

## Two possible objections to Wolterstorff's critique of eudaimonism

In chapter one of *Justice and Love* Nicholas Wolterstorff introduces his proposed ethical view of agapism, comparing it with the three macro systems of ethical thought: egoism, eudaimonism, and utilitarianism. I find his critiques conclusive against egoism and utilitarianism. Against egoism the conclusion is simple: as a matter of her ethical system of self-interest, the egoist never sets the good of the other as an end in itself (p. 9.) Against utilitarianism he offers several arguments, but he accepts the old objection that utilitarianism leads to unacceptable trade-offs (p. 11.)

His critique against eudaimonism seems less persuasive. To be clear, on the whole I do not differ with his argument, but it seems to me that his argument does not preclude two possible objections.

Regarding the first, Wolterstorff poses this question: "What then about the eudaimonist's principle, that one should seek to promote the wellbeing of another as an end in itself only if doing so promises to enhance one's own wellbeing?" He continues that it is easy to imagine situations in which aiding another decreases one's own wellbeing, and in particular he cites the story of the Samaritan who aided another counted an enemy. Wolterstorff concludes that the eudaimonist would say that the Samaritan was misguided: "such indiscriminate bleeding-heart behavior is not to be admired." Aiding someone among one's family, perhaps one's nation or people, could be said to contribute to one's wellbeing; aiding another who is an enemy "makes no sense whatsoever. No wise person would do that" (p. 10.)

The objection I see to Wolterstorff's argument is that the social categorization of the other occurs outside the eudaimonist system. Eudaimonism functions within the categories of a particular society: he is family, she is part of one's nation or people, he is an inimical outsider. Aristotle might agree that an Athenian should help a fellow Athenian, but it would be counter to one's own self-interest to aid a Spartan; the Spartan is not among the Athenian's relationships contributing to his eudaimonia.

However, I see nothing that precludes a eudaimonist acting within a social paradigm that defines one's wellbeing as intertwined with all others, such that it enhances one's own wellbeing to help all in need as ends in and of themselves. This seems to me how Martha Nussbaum, as a neo-Aristotelian eudaimonist, might respond (see her paper "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," considered briefly in my recent post "[Karol Wojtyla and Martha Nussbaum on Human Essentials: Part I](#)".) Nussbaum argues for human essentialism such that all people, across all social categories, share certain basic needs in order to be capable of living a fully human life, unqualified by considerations of self-interest.

Regarding the second, Wolterstorff states that "I hold that the good Samaritan did a fine and noble thing even if it did diminish his wellbeing;" he continues that he would need a powerful argument to reverse his view, and the eudaimonist has no such argument (p. 10.)

I openly side with Wolterstorff in his admiration of the Samaritan's action. The possible objection I see is different and is perhaps cleared up with a clarification. In concluding that the Samaritan's wellbeing was diminished, clarification is needed that the diminishment in wellbeing does not reduce to the Samaritan's direct monetary expenses in aiding the other. I know of

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nothing in eudaimonist thought that equates a diminishment in wealth spent to aid another as a diminishment in wellbeing, and Wolterstorff's statement seems to say something very close to that.

Aiding another as end in herself à la Nussbaum, whether friend or foe, could well increase one's eudaimonistic sense of wellbeing as a virtuous action. One cannot know a priori that one's actions to aid another will not in fact return to one's own harm, even in instances in which the other is counted among one's friends who one should aid. One's wellbeing might be diminished were the other to betray one's beneficence, but that diminishment would seem to follow from the betrayal, not from the fact that one spent a sum that did not result in a desired outcome; a eudaimonist definition of wellbeing seems quite anti-consequentialist in the latter sense.

I should qualify that I've not read Wolterstorff's critique of eudaimonism in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, ch. 7, and the above is subject to revision upon review of that work.

Finally, having noted the possible objections, I anticipate that meaningful distinctions can be made between eudaimonism and agapism, and I look forward to reading the rest of the book.

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