that I am satisfied with my actual career, but I have a deep regret that I was never able to write a book that gave proper expression to what I thought of as being my best ideas. It seems wrong to say that this regret is irrelevant to judgments about my well-being just because – like all regrets – it concerns what did not happen rather than what did happen.

Another possible explanation would question my proposal that both one-place desires and comparative preferences are factors that contribute to well-being. Despite my earlier comments, if we refuse to take into account S1's comparative preference that does not necessarily mean that we are ignoring facts that are obviously relevant in deciding what choice would best promote S1's well-being. If S1 has a comparative preference for being married rather than being unmarried, it seems that he must also have a non-comparative love for being married that is stronger than his non-comparative love for being unmarried. So if we take both of these non-comparative desires into account in assessing the well-being of S1 it is not clear that we are leaving anything out. This view would distinguish in what seems to be the appropriate way between the well-being of S1 and the well-being of S3. What might not be so clear is why we should think that S1 enjoys a relatively high level of well-being, given that his strongest non-comparative desire is frustrated rather than satisfied. But perhaps it is enough that the view would allow us to say that S1 enjoys more well-being than S2 but less well-being than S3.

I hope it is clear that these questions about the factors that contribute to well-being are a supplement to Krister's paper, not an objection against what the paper says. I also hope the questions are interesting, although my brief comments do not amount to a serious attempt to answer them.

<sup>3</sup> This view might be called 'Actualism', but it is very different from the theory Krister discusses on pp. 272–5.