

Taking into Account One's Own Welfare:  
A Critique of the Self-Excluding View



# GEIST und MORAL



Analytische Reflexionen  
für Wolfgang Lenzen

Herausgegeben von  
Christoph Lumer und Uwe Meyer

mentis



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Christoph Lumer / Uwe Meyer (Hrsg.)

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Analytische Reflexionen für Wolfgang Lenzen

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CHRISTOPH FEHIGE

## Taking into Account One's Own Welfare: A Critique of the Self-Excluding View

The following pages are dedicated to Wolfgang Lenzen, an important person in my life. As an undergraduate I discovered the fascination of analytic philosophy at a philosophy department that in those days was fairly good at keeping that kind of philosophy out of sight. That was in Münster. I was getting ready to depart for some more congenial place when a new professor arrived: Georg Meggle. We got along well, and I knew that I could learn a lot from him. But no matter how much that was, I didn't find it advisable to focus on one rigorously analytic teacher alone, and so the plan emerged to stay in Münster after all, but to rummage the neighbourhood for some more courses in analytic philosophy. Wolfgang Lenzen was the solution. Here was a cordial and distinguished philosophical logician, in Osnabrück, only an hour away on the train! I should go and hear what he had to say. And so I did, attending his advanced courses for several terms. I benefited immensely.

Our paths have kept crossing. Lenzen became one of the examiners of my dissertation. We were both among the co-founders of the *Gesellschaft für Analytische Philosophie*. We corresponded; we had papers in the same volumes; we ended up at the same conferences, including conferences that I co-organized between 1990 and 1992 in Saarbrücken: *Zum moralischen Denken*, *Analyomen 1*, and *Preferences*. And we had some great parties over the years. It has all been good and will, I hope, remain so for a long time to come.

### 1. Including versus Excluding One's Own Welfare

One philosophical issue that Lenzen and I are both interested in is the moral status of giving weight, in one's decisions and actions, to one's own welfare. I will make use of the occasion and put on the record my doubts about Lenzen's views on that topic.

The matter can be couched in deontic terms like »right« and »wrong«, »obligatory«, »permitted«, and »forbidden«, but will first be presented here in its evaluative form: as a matter of good or bad, better or worse. The evaluations at issue are moral evaluations, so »good« should be understood as »morally good«, »better« as »morally better«, and so forth, unless the context clearly calls for another meaning.

There are two simple views on the goodness of taking into account one's own welfare. According to the self-including view, it is good of an agent to maximize the sum total of welfare, the agent's own welfare included. Lenzen is critical of this view, and so am I. The self-including view begins to look dubious when we consider a person who could secure an extra chunk of welfare for herself, at no cost to anybody else, but is unwilling to do so and thus fails to do so. We may well want to say that such a person has *some* sort of deficit – perhaps a deficit of prudence or of practical rationality. But it sounds odd to say that she has a *moral* deficit. Morally speaking, she is at liberty to do what she wants with her own welfare: grab it, skip it, whatever. It makes no moral difference. It is, in and by itself, morally no better of her to promote her own welfare than to refrain from doing so. The problem with the self-including view is that it does not respect that claim. The self-including view entails, implausibly, that it is morally bad of a person not to maximize, and morally good of her to maximize, when all other things are equal, her own welfare.

In that respect, the other simple view, the self-excluding view, is more plausible. According to the self-excluding view, it is good of an agent to maximize the sum of everybody *else's* welfare – everybody's welfare, that is, except her own. The focus on the welfare of the others implies that whether or to what extent the agent bothers about her own welfare makes, in and by itself (that is, as long as it does not affect the welfare of others), no moral difference. On that account the self-excluding view seems more attractive than its competitor.

However, that there is one problem the view does not have does not tell us how few or how many other problems it has and how plausible it is all things told. We need to talk about the overall merit of the self-excluding view. Lenzen has strong affinities to that view, whereas I find it, all in all, at least as implausible as the self-including view and believe that the adequate approach is a third one, somewhat less simple than the other two. I have sketched that third option elsewhere, in a paper on the weight of self-love in benevolence and virtue. Today I want to examine the second option only, the self-excluding view, which is favoured by Wolfgang Lenzen.

Lenzen's treatment of these matters has one peculiarity that I have played along with in presenting the issue and that I will continue to play along with in this paper, in order not to complicate the discussion further. But it

really is a peculiarity and should be mentioned. The debate Lenzen takes part in concerns the moral role of motives. Lenzen himself is aware of this when he argues, as we will see him doing below, that his position renders morality sensitive to an agent's altruism or egoism in the right way. Yet Lenzen tries to conduct that debate with principles that focus on certain effects (effects on people's happiness) that an action has or tends to have. Now, which of the two is it to be, motives or effects? The fact that an action has or tends to have, say, consequences that are bad for the agent but good for others does not tell us anything about the extent of the agent's egoism or altruism, because the effects may not have been foreseen or intended by the agent. At best, the fact would tell us something about the agent's egoism or altruism if she were rational and fully informed. I will imagine such conditions to be in place in Lenzen's principles. But even so, we are left with a roundabout way of talking about the things that are at issue. It would be more straightforward to discuss principles that are explicitly concerned with an agent's desires, motives, or intentions – that is to say, not with the amounts of good for the agent and for the others that the agent causes or tends to cause, but with the amounts she *wants* to cause, with the weight that she *attaches* to her good and to the good of others.

Lenzen's views on the morality of taking into account one's own welfare are contained mainly in the opening chapter, especially sections 0.2 and 0.5, of his monograph *Liebe, Leben, Tod*, published in 1999; and in section 5 of his article »On the Origin of the Utilitarian Maximization Requirement«, published in 2003. I will quote from the section of the article unless I say otherwise, and will omit some of Lenzen's italics along the way. Where the topic surfaces in writings of Lenzen's that he has published since (such as the paper on just wars from 2004 and the dictionary entry on bioethics from 2010), it does so, as far as I can see, only briefly, and with no changes or supplements that would affect our discussion. A second, revised edition of *Leben, Liebe, Tod* is imminent; it appears to revisit our topic, and a brief comment on a draft of it can be found ahead of the references at the end of this article.

## 2. Self-Excluding Obligation

In the article from 2003, we find what is probably Lenzen's most radical pronouncement for a self-excluding view of the moral landscape. He presents among other things a principle that, freed from some technicalities in the notation, reads as follows:

»(FORBIDDEN<sub>moral</sub>) Action A of an agent [...] is morally forbidden iff A has the tendency to diminish the happiness of the others«.

As far as readers of that paper can tell, Lenzen does not just discuss that principle, but also endorses it. He writes that the principle and its companions »may be regarded as precisely refined versions of another traditional ethic, *Neminem laedere*, which, roughly, tells us that we should never harm others«. This is circumstantial evidence for his endorsement of the principle  $\text{FORBIDDEN}_{\text{moral}}$ , because he himself advocates a morality built on the principle »*neminem laedere*«. Less circumstantially, he says in the same section (as well as in section 1) that another principle he discusses »should be replaced« with  $\text{FORBIDDEN}_{\text{moral}}$ . In slightly different words – as the »obligation to minimize [...] harm to others« (my translation) –  $\text{FORBIDDEN}_{\text{moral}}$  is also advertized in section 3.1 of the dictionary entry on bioethics, from 2010.

Consider, however, the following case. Mary can push a button, and doing so would affect her own welfare and the welfare of Rose, but nobody else's. The button is a mild-pain-for-Rose button. If Mary pushes the button, she herself will be fine, but Rose will briefly have a mild headache. If Mary does not push the button, she herself will suffer terrible pain for several decades, but Rose will be fine – as fine as Mary will be if Mary pushes the button. In short, Mary has a choice between brief and mild pain for Rose (pushing the button) and long and terrible pain for herself (not pushing the button).

The principle  $\text{FORBIDDEN}_{\text{moral}}$  entails that it would be wrong of Mary to push the button because doing so would diminish Rose's happiness. Expressed positively, in terms of obligation rather than prohibition, Mary is under a moral obligation to undergo an immense amount of pain in order to save Rose a small amount of pain. More generally speaking, there is no limit at all to the size of the sacrifice she is morally required to make in order to spare Rose a minor inconvenience. It is her duty to maximize the welfare of others no matter how bad the rate of exchange. Even if every gram of the welfare of others costs her a ton of her own welfare, she must buy.

This is highly implausible. And the good news is that Wolfgang Lenzen agrees. In a personal communication from September 2009 he assures me: he, too, thinks that  $\text{FORBIDDEN}_{\text{moral}}$  overshoots the mark.

### 3. Self-Excluding Betterness

We need a term for sacrifices like the one Mary could make: sacrifices that provide some welfare for others but gobble more welfare from the agent than they provide for others. I propose to call such sacrifices unproportional. I realize that the word »unproportional« has negative overtones, but it is hard to find a word for the fact that we want to capture that does not have such overtones. It is hard to banish the idea that with that kind of

sacrifice the agent is making, even by moral standards, a »bad bargain«, for she herself gives up more than she achieves for others. We should try to ignore the pejorative halo of the word. Calling such sacrifices unproportional is not supposed to prejudice their moral status.

We have seen Lenzen move away from the claim that unproportional sacrifices are morally obligatory, and the case of Mary and the button strongly suggests that the move goes in the right direction. But Lenzen stops too early. He still insists that such sacrifices are good. In Lenzen's view, if it holds true of some unproportional sacrifices that making them fails to be obligatory, then only because making them is supererogatory. In other words, if making such a sacrifice fails to be obligatory, this is not because making it fails to be better than not making it. To the contrary, making that unproportional sacrifice *is* better – but it goes beyond the call of duty.

For Lenzen, therefore, nothing about unproportional sacrifices gives us reason to modify the simple self-excluding view of betterness, the view that he expresses in his principle  $BETTER_{moral}$ :

»( $BETTER_{moral}$ ) Action A of an agent [...] is morally better than action A' iff A augments the happiness of the other individuals [...] to a higher degree than [...] A'«.

The principle clearly entails that it would be better of Mary not to push the button, and ditto for all unproportional sacrifices: it is better to make them than not to make them. Lenzen stands by the principle and by the implication. If torturing you for a fortnight is the only way to provide your neighbour with a third scoop of ice-cream at lunch today, and if you refuse to be tortured for that extra scoop, then you are doing something morally worse than if you agreed to be tortured.

I find this an extraordinary claim. It appears to me that nobody is better than the thorough universalizer. By a thorough universalizer I mean a person who universalizes come what may. Even in a tragic situation in which three other lives can be saved only if she gives up her own, such a universalizer will count herself for one, and not for more than one: she will lay down her life for the greater good. She is a saint.

I don't see why we would want to say that she would be even better if she loved herself *less* than she loves her neighbour – that is to say, if she laid down her life in order to provide another person with a larger ice cream. To me, such a preference, the preferring of a lesser amount of other people's good to a larger amount of one's own good, seems morally neutral. Beyond universalizing, a preference for making sacrifices is a preference or taste or hobbyhorse like any other – like a preference for spinach, say, or for jazz or for pushpin. Harboursing such a preference or acting on it doesn't turn you into a better person.

Scanning Lenzen's writings for a reason to change my mind, I could not find one. Lenzen points out that the person who makes an unproportional sacrifice is »more altruistic« than the person who refuses to do so. Taken as a purely descriptive claim, that is correct. The person who makes unproportional sacrifices does indeed give, relative to the weight she gives to her own good, more weight to the good of others than does the person who does not make such sacrifices. But the correct descriptive diagnosis that there is, in that sense, extra altruism does not get us near the evaluation that is at issue. It does not get us near Lenzen's moral assessment that the extra altruism amounts to extra moral goodness.

I hasten to clarify that no participant from this debate denies that *often* an increase in altruism would amount to an increase in goodness. That is so because often there is a moral lack of altruism to begin with. The question is only whether that strict monotonicity (the more altruism, the more moral goodness) holds across the board. It seems to me that it does not. There is a saintly point – call it universality or impartiality or whatever you like – beyond which any further increase in altruism is morally neutral.

It would be of no help for Lenzen to say that he had in mind an evaluative reading of the expression »more altruistic« – one that *entails* that it is always better to be more altruistic. Under that reading of »more altruistic« his statement that the person who is prepared to make unproportional sacrifices is more altruistic would already express the moral claim that we are looking at and would thus be unable to support it.

Lenzen also claims that the person who does not make unproportional sacrifices is »more egoistic« than the person who does. But the same considerations apply. If by an »egoistic« person we mean a person whose self-love is so strong that, by moral lights, it had better be weaker, I do not grant Lenzen that the person who refuses to make unproportional sacrifices is more egoistic. Again, the descriptive part is correct: that person has more self-love, gives more weight to her own welfare than the person who carries altruism beyond the saintly point of impartiality. But why should that be a moral flaw? If the saintly point is a moral optimum, failing to carry altruism beyond that point does not make her worse than the other person, and thus not »more egoistic« in an evaluative sense.

Neither is there any support for Lenzen in content-based or consequence-based considerations. The person who makes unproportional sacrifices does not have a better will in the sense that the content of her will, the world she wants to bring about, is better; and thus not in a closely related sense either: that the canonical consequences of her will (the world brought about if the will had its way) is better. If Mary makes the unproportional sacrifice and does not push the button, there will be more suffering rather than less. Lenzen will hardly want to call the world with more suffering bet-



ter. Thus, he cannot expect support from that quarter. He cannot say that his controversial moral evaluation of actions simply mirrors a plausible evaluation of the worlds that these actions bring about.

The diagnosis that Lenzen cannot build his case on the claim that the one moral evaluation mirrors the other should not be confused with a plea for any such mirroring. In fact, when Lenzen renounces the pure consequentialist doctrine that the value of the action is the value of the world it would bring about in favour of a doctrine that assigns a special status to the agent's own welfare, I'm on his side. My only complaint is that he goes about the matter too crudely. Leaving the agent's welfare out of the picture altogether does not do justice to its special status.

#### 4. From »Not the One« to »Only the Other«?

It is tempting to speculate whether Lenzen is in the grip of some other force that, more or less explicitly, informs his allegiance to the self-excluding view. For instance, he may simply have neglected to consider the possibility of a third way that runs between the two simple views that I presented in section 1. His writings, at any rate, contain no trace of such a quest.

What might such a third way look like? Having already mentioned that my own proposal can be found elsewhere, I will limit myself to a hint. Suppose that we look at a person who in her deliberation and her actions gives weight 1 to the welfare of every fellow-being of hers, and that we ask what weight it would be good of her to give to her own welfare. Suppose that we start by considering some large positive weight and work our way down.

We could say that on the way down the person's goodness behaves as follows. On the one hand, it is very bad to give to one's own welfare much more weight than to that of one's fellow-beings and still bad, but less bad, to give to one's own welfare a little more weight than to that of one's fellow-beings. Thus, all the way down from the large possible weight for her own good to weight 1 for her own good the person's moral badness decreases, which is the same as saying that her moral goodness increases. On the other hand, it is not better to give less rather than equal weight to one's own welfare. Thus, her moral goodness stops increasing when the weight has shrunk to 1; from 1 downwards, it remains constant. (Perhaps all the way, or perhaps only until weight 0 or weight -1 is reached, declining as soon as the weight falls under one of those thresholds.)

The upshot would be that it would be better to count oneself for one than to count oneself for more than one, but not better to count oneself for less than one than to count oneself for one. Opening our minds to views of that

sort should diminish the attraction of cruder options like the self-excluding view.

Another force that may well be at work when moral philosophers get entangled in the self-excluding view is the following kind of reasoning. Suppose we start with two premisses, the first of which is WELF:

- (WELF) The only thing that by itself makes a moral difference is what the agent does about welfare of some kind or other.

WELF asserts that welfare is all that matters, while leaving it open whose welfare matters and in which way. Since the moral monopoly of welfare of some kind or other is common ground in the dispute at hand, we may treat WELF, in this context, as uncontroversial.

The second premiss, SD, evaluates the self-regarding dimension of agency:

- (SD) It makes by itself no moral difference what the agent does about her own welfare.

SD, too, is innocent enough. Both Lenzen and I endorse it, which is the reason why both of us reject, as has been reported in section 1, the self-including view. So SD is another piece of common ground.

These two premisses might seem to entail a claim about the other-regarding dimension:

- (OD) The only thing that by itself makes a moral difference is what the agent does about other people's welfare.

The idea behind the inference is that, if only welfare makes by itself a moral difference (premiss WELF), and the agent's own welfare does not (premiss SD), then the only thing that is left to make by itself a moral difference is the welfare of others. The then-clause is OD, and OD comes close to the self-excluding view. To be sure, OD does not go so far as to assert that only the *quantity* of other people's welfare counts. But the fact that OD stops short of that particular claim is inessential for the dispute at hand. After all, my complaint against Lenzen and against the self-excluding view is not that they ascribe positive value to the wrong thing about other people's welfare (to maximizing it rather than, say, distributing it equally). My complaint is that they keep ascribing positive value when the agent's costs get out of proportion. It would seem that in a discussion of that complaint, any distance between OD and the self-excluding view that consists in OD's silence on maximizing in particular may be neglected, so that no fuss needs to be made about the remaining step from OD to its quantitative variety:

- (ODQ) The only thing that by itself makes a moral difference is what the agent does about other people's welfare: the more of it she produces the better.

I propose to call the entire train of thought the splitting argument. The name is suitable because the decisive move is to split welfare in two (the agent's own welfare and the welfare of others) and to process the two parts separately. Moral weight is denied to the first part and assigned exclusively to the second.

By all appearances, then, the splitting argument establishes that two innocent premisses, WELF and SD, entail (not exactly the self-excluding view, which is here represented by ODQ, but) something, the principle OD, that is essentially the self-excluding view. It behoves the opponent of the self-excluding view to show that the appearances are misleading.

As indeed they are. Imagine a similar kind of splitting in aesthetics. Faced with a beautiful pointillist picture, an aesthetic splitter could number the points and then argue that since the first point isn't beautiful, and neither is the second, . . ., and neither is the one but last, all the beauty of the picture must come from the final point. A similar train of thought would conclude that all or much of the beauty of a melody resides in one particular note. We would not look at such pieces of reasoning with much favour. They squeeze all or much of the beauty into one particular point or note by ignoring the blatant fact that there can be beauty, and that indeed there often is much beauty, in the way in which points or notes are *arranged* – in the way in which they *relate* to each other.

The splitting argument as I reported it, the step from WELF and SD to OD, commits the same kind of error in the realm of morality. From the premiss that what the agent does about her own welfare makes by itself no moral difference we can only proceed to the conclusion that the only thing that makes by itself a moral difference is what she does about the welfare of others if we assume that how those two things relate to each other makes by itself no moral difference. But that assumption is no more plausible than the assumption that how the individual notes are arranged makes by itself no difference to the beauty of a melody.

And so the splitting argument fails. It misses the point. In order to be valid, it needs the extra assumption that the relation between the welfare the agent produces for herself and the welfare she produces for others makes by itself no moral difference. But that assumption – required but in no way supported by the splitting argument – is the core of the controversy. When opponents of the self-excluding view say that, where an extra amount of welfare for others can be produced only by an unproportional sacrifice, producing it is not better than failing to produce it, they deny the assumption that it makes by itself no moral difference how the welfare the agent produces for herself is related to the welfare she produces for others. They deny the assumption that the splitting argument needs.

One fact that may well lend some appearance of soundness to the splitting argument is that, if we have utilitarian leanings, we accept the splitting when we talk about the moral quality of possible worlds. After all, utilitarians agree that the moral value of a world is the value of the agent's welfare in that world plus the value of the other people's welfare in that world plus nothing else. Couldn't a defence of the splitting argument be erected on the claim that this kind of additivity carries over from the evaluation of worlds to the evaluation of actions?

The move would be unwise in several respects. For one thing, there is no reason why we should even begin to expect the additivity to carry over. Why should the moral quality of actions be constituted in exactly the same way as the moral quality of the worlds they would bring about? There is nothing far-fetched about the hunch that the moral quality of actions is a little more complex, in that it depends not just on the moral quality of the worlds brought about but also on the sacrifice the agent makes in order to bring about a world of a certain moral quality. Furthermore, a defence of the splitting argument that appeals to an analogy between a utilitarian arithmetic of the moral value of worlds and the arithmetic of the moral value of actions is self-defeating. For if the analogy held, it would not support the conclusion of the splitting argument. It would support the self-including view.

In short, whichever way we look at it, it is hard to see how moral self-excluders could pin their hopes on the splitting argument; and also hard to see, as our earlier discussion in sections 2 and 3 has shown, what else they could pin them on.

## 5. Conclusion

Our question has been how good or bad it is to give weight to one's own welfare. Unlike most moral philosophers, who do not even see that the question is important and tricky, Wolfgang Lenzen has gone a long way toward treating it with the attention and the moral and logical perspicacity that it deserves. Yet the answer he endorses, the self-excluding account of moral goodness, is not convincing.

## Bibliography

Note on an as yet unpublished source: A second, revised edition of Wolfgang Lenzen's monograph *Leben, Liebe, Tod* is in the pipeline. The following remarks concern a draft of that new edition dated August 2010. While there are changes in the theoretical chapter (chapter 0) that pertain to the topic at hand, the self-excluding account of moral goodness or moral betterness (reported above, in section 3) is by and large re-asserted, without new arguments to support it. Section 0.6 »corrects«

utilitarianism by declaring the moral betterness of an action to be a matter solely of its impact on the welfare of others (a view that finds expression in the principle »UTIL 3«), and section 0.7 contains thoughts on assessing an action as »morally good« that point in the same direction. So it appears that the critical thrust of the present article will remain on target.

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