

Ethics from the Outside Looking In: An Interview with Roger Crisp

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Crisp mainly conducts research in normative and practical ethics, value theory, metaethics, and the history of moral philosophy. He is the author of multiple books, including, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (1997), *Reasons and the Good* (2006), *The Cosmos of Duty: Henry Sidgwick's Method of Ethics* (2015) and *Sacrifice Regained: Morality and Self-interest in British Moral Philosophy from Hobbes to Bentham* (2019). Crisp has also published or co-published several edited volumes, such as *Terrorism, Protest and Power* (1990), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (1996b), *Virtue Ethics* (1997), *Business Ethics: Perspectives on the Practice of Theory* (1998), *Well-Being and Morality: Essays in Honour of James Griffin* (2000), and *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics* (2013). His work has appeared in many edited collections and various philosophy journals including *Ethics*, *Mind*, *Utilitas*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Analysis*, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, *Philosophy*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, and *Mnemosune*. In 2018, he presented the Lindley Lecture, 'On Partiality'.

The *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy of Economics (EJPE)* interviewed Crisp about his formative years (§I), his work on utilitarianism and the

virtues (§II), the good (§III), practical reason (§IV), future research projects (§V), and his advice for graduate students (§VI).

I. FORMATIVE YEARS

EJPE: Professor Crisp, what first sparked your interest in Philosophy?

ROGER CRISP: I don't think it was my parents, though we did discuss political issues. I went to a school with many outstanding teachers. The best, and the one who most influenced me, was a great classicist, Dennis Rid-diford. Dennis did tell us about Plato, and I found that interesting. People often say that children are naturally philosophical, and I think that I had already started thinking in an abstract way. Then I went to university. I came to Oxford to study classics. It's a tripartite degree, involving literature, history, and philosophy. I had worked on literature and history, but I hadn't done any philosophy. The first philosophy I studied was Plato's *Phaedo*, which is a very hard dialogue: I still find it tricky, so that was a struggle. The next thing I read was Locke's *Essay*. I can remember quite vividly sitting in my garden for weeks over the summer wondering what an earth was going on in this book. It seemed to me like armchair psychology and that it was all just made up, because I was approaching it in completely the wrong way. By the end of that summer, I had decided that I was going to give up philosophy. I went to find my tutor, Gwynneth Matthews, who luckily wasn't in, and my tutorial partner recommended that I give it another term. Then we looked at Mill's *On Liberty* and that's when I decided I really wanted to do more philosophy. I think this was because Mill was discussing some of the things that I had been thinking about. Obviously he'd got a bit further(!), but that's what excited me, especially the issues of free speech, duties to the individual, and the nature of the good society.

What views helped shape and influence your early thought?

When I was an undergraduate, I was required to write one or more essays each week on a separate topic, and I thought of it in a kind of serial way. My job each week was to come up with decent essays. Because we were covering such vast areas, and there was so much to do, I don't think I ever did much global thinking. So what I was really trying to do was come up with a clear view on each topic, I suppose in the hope that everything would fit together. But to be honest, even that didn't matter very much because all I was trying to do was come up with views I could use in exams, and what was important there was to make sure all the three essays in the exam were consistent with one another.

Then I did the BPhil. I remember the letter of acceptance from John Ackrill. My mother brought it to me, and it just said, "Dear Crisp, we have decided to admit you to the BPhil. Yours sincerely, John Ackrill." (My mother explained that Ackrill's addressing me by my surname was in fact rather friendly.) I was lucky enough to have Ackrill as my main supervisor.

He was wonderful. With him, I worked on Aristotle. And then I had Jonathan Glover for my thesis, which was on the minds of animals: mainly philosophy of mind and language. I had Alan Ryan for politics. The person who had the greatest effect on my thinking was James Griffin. Partly because he was Jim Griffin, but also because of the things he was working on, which happened to be what I was most interested in. And then, of the faculty members around at that time, R.M. Hare and Derek Parfit had the biggest influence on me. Partly through their writings, but also because they were very ready to talk. I should also mention how much I learned from many other graduate students. One of them was Brad Hooker and he has been an inspiration to me throughout my career.

Let me say one other thing about the B.Phil. I've talked about the topics I did and the subjects I covered with Griffin, but that of course leaves out metaethics. Griffin had a metaethical view. But it was slightly negative. He tended to think that many of the distinctions people use are unclear and that we could probably do without them. But I wasn't persuaded by that. I was interested in the debate between people like McDowell and Wiggins on the one hand, and Blackburn on the other. I was particularly attracted by a view—which both McDowell and Wiggins argued for—according to which evaluative properties, particularly moral properties, are importantly analogous to secondary qualities. For example, there's a paper by Wiggins called "Sensible Subjectivism" (1987), and also McDowell's "Value and Secondary Qualities" in the volume Honderich (1985) edited in honour of Mackie. My thesis, which was a bit of a grab bag, contained a chapter defending that view. But that's one of the positions I came to reject, I guess because, reading people like Clarke, Sidgwick, and Parfit, I came to the view that that kind of moral metaphysics is unnecessary, and we can avoid it by recognising that the reasons we have are capturable in statements of necessary truths. (I might add that I think Clarke and Sidgwick saw that more clearly than Parfit, who spent too little time thinking about the epistemology of normativity.)

So how did you end up writing a thesis on Ideal Utilitarianism?

I had enjoyed working with Griffin and knew I wanted to do moral philosophy. I don't think we were asked, "what would you like to do your thesis on?" You just said, "I would like to write a doctorate" and they would say, "Yeah, Okay." So I started in the first year writing some stuff that was influenced by Dworkin's views of jurisprudence, trying to argue for a conception of morality where there were good and bad interpretations of it, and what we are looking for is the best interpretation of morality. But (and I'm not surprised looking back) that ran into the ground. But it helped me learn more about philosophy and how to do it, and Griffin was encouraging about it. He told me I'd made some progress and developed as a philosopher, so now I had to decide what to do next. Griffin was sharing a draft of his book *Well-being* (1988) with the large group of excellent graduate students at that time working on moral and political philosophy, and this got me interested in well-being. I was pretty influenced

by his criticisms of hedonism and desire-satisfaction accounts. Griffin sometimes says in the book that he accepts a version of informed-desire theory, but I don't think he does. I think it's an objective list account, but Griffin didn't like that name, partly because he thought the distinction between value and desire breaks down. So that led me to try to defend an objective list theory. I was attracted to consequentialism (or utilitarianism) and Tom Hurka had heard I was interested in an objective list account, and suggested to me that I should read Hastings Rashdall's *A Theory of Good and Evil*, which I did, and that led me to think, "Oh yeah, this all makes sense to me." Well, not everything Rashdall said made sense, because he also tries to plug a pretty non-consequentialist account of virtue into his account of well-being. So I didn't do that. I just defended this objective list theory and attached it to the utilitarian principle. And because I was interested in applied ethics, I included some chapters in practical ethics, one on vegetarianism, and the other on population ethics.

I will ask you more about the upshot of your thesis shortly, but beforehand, looking back, what would you consider to be your early career breakthroughs?

I'm not sure it counts as a breakthrough, but looking back I would say that probably the Rashdall element was the most important. Not only the objective list element, but also his arguments for impartiality, in particular the analogies between time and space, which Parfit then developed as well. I think that was what stayed with me most.

Which of your early convictions have you retained and which ones have you now jettisoned?

Well, I was fairly convinced by standard act utilitarianism in a way that I'm not now. But I still think that anybody ought to accept the utilitarian principle, as one principle among others. That is, if the principle is, other things being equal, produce more happiness than less, that seems to be pretty undeniable. But I'm inclined to think that utilitarianism doesn't give enough weight to the separateness of persons. And this is one of the things I learnt from Sidgwick. I also gave up on the objective list account. I don't think I realised this at the time, but I was on the one hand learning from Griffin, while on the other hand rejecting some of his conclusions, because, unlike many philosophers in ethics, he was prepared to take morality as a system—a bit like religion—and think about it independently. In other words, it could all turn out to be something we have to understand primarily from an anthropological point of view. This line of thought is also at least present in the work of John Skorupski, from whom I've also learned a great deal over the years. Indeed, it's there in Mill, on whom of course Skorupski wrote, and in many other British moral philosophers.

Do you mean that Griffin was prepared to take morality as a natural kind?

I don't think he would have put it quite like that. But very roughly, that is what I got from his approach. And, though he was not a utilitarian, he was ready to take it seriously in a way that many people weren't. Utilitarianism is obviously a very radical position, because it says: "we've got this set of principles, which we call morality, but only one of them is correct, and you've got to take that out, and let everything else rest on it." All of the other principles then become secondary. That's essentially the two-level utilitarianism of the kind you get throughout the tradition. And what I now think is that that radical aspect of utilitarianism was carried across to the theory of well-being by Bentham, Mill and Sidgwick, in particular. They were ready to take the common-sense views about what matters in life—like accomplishing something, friendship, and so on—and take seriously the thought that they were mistaken, in the same way that common-sense morality is mistaken. There is one exception: when it comes to the hedonistic principle, we can't give that up: pleasure is good and pain is bad. This is what led me in the direction of hedonism. So I think there's a tension in the kind of view that I defended in my thesis, where you're radical about ethics—you're ready to be minimal and impartial—but when it comes to the view of well-being, you're not. You're actually just somewhat unreflectively adopting the view of common sense.

Why, exactly, do you think there's a tension there?

Well, there's a tension in approach. I'm not saying that you shouldn't end up with an impartial, maximising perfectionism. But, if common sense has got it wrong about morality, it's quite likely to have got it wrong about well-being also.

We will pick up on this more, in a moment, but first, let me ask, how would you describe the philosophical environment at Oxford during the time of your first appointment?

Very, very exciting. I've actually got all my notes somewhere in this room. I kept all my lecture notes, and one day I want to go back and look at them, because I'm sure I've forgotten a lot.

You may have heard of the seminars that came to be known as 'Star Wars', involving people like Parfit, Cohen, Sen, and Dworkin. The debates between McDowell and Wiggins, on the one hand, and Blackburn, on the other, were also gripping. Hare was around, Williams was around, and many others too. It was just a great period for moral philosophy, and I count myself extremely lucky to have been in Oxford during that period.

So this was the late 80s going into the early 90s?

Yes, that's right. I had a British Academy postdoc at University College from '89, and then I started the job here [St. Annes] in '91.

In David Edmonds' (2023) recent biography of Derek Parfit, Edmonds describes a regular gathering with yourself, Brad Hooker, Ruth Chang,

and Derek Parfit. What were these meetings like? What (if anything) did you (dis)agree about the most?

It's quite funny really because the person who had the idea was Ruth Chang. She had this nice apartment (or nice room) and so the first meeting was in there, and she brewed this great coffee, and everything went very well. Then Ruth said to Derek, "Shall we have another one?" And Derek said, "Yes, we should definitely have some more, but you can't come." Parfit was Ruth's supervisor, and he thought that she was taking rather too long over her thesis (she might have agreed with that, I guess). So I think there was at least one meeting where she set up the coffee in her room, and then disappeared—which is a great pity, because it would have been great to have had her there! (Maybe she did come to a few later on.) The people who were there included Brad Hooker, Philip Stratton-Lake, Jonathan Dancy, John Broome, Julian Savulescu, Ralph Wedgwood, and others. And then there were visitors as well, often people staying in All Souls, like John Skorupski, Tim Scanlon, Michael Bratman, Bob Adams, and others. The meetings tended to revolve around work-in-progress. We didn't really read published articles. And it was somewhat dominated by Parfit. Probably half to two-thirds of the discussions were about his drafts. And, I think, for us, it was probably more stimulating earlier on, because Parfit started going around in circles a bit towards the end. But in the earlier sessions he was really working in linear ways, so that was very exciting and inspiring. He really was a phenomenon: much quicker than everyone else.

Were there any points of convergence? Which aspects did you really disagree about?

Hmm. I don't remember a great deal of convergence. In fact I don't recall a single occasion where we ended thinking, "Right, well we've got that sorted out!"

As I mentioned, it did revolve around the themes that people were working on. I remember that the notion of reasons was pretty dominant: I can recall one early session where I'd written something that came up with (I think) five different senses of reason, and Derek was very excited about that—probably with little justification. Still, people really hadn't thought all that hard about reasons, though obviously there's been a lot of helpful work since then. (I was very pleased to hear from Derek years later that I was the person who had first persuaded him that neutral subjective or psychological states such as desires can't ground reasons for action.)

The meetings went on and probably became more spaced out. But we kept going, and then, I'm not sure when, but after quite a long time, Derek told us that he needed to stop because he wanted to finish his book. We were disappointed, partly because we thought he wouldn't finish the book. But then of course he did—so maybe it was the right thing in the end!

II. UTILITARIANISM AND THE VIRTUES

As mentioned, you wrote your D.Phil thesis on ‘Ideal Utilitarianism’. What was the main upshot of that thesis?

The main upshot for me was that it got me thinking more about impartiality, and well-being. But of course in writing it, I read a huge amount and talked a great deal to other philosophers which really helped the development of my philosophical views in general.

In work leading on from that thesis (1992), you argue for a form of ‘Two-level Utilitarianism.’ Before I ask my next question, perhaps you could explain what you mean by two-level utilitarianism, exactly?

I don’t know where the ‘two-level’ phrase comes from. I think it comes from Hare, doesn’t it? And then Griffin took it on as well. Anyway, Hare got it right, really. The idea is that one level of thinking about utilitarianism—or ethics in general—is at the philosophical level, trying to get to the truth about ethics *philosophically*. And that concerns what people call—and this isn’t a term from Hare—the criterion of rightness. And, though I wouldn’t put it in terms of ‘rightness’ (because I think that reasons are fundamental), what you’d be looking for there is the truth about the reasons we have, i.e., what makes a particular action the one you have reason to do.

So that would be at the critical or foundational level, as it were, questions about what grounds one’s reasons for action. But what about at the second level, what goes on there?

The other level would be stuff that goes on outside the study, essentially. The distinction is a bit rough and ready, because of course you will in the study think about how you ought to act outside, and *vice versa*. But the crucial idea, as far as utilitarianism is concerned, is that when you leave the study, if you’re a utilitarian, it doesn’t follow that you should go around all the time trying to put utilitarianism into practice, because that may itself be something that utilitarianism recommends you shouldn’t do. This was Hare’s ‘intuitive level’. The philosophical level, he called the ‘critical level’.

Like most thinkers in the utilitarian tradition, Hare thought that common-sense morality—the morality that we’re brought up with—has quite a lot going for it. I think one failure in the utilitarian tradition (though there are exceptions to this, perhaps in the works of people like Mill or Singer) is that utilitarians haven’t said enough about how damaging common-sense morality is in various ways. In particular, common sense perpetuates the myth expressed in the so-called ‘acts and omissions’ distinction. It also tends to encourage us to focus on what we’re doing as individuals. So it leaves out collective aspects which are hugely important.

In the afore-cited paper, you argue for a position which you call ‘Biographical Utilitarianism’ (BU). BU holds that “Any individual ought to live in such a way that the total amount of utility in the history of the world is brought as close to a maximum.” (p. 141) You then claim that BU is consistent with, and most likely to recommend, a life of the virtues. But why do you believe that BU would end up recommending a life of virtue, in particular?

That paper (if I remember) was a response to some criticisms about various forms of utilitarianism—including act-, rule-, motive-, and other forms of utilitarianism—and I thought, well, what you could do is just bundle all of these things together into the context of a life, and then what you should be thinking about is leading the life that results in the best history of the world. I had some conversations a few years afterwards with Parfit, Michael Smith, Phillip Pettit, and some other people about these issues and what should be the *focus* of the utilitarian ethics. The upshot was that I came to believe that there *is* something special about acts, because acts very often result from decisions, and decisions are meant to be based on reasons. So actually, the question, “Which act should I now perform?”, is a pretty salient one. Hence the focus on acts in the ethical tradition makes a lot of sense. But you’ve got to be clear that the consequences of your act might include all sorts of things like what sorts of dispositions you might be consolidating or weakening, or what motives you might be making yourself more likely to have in the future, what your character is going to be like, and that’s where virtue comes in.

To answer your question, the reason I brought the virtues in was that it just looked plausible to me. I think that somebody with the virtues, properly understood, would have to be someone who, for example, recognised the myth of the act/omissions distinction—it wouldn’t be the typical virtuous person as currently conceived—and then I believe that person would be living the right life. They would have to be thinking about decisions that they are taking at particular times, which will result in their living a life of that kind, but their life would not be dominated by constant reflection on that life.

Thinking out loud, here—and let me know if you agree—but one way to cash out the idea would be to say that the virtues, or certain dispositions or motives to act, are thus prior to the acts themselves. Acts are important, but these stem from the dispositions, motives, or virtues that we might have. And hence why it is important to cultivate these dispositions, motives, virtues is because they help to select the right action.

Exactly. But then you need to take into account the consequences of all of those. And I think that if you don’t get that distinction clear, you can end up muddled. So, for example, I think that Parfit’s (1986, chapter 1) idea of blameless-wrongdoing is a muddle because he didn’t get clear on the distinction between actions and dispositions. He was thinking about act utilitarianism, and the act utilitarian can take into account the effects of

actions on your dispositions in the future. So if you fail to benefit some stranger and instead benefit your child, you can take into account the effect of that action upon your future dispositions. Act utilitarianism has no problem with this. Of course, act utilitarians—as far as I'm concerned—shouldn't be talking about wrongdoing, they should be talking about what we have reason to do. And they certainly shouldn't be talking about blame. Blame is at the heart of common-sense morality, but it's really just a matter of anger and other emotional reactions. And when you should express anger is, again, a question that the act utilitarian can ask. You're not going to end up with anything like blameless-wrongdoing.

But would it not be more likely that BU recommends something akin to a non-principle-based deontology, such as moral particularism? That is to say, on a two-level view, BU would be true at the 'critical level', but would recommend that an agent ought to be responsive to particular moral reasons or considerations at the 'intuitive level'.

To frame the question slightly differently, one might ask, isn't positing the virtues unnecessary here when all that seems to be required is good moral judgement? And if not, why not?

Another good question. It depends on what you mean by particularism. I think when Dancy is talking about particularism, it's a kind of meta-view. It's not a meta-ethical view in the sense in which most people understand that term—it's not a metaphysical view—but a view about moral principles. It says that the truth about ethics is not captured entirely by moral principles. So I presume that BU (or any of these views) would not be consistent with that.

But if we go back to the distinction between levels again, then I think you are right about that. In other words, BU (or any other plausible form of utilitarian principle) wouldn't be recommended. Rather, the implication would be that what you ought to do is just decide what to do in any of the particular cases, with some degree of appropriate reflection.

Yes, this is what I had in mind when I suggested good practical judgement. Notwithstanding, implicit in my previous question, I guess, is a desire to get your thoughts on what you think a virtue actually is. Because, at least on my reading, it can often seem as if Aristotle wants to equate virtue with good practical judgement. If this were so, and if we were to accept this picture, then my last question would not be so much of a criticism of your view, but rather another way of phrasing it.

I think, roughly, Aristotle got it right on the nature and structure of virtue. He's the greatest theorist of the virtues. And it's sad that, despite the revival of virtue ethics, many aspects of his view have been misinterpreted.

The distinction between actions and feelings is clearly very helpful. And it's illuminating to think about life as consisting in certain spheres, like money—your control of money—and the emotions, anger, fear, and so on, in each of which what you should be aiming at is getting it right. You can get it wrong by failing to do the right thing at the right time, and

so on, which is Aristotle's set of defective vices. And you can do the act in question at the wrong time and the wrong place, and so on. So, if we take generosity, the generous person is the one who gives away the right amount of money, at the right time, for the right reasons, and so on. The prodigal person is the person who does it when they shouldn't, and then the stingy person is the person who fails to give away money when they should. Aristotle recognises in his discussion of generosity that it's going to be quite common for a person to have both vices. So it's not as if you can place each person on a spectrum. If you're prodigal, then you'll give away all your money. Then someone will come around collecting for a worthy charity, and you can't donate to them, even though you'd like to, because you've given away all your money, and that makes you mean or stingy. Aristotle doesn't have the focus we have on the will and intention. It's your fault that you cannot now donate. Thus you've got both vices. I don't know what he would say about someone who had both vices *and* gave away money at the right time. I presume he would say that they're not even a little bit virtuous. Virtuous people don't just get it right, they also don't get it wrong.

But I guess my question is that people often tend to list the virtues—generosity, courage, bravery, and so on—but these, at least to my mind, seem to be instances of what is just one virtue, namely, the virtue of practical wisdom, or, more loosely, the virtue of getting it right.

Absolutely, yes. So Aristotle's brief account of moral education is an account of learning to get it right. People become virtuous by being properly taught, either deliberately or by inhabiting a particular culture, and so they're naturally disposed, say, to give away money. But that's not enough because you cannot just let someone off if they're naturally disposed to give away money since they might give it to people who shouldn't have it. And presumably they won't give money to everybody, so they might fail to give money to someone they should. That's why they have to develop what Aristotle calls the intellectual virtues. Next, though, and this is where I disagree with Aristotle a bit, he follows through with the Platonic/Socratic view, and says that, if you're going to have one virtue, then you must have all of them. And you can see why he thinks that because, if you don't have all of them, you're not insured against cases where you might not do the right thing. You might be thinking that you're pretty generous because you give away the right proportion of your income in certain circumstances. However, to do this consistently might require a certain amount of courage. And if you haven't got that virtue, then you actually fail in the sphere of generosity. So on Aristotle's view you haven't got the virtue of generosity, since it's success-oriented. And I can see the argument for that. But the reason I disagree with Aristotle is because he's just a deontologist. He thinks that there is a right way to act, and a right way to feel, and so on, for any particular occasion. And given this, he comes up with an account which is pluralistic in terms of the set of principles corresponding to each virtue. Whereas I'd be more inclined to think

that the correct principle is consequentialist, really. Ethics is essentially to do with the distribution of well-being. So the question of whether you should have all the virtues, or just some subset depends on what the outcome is of having those virtues.

In your paper “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”, you state that “an agent ought to live virtuously, consulting the BU criterion only on certain special occasions.” (p. 154) But I wonder why this latter qualification is necessary. To be sure, there may be times when the right thing to do is to straightforwardly maximise the good. But surely a virtuous person will already be disposed to act in such a way without having to “consult the BU criterion.” So why do you believe this latter qualification is needed?

Well, it might not be. But I take it that people like Mill, and Hare are right, in that it would be probably a mistake to think to yourself fairly early on in your ethical career, “Well, this common-sense morality that we’ve got, it needs a bit of tweaking, but I can now tweak it and live in accordance with that for the rest of my life”. That seems a bit complacent. The morality you’ve been taught may be appropriate to the time in which you are living. But things may change. Or, of course, you may have got it wrong. So, I think there is monitoring that has to be done, and there might be conflicts that require some kind of resolution.

And do you not worry that the recommendation to live a life of virtues whilst consulting the BU criterion on special occasions might lead to a form of cognitive dissonance on behalf of the agent?

Yes, it could lead to such an incoherence, and that would be another factor I suppose for someone to take into account when questioning how one ought to live. In fact, I remember talking to Hare about this—well, several of us talking to Hare about this. He and his wife, Catherine, really loved one another—they had a wonderful partnership—and he was prepared to be very frank, so we said to him, “Isn’t there some tension between the way you feel about Catherine, and your thoughts about ethical theory’s being completely impartial?” And without hesitation he said, “No”. I take it that he really was ready to draw a sharp distinction between the study and the rest of his life. It wasn’t as if he was living his life and then he went back into the study to think about utilitarianism. He wouldn’t be thinking to himself that in some sense he oughtn’t to have been doing those ordinary things in life; he was convinced that he lived in accordance with his theory, at least in that respect, but probably in many other respects.

How important do you think it is for philosophers—especially practical philosophers—to live in accordance with their own philosophical views? One example that comes to mind is G. A. Cohen (2000), in his well-known paper, “If you’re an egalitarian how come you’re so rich?” Another example perhaps being some more hard-nosed utilitarians who

openly believe that they should be acting more morally in their own lives, but just don't. Do you have views on this?

I don't myself think there's anything bad in itself about such inconsistent or hypocritical behaviour. Consider some appalling fascist, who acts in accordance with their moral views. I wouldn't want to say, "Well, of course what they're doing is overall wrong and regrettable, but at least they have the virtue of integrity". We also have to be careful about what the implications of a theory actually are. A very rich egalitarian might be developing some fund which will promote equality much more effectively than their handing over their money piecemeal to one charity or another. What people have reason to do is what they have reason to do, and this may be in line with their own view, or it may not. But its being in line with their own view doesn't give them an extra reason to do it.

Moving on to virtue ethics more generally, you mention in the article that the value of the virtues is derivative from the value of welfare.

In a different paper, "A Third Method of Ethics?", you argue that virtue ethics as a theory of right action should be categorised as a 'non-principle-based deontology.'¹ However, you entertain the idea that virtue ethics constitutes its own branch (or method) of ethics if considered, not as a theory of right action, but as a theory about what type of characters we ought to possess. You reject the idea that there is added moral value in a particular act simply because it was performed from a virtuous motive (or disposition). Some philosophers, though, hold that being virtuous is intrinsically or non-derivatively valuable (for example, Hurka 1992). I must admit, I feel the force of this view. Maybe you could say more about how you see the relation between virtue (or the virtuous person) and welfare and why you think that being virtuous is not ultimately valuable?

In the 80s, I edited a book called *How Should One Live?*, a collection on the virtues. I haven't looked recently at the introduction to that, but I suspect I wouldn't agree with all of it now. One of the things it says is that this turn in thinking about the virtues has been hugely productive in moral philosophy. I haven't given up on that. I think the issues raised about the relation between the self and others, about partiality and impartiality, the nature of dispositions, the two-level issue, how to understand the virtues, and which virtues we now live by, and so on are all worth thinking about.

¹The argument, roughly, is that, when pressed to explain what makes an act right, the proponent of virtue ethics is led to the view that a virtuous act is so by dint of its being right. For example, it would be virtuous to save a drowning child because, under certain conditions, this would be the right thing to do. Pressed on what makes it the 'right thing to do', the virtue ethicist would then draw attention to various normative factors which she deems relevant. This, therefore, takes the form of a non-principle-based deontology. And so, as a theory of right action, virtue ethics is not a distinct method of ethics alongside consequentialism and deontology.

The turn in virtue ethics that I disagree with is the idea that there is a third kind of ethical theory which nobody had noticed, though Aristotle got part of the way there. That strikes me as a mistake. Because, once you understand what ethics is aiming at, you see that it's trying to state clearly and precisely what your reasons are. If you're a virtue ethicist, you have to say that a virtuous person's actions are right *because* they're virtuous. And that's terribly circular and implausible. It also gives you a weird account of the virtuous person because in most cases, if you ask a virtuous person *why* they are acting as they are, they won't say, "Well, I'm doing it because I'm virtuous" or "I'm doing it because it is what a virtuous person would do in these circumstances". They'll say, "Well, I'm doing this because it's just" or, "I'm doing this because it would have been unkind not to do it", and they can articulate without reference to virtue itself what makes the action in question virtuous. So, the virtue of kindness just *consists in* doing kind actions. And that's really my objection to so-called 'virtue ethics'. That seems such an obvious problem with virtue ethics that I'd be surprised if it continues for much longer. It's pretty well entrenched at present, but so was phrenology.

One thing I was also trying to do in that paper is to say that it's really worth thinking about the virtues because they're the property of all moral philosophers, not just those defending one particular theory. And it certainly is worth asking the question which the ancients asked, namely, "Should we say that all that matters is doing the right thing, or perhaps having the right feelings on individual occasions, or should we say there is some value in having the disposition to do that?"

I remember years ago having a conversation with Frances Kamm, who has probably written more about deontology in the last few decades than any other well-known philosopher, and I asked her why she never talks about virtue. And she said, "Well, why should I? If somebody is living their life in such a way that they always do the right thing, for the right reasons, then, what else is there to say?" I can understand where she's coming from. But I also think the questions that the ancients asked, and that W. D. Ross asked, such as "Is there value in having virtuous dispositions?", is an important and interesting one. Ross thought, yes, there is value in having these dispositions. So he was actually a virtue ethicist in that sense.

What do you mean by 'value' here?

I mean that it makes the world better—that it's a good-making feature of a person.

And, if I've read you correctly, you would agree there is moral value here, but not non-ultimate value, as you put it.

One view I've come to, mainly through reading Sidgwick, is what's come to be called the *demoralizing position*. So, if you're going to capture reasons for action, it's best to try to avoid using moral terms. This is partly for reasons of parsimony. But there are other reasons that we might talk

about later. Then you'd have to ask the question without reference to moral terms. And I think it starts sounding less plausible. Also, I'm a welfarist, so I don't believe in the idea of any kind of moral value that is not to be explained by reference to well-being. I grant that such value is conceivable, but I guess that welfarism is more aligned with the theory of reasons.

Thus, in your view, to be a virtuous person has value only to the extent that it increases my well-being?

And the well-being of others, of course.

III. THE GOOD

This brings us onto the topic of welfare or well-being more generally.

You are well-known for your writings on Hedonism.² What do you find attractive about this view, and why do you favour it over other leading theories of welfare (such as 'desire-satisfaction' or 'objective list' theories)?

The way I see the history of discussions about well-being is that the debate (at least in the Western tradition) has been between hedonism—which was hugely popular in the ancient world—and objective list theories. The objective list theory was defended by the three philosophers who dominate discussion of ancient philosophy, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. And I think that debate between hedonism and the objective list theory runs through Christianity. There's a kind of side debate about whether we include virtue on the list. And I think that when we get to the so-called British Moralists, the majority of them were hedonists. But hedonism started to become less popular in the 19th century. Why that happened is a bit of a mystery. Terry Irwin suggested to me—in what was just a throw-away suggestion of his—that it might have had something to do with Victorian sensibilities: it was not thought of as being sufficiently high-minded. And obviously there were the worries about sensualism and so on in the background. And then, of course, we have Moore—who was not a hedonist—and he really put the boot into Mill in a not terribly plausible way, but in a way which was hugely influential. Still, I'm inclined to think that hedonism is on the rise again. The truth will out!

As I mentioned, I defended an objective list theory in my thesis. But then I moved away from it as a result of thinking about the common-sense view of well-being in the same way that I thought about the common-sense view about morality.

Most objective list theorists have said, and would say—though there have been exceptions, not least, Aristotle—that pleasure is good and pain is bad, other things being equal. Thus there is agreement there. And then the question is, should we say that there is other stuff that's good—accomplishment, friendship, knowledge, and so on?

² See, for instance, Crisp, (2006a, Ch. 6; 2006b).

One thing that happened towards the end of the 19th century was that people started to argue that we shouldn't be thinking in either of these ways, but that we should be thinking in terms of desire- or preference-satisfaction. That came out of philosophical economics. And the view became very popular in philosophy in the last century, and is still quite widespread, though I'd say it's losing ground in philosophy. That view seems to me seriously mistaken. It misunderstands the relation between the desire and the good which Aristotle had already made perfectly clear. We desire things because they are good, and if we get the good thing, that makes us better off. But it *does not* make us better off *because* it fulfils our desires. In other words, desire-satisfaction is not a good-making property. That's the difficulty. Whereas, something like accomplishing something with your life, that's a plausible candidate for a good-making property. What the hedonist will say here is, "Well, these things that people say are valuable independently of pleasure—like accomplishment, friendship, knowledge and so on—they're all things people enjoy". So that already makes the objective list view slightly suspicious. But it's not just that. Confronted with many common-sense principles that we're taught—that you should keep your promises and so on—the utilitarian will say, "These principles are very productive of utility, so you should follow them". It's the very same with accomplishing something, having friends and knowledge and so on. These things will lead to pleasure. So the basic idea is that, just as someone like Sidgwick did, you can distance yourself from common sense both in your thinking about morality and in your thinking about well-being.

Now, if I understand your view correctly, you take pleasure to be a quale (2006a, p. 109). Which is to say, you take pleasure (or enjoyment) to be an element of phenomenal consciousness such that there is something that it is like to experience it. In short, you think that pleasure is a feeling.

Thus, if pleasure (or enjoyment) is a conscious feeling, and if hedonism is (in part) the view that only pleasures and pains count towards well-being, then this implies that non-conscious creatures cannot be welfare subjects. Would you agree?

Yes, I would. So, I'm putting what you might call a *phenomenal experience requirement* on well-being, or something like that—a consciousness requirement, maybe. But I know that some people like David Chalmers recently have taken seriously the idea that zombies could have well-being. And there does seem to be a link there with the desire and objective list theories. Because, on the face of it, you might think that zombies can have desires fulfilled and so on; they could accomplish something; and, on some conceptions of knowledge, they could know things, but it's just that *there is nothing it's like* to be a zombie. I guess someone like Chalmers would say I'm only holding this view *because* I'm a hedonist—but it seems to me totally implausible that zombies could have a well-being, that there is anything good or bad for a zombie.

This view has gathered momentum recently, and one of the arguments you referred to has come to be known as the argument from positive goods (Bradford, 2023). In a nutshell, (1) the experience machine shows us that there are non-experientialist goods, (2) these goods can be instantiated in the lives of non-sentient creatures such as zombies, so therefore, (3) non-sentient creatures such as zombies, robots, plants, etc., can be welfare subjects too.

Be that as it may, consider the following case. Imagine we stumble across a community of aliens, and they seem to care about others, and are cognitively sophisticated, and display a range of behaviours that are similar to those that we display, but it just so happens that they don't have phenomenal consciousness. On your view, they do not count as welfare subjects?

That's right. There's an epistemological problem about how we tell that these claims are true. But if the question is, if we were to do something apparently bad to those individuals, and it really were true that they did not have phenomenal consciousness, then I am committed to the idea that there is nothing wrong with our treating them in any way that we wanted to.

I do think that this discussion is really interesting. And, in a way, I think it's good for the hedonist, because it's produced a bullet for the objective list theorist to bite, one which hadn't really been noticed at the time that people like Griffin were writing.

What do you mean, exactly, by having a bullet to bite?

Well, you have to accept that a zombie who accomplishes something has made their life better for themselves.

That's very interesting. Because I feel as if it's the hedonist who is biting the bullet in these cases, especially in the example of the sophisticated aliens. I think you are quite right to point to the epistemological issue. Nevertheless, the hedonist is committed to the view that it would be perfectly fine to exterminate a race of sophisticated but non-sentient aliens. To my mind, that's a pretty big bullet.

Fair enough. It might be worth making a general point here about examples in ethics and other areas of philosophy. A lot of people seem to think that the way to do philosophy is to hear what somebody says, and then to come up with some consequences or implications of that account which look weird, and leave things there. I don't think that's a good way to do philosophy. Sidgwick is right when he claims that you need to get your views on anything in philosophy, including ethics, very, very clear—as clear as you can make them—and then you have sit down and think honestly about whether any particular view is self-evident, that is, necessarily true, true in all possible worlds. I think examples can be helpful here. For instance, say you do decide that pleasure is the only good, and then somebody comes up with an example like the zombie one. In that

case you should go back to your view, and you'll be able to see that it's counterintuitive, but you need to ask whether it's so counterintuitive that it undermines your initial confidence that this is a self-evident truth. And if I do that, I find that I can retain my original confidence in hedonism. Though of course I'm not saying that, in the case of somebody else, it might not be different. And, Sidgwick was very good at explaining why *that* should be worrying—i.e. that you and the other person both disagree—unless you've got some account of why one of you is unjustified in taking that different view.

Most people in this debate agree that sentience is sufficient for an individual to count as a welfare subject, and I think this is consistent with all that you've just said. This consideration seems to survive Sidgwick's reflective process. The critical question, though, is whether or not it is necessary for being a welfare subject—is sentience and the capacity to have experiences of pleasure and pain the only thing that matters? That's the crucial issue.

I think that's right. And of course, objective list theorists could refuse to bite the bullet and say, "Oh, well, I have some kind of experience requirement". But you cannot just bolt that on without thinking about it in isolation, and asking yourself whether you are saying this just so you can keep the show on the road.

Yes, and then, if they posit an experience requirement as necessary, that raises the further question, why is that necessary? And hence we're back at square one.

Yes, I think that's right.

Moving on, then, one objection to the view that pleasure is a quale is the so-called 'heterogeneity objection', the idea being that various feelings which we label 'pleasures' are so diverse that it is difficult to believe that they have anything in common whatsoever. For instance, the pleasant feeling of a warm shower seems to have little—if anything—in common with the pleasure I take in the fact that next week I'll be on holiday.

Your response (2006a, Ch. 4; 2012) to this objection is to point out that pleasurable feelings do have something in common, to wit, the fact that they are all pleasurable!

But a sceptic may simply reply that we only label these feelings as pleasures—that is, we use the word 'pleasure' to refer to them all, but that this does not entail that they all share a certain phenomenology. Rather—the sceptic might continue—we call these feelings pleasures only because we take a certain pro-attitude towards them.³ Why should we believe the former view and not the latter?

³ See, in particular, Feldman (2004).

Because there is a difference between a feeling and an attitude. Pleasure is a feeling. And we can now measure it. There are certain circuits in the brain which are associated with the feeling of pleasure. And you could have one of these pro-attitudes without feeling pleasure. So, for example, if we think about Feldman's idea of attitudinal pleasures, you might say, "I take pleasure in and am pleased at the fact that the Nazis lost the war". But there might be nothing going on in the pleasure circuits in the brain. You just think it's a good thing. You don't actually have any feelings about this. You *could* have feelings. You could contemplate that, and have certain subsequent feelings as a result. But it's still the case that your taking pleasure in the having of the attitude. It's not the attitude itself that is the pleasure. I think it's fine if you want stipulate that that's what you *mean* by pleasure—i.e. that it's an attitude—but I don't think it's in line with the hedonist tradition, or indeed ordinary usage. And to me it doesn't look very plausible as the foundation for an evaluative position. I can't see what's so great about tokening an attitude if you're not getting anything pleasurable—i.e. any *enjoyment*—out of it.

A Recent paper, Lin (2020) argues that pleasure is an attitude, but goes on to ask, if we agree on this much, then how do we identify this attitude—how do we bracket it off from other attitudes that we have? Well, Lin thinks that the way that we do this is by identifying those pleasurable attitudes with the ones that feel good. Thus, on this account, attitudinal and phenomenal hedonism don't conflict. And hence we have a hybrid account of pleasure.

I partly agree. An attitude you take pleasure in is a hybrid. But it doesn't mean we've found some kind of new philosophical pigeonhole. I think that the distinction between attitudes and pleasures is still there. It's just that they can be found together.

More recently, there has been a growing body of work discussing the badness of pain.⁴ Two cases are often discussed in the literature. The first is pain asymbolia. These are cases where individuals report feeling pain, but do not seem to be bothered by this—i.e. they have no con-attitude towards it. The second type of cases are what has come to be known as 'Hurts-so-good' cases (HSGs). These are instances such as climbing a mountain, having a deep-tissue massage, or jumping in a freezing lake, in which people tend to enjoy pain for its own sake, and so, paradoxically, pain seems beneficial in HSG cases.

Now, I am making the following assumptions. If you take pleasure to be a feeling, then, presumably you think that there is some essential feature of this feeling that makes it intrinsically good. And, assuming that pain is the opposite of pleasure, then I suppose you take some essential feature of the feeling of pain as intrinsically bad. In the

⁴ See, for example, "Well-being and Ill-being", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 46. 2022.

two cases given above, however, there appears to be nothing intrinsically bad about having these painful experiences. They appear to show that pain is not itself intrinsically bad, and hence they pose counterexamples to your view. How do you respond to these counterexamples?

I think these cases are fascinating. And I've had some pretty interesting discussions with people about them, including the neuroscientist Morten Kringelbach. Now Morten doubts them because he thinks that people can just be misremembering, misinterpreting, misunderstanding their own experience. And as he says, we're actually quite good at that as a species. But I think another possibility is that, there is, as it were, a sensation of pain—there is something that it is like to be in pain—and maybe that's the same before and after the operation or whatever, but that's not what hedonists are talking about. Hedonists are talking about the experience of having that sensation *and* disliking it. But you have to be careful. It's not that the dislike, as it were, is *making* the pain bad. Because then that would make other things bad, even if they were completely independent of pleasure and pain. The idea is, for beings like us, having sensations of pain and sensations of pleasure and disliking them in those cases is a pretty basic category of experience. And that I think would deal with the hurt-so-good cases.

Right, so to get clear on this, you're saying that there is the sensation of pain, but I like this sensation of pain, and so I'm enjoying it. And, on your view, is this good or bad for a person?

It's good for a person—it's good if they're enjoying that sensation of pain. This is what hedonist meant by enjoyment. And, on this view, all enjoyable experiences are intrinsically good. *That's* why people jump in the lake.

But this seems fairly attitudinal. I have the feeling of pain, but my attitude of enjoyment is what makes it good?

It is attitudinal because it involves attitudes. But the attitude isn't making things good or bad. And it is complicated. For example, I sometimes go swimming in the river near my house when it's quite cold, and when I jump in it's a mixed experience, there can be a certain amount of pain involved, so there are bits of it I don't enjoy—I dislike them. But then, as I get more used to it, I start to enjoy it. But I think there are purer cases, where the person, right from the start, is feeling the sensation of pain and they're just loving it. And that's *taking* pleasure *in* the sensation of pain.

But there has to be a feeling of pleasure.

There is the feeling of enjoyment, and that's just the experience of liking the pain.

I think I see it now. So, there is a feeling—something that it is like—to like/enjoy the sensation of a pain. So there is an attitude involved, but that attitude is accompanied by a phenomenology, and it's the latter phenomenology and not the attitude that counts?

Yes.

Hedonism is often criticised on the basis of the philosophy of swine objection. Very roughly, the idea is that, if pleasure and pain are the only things that matter, then the life of a contented pig can be better than that of a discontented Socrates, as Mill (1863, Ch. 2) puts it. This is a proposition which many people find difficult to believe.

The implication of the philosophy of swine objection is that there must be some point at which the prolonged simple pleasures outweigh the rich and diverse pleasures of human experience. So, for example, if you give the pig enough of its piggy-pleasures, then there will always come a point at which the pig's life is better than that of the human's. You have responded (2006a, Ch. 4) to this objection in the following way.

You claim that deciding which are the correct criteria for valuing enjoyment (pleasure) should be influenced by the way subjects actually value experiences. So imagine an individual judges reading a novel more enjoyable than drinking a glass of lemonade. If I understand you correctly, you claim that, so long as there are certain properties of the experience of reading the novel which the subject deems good, then we do not have to assume that there must exist an amount of prolonged lemonade-drinking enjoyment which necessarily outweighs the enjoyment of reading the novel. In other words, this valuation of the hedonistic value of novel-reading could be correct.

This is a complicated view. And so, before we move on, I would like to invite you to say a bit more by way of clarification, and why you think that this is the case.

Yes, I think what I was doing there, taking my view from Griffin and others—maybe Rashdall—was suggesting that it's possible, not totally implausible, that there are discontinuities here. So, yes, it's true that the more years of piggy-pleasure you get, the better off you are. But it does not matter how many years of piggy-pleasure you get, it'll never compensate for (let's say) a year of higher, human pleasures. And it could be the same with pains. So you could have what I call *bad-bad* discontinuities, as well, in which, for example, if you take a week of the most awful agony you can imagine, say torture, and compare it with a lesser bad, say, a hangnail, then, it doesn't matter how long you have the hangnail, it'll never be as bad as the week of torture. Now, that seems to me an available position, and one that's not completely implausible.

But apart from that general intuition, is there further argumentation to back this position up?

No, but that's OK, because I think we're getting down to bedrock at this point. I'm a foundationalist on these matters.

IV. PRACTICAL REASON

Turning now to normative considerations. W. D. Ross entitled his seminal work, The Right and the Good. The title of your book, Reasons and the Good, subtly implies that this distinction misses the mark.

This is because one of the key theses of the book is that we can answer—in full—the fundamental normative question, “What ought I to do?” without reference to moral concepts. As I understand it, all that is required on your view is the concept of (i) an individual’s welfare, (ii) normative reasons, and (iii) a mechanism for comparing these reasons, such as ‘weighing’.

Is this correct, and would you care to elaborate at all?

I think that’s absolutely spot on. That is the view I ended up with, but I didn’t start with it. The road I went down could have led to returning to the ‘right’ as well.

I think it’s amazing in philosophy how rare it is for anyone in any area of philosophy to start by saying, “This is the question that I’m asking. And I’m going to stick to it, and I’m going to give you the answer”. So in general this simple, basic principle of good philosophical methodology is widely ignored. So which question are we asking in ethics? Well, you might say, “Oh, it’s obvious, we’re asking about what the right thing to do is”. Well, people are doing that. But if we get the correct answer to that question, there’s still a prior question, viz: “do we have any reason to do what’s right?” I think this suggests that the ultimate question in ethics is what reasons we have.

What is more, one should be parsimonious. The philosophical conceptual scheme we have is, on the whole, just given to us. And we often have lots of concepts which roughly amount to the same thing. They’re often not quite the same, and one can go on for ages about how they differ from one another. But it gets very complicated, and there’s a lot of quicksand there that it would be good to avoid. So, I think that, once you’ve decided what your question is, then you need to start answering it. And every time you offer an answer, using certain concepts, you should ask, “Do I really need that concept? Because, if I don’t, I’m just going to put it to one side. Maybe it’s unnecessary and maybe it will cause confusion”. So there’s an argument for parsimony here.

Again, following through on Sidgwick’s view, I don’t think you have to go that far, ending up by saying the reasons we have to act are to do with the promotion of net well-being, that is, net pleasure, and nothing else. As Sidgwick himself points out, we’re separate beings. And the egoistic view, that you have strongest reason, or reason only, to look after your own good, has been viewed as very plausible over the centuries. Indeed William Frankena once claimed it’s probably been the most popular view over time. (This is another strange thing that happened in the 19th century: people largely just stopped talking about egoism. And there was very little discussion of egoism in the 20th century.) Anyway, the point is that there are several views on the table: hedonistic (perhaps weighted) utilitarianism, hedonistic egoism, or some dualistic view, according to which what we have strongest reason to do in any case depends on which

principle speaks more strongly in favour of acting in accordance with it on that occasion.

As an aside, as I view 20th-century philosophy, it made some massive advances over previous centuries, in clarifying problems and possible solutions to them, but, in general, certainly in ethics, things really went downhill after Sidgwick. People on the whole didn't recognize the power of his arguments for utilitarianism *and* for egoism, as well as the problems he found in deontology. (I think that book III of Sidgwick's *Methods*, along with Richard Price's *Review*, are the best statements of deontological ethics in the history of Western philosophy, at least since Aristotle. Further, not only did Sidgwick state the views pretty clearly, but he also had some quite powerful objections which people didn't bother to deal with. W. D. Ross is an exception. I think that Ross was a bright point in 20th-century philosophy because he basically saw the world in a very similar way to Sidgwick. He was an intuitionist. And he was very careful in his philosophy. But he also saw the plausibility in the deontological view which Sidgwick hadn't completely dispelled. And that was the thing to think about. But unfortunately people went off in the direction of metaphysical meta-ethics. And then, in the 70s, for understandable reasons, practical ethics. That's worth doing, but if you're going to do practical ethics properly, then you need to have a theory, and we haven't made much progress on that since Sidgwick and Ross. It's nearly a hundred years since the *Right and the Good*, so I hope things improve.

Anyway, I've gone slightly off track. On the demoralization position, it's based on parsimony, but also, I think, there are two further broad kinds of argument. One would be that, when we think about morality properly, we can see that it's evolved. It's a cultural and social phenomenon with a history. Why have these systems evolved? Because they promote survival, broadly understood. Now, if you think about the law, things have changed. So, in the past, many people were natural lawyers. They believed that there were positive legal systems, but also that, on top of this, there was a natural law built into the universe, decreed by God or whatever, so that we can consider positive legal systems in light of what we think about natural law. These days, most legal theorists have given up on that way of thinking. But, in ethics, people continue to think of morality in an analogous way, as if there's some kind of ideal moral law built into the universe, and we can find out what it is, and we can then test our own moral systems against that. But I think positivists in law are correct, and that we should be positivists about morality. And we should probably be positivists about religion, at least to start with. This is not to say that we shouldn't be doing philosophy of religion, but that we should hold these positions at the start. And in ethics we should ask whether we actually want to go along with the idea that there's this—on the face of it, rather peculiar, and hard to explain—moral law, in the universe, though we don't believe in God anymore, demanding that we do certain things, requiring that we do certain things, requiring that we punish people

because they're blameworthy, and so on. No, let's not do that unless we have to.

The other worry is that, more than in the case of law, morality involves the emotions. Many people—particularly outside of philosophy—when they are having moral arguments become very worked up. It does happen within philosophy as well—there is too much table thumping going on, too many high-minded appeals to ideas of nobility, dignity, and so on. This is not a good way to do philosophy. You should be standing back from your emotions, and using your capacity to reason; and, as I said before, working the way that Descartes and Sidgwick and other people have recommended: state your view as clearly as possible and as unemotionally as you can, and then decide on the basis of calm reflection whether it's true. Now that's not to say that you might not need certain emotions, or the capacity for them, to grasp necessarily true practical principles. It's not a coincidence that many utilitarians were highly benevolent, and they probably wouldn't have got to that view if they hadn't been.

According to your view, deontic concepts such as right, obligation, duty, etc., fall out of the picture. And the question, "What ought I to do?" can be fruitfully rephrased as, "What do I have most reason to do?". Ross, therefore, had no need to appeal to the deontic concept of 'right' when 'most reason' would have done just fine.

I must admit, I find this view very attractive. Let me ask, therefore, what do you consider to be its main downsides?

Well, one downside is that many people seem to disagree with it. Like Sidgwick, I'm attracted to Pyrrhonism, and this means that, strictly speaking, I have to suspend judgement on several views which seem to me to be highly plausible. I have had conversations with people about it, and it just is true that some obviously intelligent and reasonable people will say, "I've thought hard about the ultimate question in ethics, and I think it's 'What's the right thing to do?'". I might reply "Well, but do you have reason to do the right thing?" And they'll say, "Yes, of course you do, because we have the correct conception of rightness as itself grounding reasons." So there are certain conceptual debates that I think still need sorting out.

And I guess a practical downside of the view is that you can't engage straightforwardly in the kind of praise and blame that many people believe belong to morality. I think that in *Reasons and the Good* I used the example of Hitler. We want to be able to condemn Hitler in the strongest terms. We want to be able to say that he was a monster, evil, contemptible, and so on. We want to use all these moral terms to condemn him. But according to the reasons-first approach, or whatever you want to call it, all you can say is that Hitler had very strong reason not to do what he did. I think the only solution here is to recognize the two levels again. So demoralizing on the whole is a philosophical strategy, but I also think that in certain cases it can be quite helpful. Especially if tempers are getting heated and there is a lot of disagreement going on. It can be valuable for

people to step back and recognize that what really matters in the question at stake is how certain lives go.

Your view in Reasons and the Good is teleological—since all reasons for action are those that promote welfare. But you state that the view is not ‘act utilitarian’. Presumably this is for two reasons. The first being that the view takes into account the distribution of welfare.⁵ But, second, the view places more weight upon self-interested reason than does traditional act consequentialism. You call this the ‘dual-source’ view. Very roughly, the idea is that there are reasons to promote both one’s own welfare, as well as the general welfare of everybody (see also, Crisp 1996a).

As you note, the dual-source view relies on the idea of the separateness of persons. But the separateness of persons can be, and has been, challenged. Why are you not swayed by these arguments?

The most significant aspect of Parfit’s (1986, part III) work is that he’s brought out more clearly than anybody that I know of in the history of philosophy just how important the issue of personal identity is when it comes to ethics. In ethics it’s important to find out, as it were, which beings we should care about (some people speak in terms of moral status, but that’s a bit misleading), i.e., which are the beings that matter. Does that chair matter? Does that bird matter? Well, the bird matters but the chair doesn’t. But when it comes to human beings, there are some real problems about the correct view of personal identity. So if you’re going to hold the dual-source view, you will have to get clear on that. And I haven’t, really, yet anyway. But say that one followed through on Parfit’s sceptical arguments about the standard views of personal identity all the way to Buddhism of a kind, where you’ve got just momentary subjects of experience. Even then, on the face of it, they would look to be separate from one another as well. Now, you might just bundle them all together and say there’s just consciousness, and a single subject. Then the dual-source view would in effect collapse because there would be no duality. But until we get to that point, I think there’s going to be separateness.

So, why do I accept the principle of self-interest? Well, it’s partly through noticing that everybody that I know thinks their own self-interest matters to them in some special way. But, of course, that doesn’t show that it does. It’s more a matter of reflective intuition, where you do have to focus on particular cases. Imagine one case where you’ve got to decide whether to undergo some pretty bad pain and suffering. And if you don’t do that, some very minor hangnail-type suffering will occur to many other people. But these people are already doing massively better than you. I’m not saying you shouldn’t undergo the severe pain, but I just cannot imagine how it could be at all plausible to say that the fact that it’s *me* who’s

⁵ Crisp holds a ‘sufficiency’ view. Namely, that we have special reasons to promote an individual’s welfare up until a certain threshold, after which, these reasons give out, and we have no (non-derivative) reason to give any individual special treatment (see 2003; 2006a, Ch. 6).

going to be experiencing this severe pain, and the fact that *they're* going to be experiencing the hangnail, are just practically irrelevant. I just cannot imagine thinking that all that matters is the impersonal pleasure and pain. That's where I get off the bus really, and I do wonder if utilitarians might be charged with at least a degree of bad faith at this point.

There does seem to be an intricate connection between the entity/subject that's making the decision and the experience of the same entity/subject that's making that decision. It seems that because the entity/subject that makes the decision is the same entity/subject that will have that experience, then this provides that decision-making entity/subject with reasons that other entities/subjects who will not have that experience do not have.

Exactly.

So, such a case is difficult to imagine, but we can try to imagine an angel version of yourself that makes all of your decisions from heaven, but your earthly body is the one that has to experience the effects of the decisions taken by your angel-self up in heaven. And thus, in this case, the subject of experience and the decision-making subject are separated, and thus the pain of the one seems less relevant to the other. (Notwithstanding the significant difficulties concerning the theory of personal identity here.)

That's a nice example. My main problem with it is understanding the identity of the angel with the body. It sounds as if this is a case of one person's making a decision about another. But I'm not ruling out that claim of identity as wrong or inconceivable. Many years ago, for example, people would have found it inconceivable that parallel lives could meet. But we now know that, given the way space actually is, they do. So I can imagine arriving in heaven and God's saying, "That angel is identical with you", or perhaps it could turn out that utilitarianism is in effect true, because there is just one single consciousness, and 'I' am just a part of God's consciousness.

One line of thought in Parfit that I don't think he followed through properly, and I don't think reductionists have followed through properly either, is this. If you take Parfit's case of *My Division* (1986, pp. 254-255) and like Parfit you think that we split, in the *Y* case, if you think that's twice as good as ordinary survival, what you have to accept is that your well-being is now being accrued in two different places at the same time. So, if you could come up with some view in which all sentient beings were identical to one another—they were the same owners of well-being—you could plausibly become a utilitarian. But it would require a very peculiar metaphysics, I think.

Of course. We would have to fundamentally rethink what it means to respond to reasons and make decisions in such a case.

On your view, then, the reason that my welfare is my own gives me a reason for promoting it over another's provided that the costs to me are significant enough and the benefit to the other is not very significant. So, in a type of case that you discuss (2006a, Ch. 5, part 2), if I could make it so that either I, or someone else, receives an electric shock of the same magnitude, then, all else equal, I have most reason to prefer that you, rather than I, receive the electric shock.

Personally, I find this difficult to believe. I struggle to see how—on a view in which all normative reasons are derived from welfare-promotion—the mere fact that this welfare is mine (and not another's) gives me a normative reason to promote it—at least in some marginal cases.

I agree that this is intuitive. But to my mind, we can explain this intuition away. The reason why it may seem as if I have most reason to promote my own well-being in this case is because (generally speaking) I will also have motivational reasons to promote my own well-being, too. So while I have equal normative reason to shock either one of us, my motivational reasons tip the balance—they act as a tiebreaker as it were.

Hopefully I have made this point clear. To try to put it differently, the reason it appears intuitive that we have most reason to shock the other person is because we wind up smuggling in motivational reasons into our normative analysis. If what I say is correct, however, your view ends up implying that, just because we are more motivated to shock the other person, then this is what the balance of reasons tells us to do.

Surely you reject this analysis. So why is it incorrect?

That is a worrying point. Another case might be one in which you and I travel to some planet where we find beings like us who are highly rational and intelligent. But they're completely impartial. I would then have to say to them, "Actually you're making a mistake, because you haven't taken the separateness of persons into account". They would then, like you, say that, we know about evolution on your planet, and you've just evolved to be partial, but this isn't really reasonable.

So I agree. There is a powerful debunking argument there. But there are no knock-down debunking arguments of that kind. I think they're good challenges. But what you have to do is go back to your original view and ask yourself whether you can still accept it in light of the debunking argument. And I can still accept it, because of cases like the one I mentioned before about pain, and so on.

Essentially, I'm following a tradition which goes back a long way, maybe to Plato, if not before, according to which ethics is like mathematics. So in ethics what we're trying to do is to come up with necessary truths, propositions true in all possible worlds. So if I say that $7 + 5 = 12$, and someone says, "You only believe that because we evolved to accept useful mathematical principles", I would reply, "Yes, well, that happened, but it just is the case that $7 + 5 = 12$ ". I would say the same about pain's being bad. We've obviously evolved to believe pain to be bad. But it's bad

in all possible worlds. And one can see that—at least, one *should* be able to see that if one reflects properly on what it is to suffer.

In your book, you concede that self-sacrifice can be irrational. To soften the blow, you offer two arguments to support this conclusion. You first point out that, in extreme cases, this seems right: for example, it might be irrational for me to sacrifice my life merely so you can have another cup of coffee. Secondly, you highlight that the term ‘irrational’ is an emotionally laden one, giving rise to connotations of blame and so forth. Hence it is better to use phrases such as “most reason” instead (p. 133–4).

Still, this is another implication I find difficult to swallow. To see this, let us adjust the preceding example slightly.

Suppose that I am a very altruistic person. I have a very strong desire that I receive the shock instead of you. Now suppose that, were you to receive the shock, the net loss to your welfare would be ever so slightly worse than if I received the shock (adjusted for any counterbalancing benefit I may receive from having this desire satisfied). Suppose that I know all of the facts—yesterday I received a shock of the exact same magnitude, so I know exactly what it feels like. I am perfectly lucid and thinking clearly. Nonetheless, I still really want that I (and not you) receive the shock. When I make it the case that I (and not you) receive the shock, I am not acting according to what I have most reason to do—I am acting contrary to my reasons.

This seems like an alienating notion of normativity. How, when I am perfectly lucid, know all of the facts, and act in accordance with what I most want to do, can I still come out as acting contrary to reason in such a case?

Perhaps this comes down to a deep disagreement between intuitions, here. But why do think I might be wrong?

That is another problematic implication of my view. I would try to deal with it in the same way that I did with the previous one. Again, what we should say about these cases depends on the correct account of personal identity. But let’s just assume that the natural view that we have is correct—that each individual is distinct—then, I can see the point of the case and it worries me. But my original intuition—which Sidgwick has as well—is that the distinction between persons is not just metaphysically important, but it’s normatively important. And so I’d stick with it nonetheless. And also, I can again appeal to the two-level view from earlier, in order to explain why we have these attitudes. Because I obviously have the attitude prompted by your case as well. I think that this altruistic person is admirable. But that is just because we’ve been brought up with the morality that we have.

Sure, but the point that’s worrying is that there is a top-down, alienating requirement in this case. Since in the example, I am perfectly lucid,

I know what the pain will feel like, and so on. So it seems as if I am acting rationally, here. Yet on your view I'm not acting rationally.

That is my view. But, in a sense, I am only reporting it to you. I am not reporting it to you and banging the table, because I have no justification in doing that. That's the way in which philosophy should proceed. People should simply be reporting their views for others to criticize them. And so there are lessons in the Sidgwickian tradition for how we should go about doing philosophy—undogmatically, open-mindedly, calmly, and carefully.

Now I'm thinking out loud here, but it could be possible that what's doing the work in this example is that it is vague. What I mean by this is as follows.

In the extreme case, it does seem that I'm being irrational when I prefer the huge electric shock for myself as opposed to the tiny shock to you. Likewise for the other extreme: I have more reason to prefer a tiny electric shock for myself rather than to impose a huge electric shock upon you. But when it comes to marginal differences in welfare, things are more tricky. It would appear as if your view needs to assume implicit thresholds as to when it is irrational for me to prefer the shock to myself as opposed to you. In the extreme cases, we can easily intuit when the threshold has been passed. But in the marginal cases, intuitions differ. And that's where the difference in agreement creeps in.

Yes, that puts the point very well. And these are exactly the kind of cases we should be focusing on, rather than the dramatic ones. It is also particularly worrying because, like Sidgwick, you've got a very partial principle, self-interest, and a very impartial principle, the utilitarian one. And many counterexamples to egoism and to utilitarianism rely on the idea that we have special reason to favour the interest of those who are close to us: family friends, and so on. I tested my intuitions about that, and came out thinking that Sidgwick was right. But equally I'm pretty sure that the majority of people would come out thinking that he was wrong.

V. LOOKING BACK (AND FORWARD)

Out of the philosophical problems that you've attempted to deal with, which attempt are you most dissatisfied with?

I've never considered this question before. And it has got me thinking about the attempts with which I'm most satisfied. For example, I think my argument against the coherence of virtue ethics is pretty undeniable. I haven't come across a good response to it. And I can't see how there could be one.

Hedonism—I'm pretty satisfied with that. Though here I can conceive that there might be some arguments which would persuade me to give it up.

What I'm most dissatisfied with, I think, would be the issue of personal identity, I'm still trying to get to grips with that. Ingmar Persson has some superb stuff on this, where he suggests that our views about personal identity are so confused that we can't make any progress. I hope that isn't true. At least, I hope people could make progress on this in the future even if we can't make progress on it now.

I am still slightly worried about the issue that we were talking about before, namely, impartiality towards others. Because we're so limited in our self-knowledge, it could be, for example, that something terrible has happened to me that's made me deny the importance of partiality to family and friends, that's made me put too much weight on the idea of impartiality.

Which philosophical problems do you still find most fascinating?

I suppose at the moment, those two, personal identity and (im)partiality.

I have a friend, Paul Robinson, a very good philosopher, who took the B.Phil. at the same time as me. He continued with philosophy and started a career in philosophy. But then he switched to another career. I was talking to him about why he did that, and he said, "I went into philosophy to answer certain questions for myself. I've now done that. So I'm going to do something else". I haven't got to that stage yet, and there are lots of other things I'd like to do that I wouldn't mind doing. I would be quite pleased if I could get to the point Paul reached.

I will always be interested in problems in metaphysics. But I wouldn't want to think about those only within philosophy. I'd want to think about them alongside scientific evidence as well. Mainly personal identity, but also more fundamental questions about the nature of reality. I suppose I'm still interested in the philosophy of religion, and I taught it for a long time. I do still find the cosmological argument quite plausible. (Derek Parfit used to get very cross whenever I told him that!) But that would tie up with general thinking about cosmology.

In epistemology, I'm happy as a foundationalist. I'm not saying that the arguments I have for foundationalism are knockdown, but they're convincing enough for me.

What are your research plans for the future?

Well, I hope to think more about the above. In the shorter term, I'd like to think more about a related set of issues to do with how we should think about ethics.

Like a lot of people, I started with a rather egocentric question: "How should I act?" I don't think I'd taken stock of the fact that even just seeking to answer that question is itself an action. So that raises the further question: "How should I seek to answer practical questions?" My view is that the consequences of our all asking that initial egocentric question are catastrophic, and will be even more so in the future, sadly. Take something like climate change: this is the result of self-interest combined with people asking the "I" question, and then continuing to fly and so on when

they realise that what they do is not going to make any difference. It's true that if we started thinking as a group and decided that we ought to stop flying, someone might say: "OK, but then you're going to have to ask the question: "Should I fly?" But we shouldn't be thinking about the "I" question at all. We should just be thinking about us. So impartiality about the fundamental ethical question is, I think, really important *practically speaking*. But I also think it's theoretically interesting in ethics. And relatedly, I think there are arguments about meaning in life, which relate to this. Most people seem to think that well-being and the meaning of life are independent of one another. So they might say that my life had a lot of meaning but it had little well-being. You might imagine someone's saying this about Wittgenstein's life: highly meaningful—as my friend Dave Edmonds once put it, it contributed to the CV of humanity; but perhaps it wasn't so great for him. So meaning and well-being might be different. And there may then be arguments for thinking about the way one lives one's life which are independent of what Frank Jackson (1987) once called the 'difference principle'—the principle that the justification for acting in some way must depend to some extent on your making a real difference. But think about for example people who played a part defeating the Nazis. If you talk to people who did that, and played a non-trivial part in it, it clearly made a big difference to their life. But it would be absurd to think that in the possible world in which, say, they broke their leg, and couldn't go to Dunkirk, everything would have changed. So what *we* do, if *it* makes a real difference, seems to make our lives meaningful. Recognizing that could perhaps make a practical difference and help us solve some of the various and apparently intractable collective action problems.

I'm also working on a translation and commentary for OUP on some dialogues of Plato: *Euthyphro*, *Apology* and *Crito*. I've completed the *Euthyphro*, and am just getting going on the *Apology*—it's not going very fast, but I hope to get there in the end.

And then, in the longer term, I'd quite like to write a book on Mandeville's ethics. I think he has some views that are really interesting and suggestive. He's become almost a forgotten figure in ethics, and I think that's because people focus too much on Hume. There is much in Mandeville that we'd do well to remember.

How would you reflect on your philosophical career to date? What are you most grateful for? And what would like to have done differently?

When I look back, I think I can see some kind of narrative arc in my career. I seem to have been on the whole rather negative, sceptical, unfashionable, and contrarian. I've argued among other things that everyday moral terminology should be avoided in philosophy; partiality to others is ultimately irrational; practical reason is disunified; the idea of supererogation is incoherent; hard incompatibilism is correct; there is no such thing as 'virtue ethics'; equality is if anything a disvalue; hedonism is true; we should suspend judgement in ethics; national borders, and hence nations, of the kind that exist currently are unjustifiable; differences between our

morality and that in Homer are of degree rather than in kind; Bentham and Mill are intuitionists, prefiguring Sidgwick and Ross, and there has been little progress in ethics since Ross; most advertising should be banned; it is not unreasonable to think that the end of sentient life on earth would be good; and so on ...

In general, I feel as I have been, as it were, on the outside of morality, and moral philosophy, finding kernels of truth in both but rejecting a good deal (this is what I think of broadly as 'demoralizing'). I've turned out to be a bit of an intellectual loner, and this is not, I think, what I expected. I do sense among some younger philosophers a greater willingness to think more radically and abstractly about ethics, and this gives me hope that we might make some progress beyond our current impasse.

As far as gratitude is concerned, I think all of us who have had lives which are overall better than nothing might reasonably be quite grateful (or glad) if we think about the incredibly small probability that we were going to be born. I've been extremely lucky to live at the time I'm living in, in the places I've lived in, with the parents, family, friends, colleagues, and students I have had, the school I went to, and much else. As I've mentioned, when I started in philosophy, I wasn't too worried about whether what I said was true or not, but just wanted to come up with an argument that got me a high mark. Perhaps I was really just trying things out. Later on I started thinking that I would like to come up with some answers to philosophical questions, and then I went through a period thinking this wasn't going to happen. Just because it didn't. Then it did start to happen. I did start to come up with views which I thought were correct. But then I became a Pyrrhonist. But that's not the same as the earlier failure. Becoming a Pyrrhonist I see as a kind of success. And it's probably made me more relaxed psychologically. I don't become impatient or irritated with people who hold views different from mine in the sense that some other philosophers seem to.

What would I like to have done differently? Not much. I think I might have become a classicist, or perhaps a historian, but am quite happy as a philosopher.

VI. ADVICE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

If you had to recommend, say, three or four texts that you believe any graduate student in moral philosophy should read, what would they be?

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Richard Price's *Review*, Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*, and Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*.

What other advice most helped you as a graduate student?

I mentioned John Ackrill before, and in my first meeting with him, he gave me two bits of advice, which presumably he gave to everybody at that time. The first was learn to type, which, back in 1983, most of us couldn't

do. That was very far-sighted. I took his suggestion and it was fantastically helpful in all sorts of ways. So I would say to students: be very aware of the technology that's available to you, and use it.

The other thing Ackrill said to me was you've got to be ready to talk to people. You've now got this opportunity to engage in discussion with others who are interested in the things that you're interested in, and you'll learn only through talking. Force yourself, if you have to, but it will become second nature. Obviously there's an Aristotelian mean here, as there are plenty of graduate students who are too happy to talk. You've got to be prepared to listen as well.

One other thing. During the B.Phil., I would just get up in the morning and start reading. And apart from engaging in some social activities and so on, I'd then go to bed. And I did that for two solid years. Alan Ryan said to me that's the way to do it, because you'll never have a time like this in your life again. Read everything you can. Think about it, try to remember it, take notes. That was such good advice. I still have all of my notes from that period. Ryan told me both that I'd learn a lot from creating these notes, and be able to use them for at least the next 20 years. And he was absolutely right.

What advice would you offer to a young scholar hoping to embark upon a career in moral philosophy?

I would say that our culture is (slightly worryingly) achievement-oriented—I see this a lot in Oxford, obviously, where achievement matters a great deal. But I think it's wrong just to assume that someone who has been successful in some profession has had a life that's good for them—I think that's a big mistake. It's fine to go into that profession, but you should be really careful to go into something you're attracted to for its own merits. So, if you go into philosophy because you think that your parents want you to, or you think it's cool, or just because you have a certain natural talent, or whatever, don't do that. Start with the question, "Am I going to enjoy it?". I'd also advise this young scholar to talk to people who are doing it and ask them whether they enjoy it, and if so, why.

Which advice have you offered graduate students in the past but no longer do so?

I used to tell graduate students what I'd been told: don't worry about publishing. But now things have changed, through greater 'professionalization' of the discipline, research assessment exercises, and so on. So now my advice is: "Publish if you like. But be careful about it. Don't rush into it, and later regret what you've published and the time you've put into it". Of course if one's hoping for a postdoc., publications are very likely to be necessary for one to be considered.

One other thing. I would also encourage graduate students to be 'good citizens'. This will give you an insight into what it's like to be an academic. But also, it does strengthen your profile: if you're going for a

postdoc position, say, maybe that will require some non-trivial admin work. If you've never done any, then that's obviously going to count against you.

As a graduate student, did you have a plan B in case you didn't make it as an academic?

I was thinking about law, and I did some mini-pupillages at the bar. I suspect that, given that I loved classics so much, I might would have tried to be a classics teacher. And I think I would have enjoyed that. Not so sure about the law...

Rejection and failure often play a large role in the life of an early career scholar. What were your biggest failures and how did you overcome them?

Well, I applied for a *lot* of jobs. You just have to keep going. And of course I've lost count of the number of times I've received rejections from journals. In the days when we submitted papers by post, Derek Parfit used to advise students, when they sent a paper out to one journal, to prepare an envelope for the next one. Try to see it as a learning experience: if you get a rejection with some critical comments, take a deep breath and read them, carefully.

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