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The Right Version of the Right Kind of Solution to the Wrong Kind of Reason Problem

According to T.M. Scanlon's buck-passing account of value (BPV), being valuable 'is not a property that itself provides a reason to respond to a thing in certain ways. Rather, to be...valuable is to have other properties that constitute such reasons' (Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge: Belknap (1998), p. 97). One of the most discussed problems for BPV is the so called 'wrong kind of reason (WKR) problem'. This is the problem that there are cases where there seems to be reason to respond in a positive way to a thing despite the fact that this thing lacks value. As an example, suppose a powerful evil demon threatens to inflict severe pain on us unless we admire him. This threat seems to provide a reason to admire the demon, but it doesn't make him valuable (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 'The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value', *Ethics* 114 (2004): 391-423). From the point of view of BPV, the reason to admire the demon must be of the wrong kind for corresponding to a value of the demon. The challenge that the WKR problem poses for buck-passers is to formulate BPV in a way that distinguishes reasons of the wrong kind from reasons of the right kind.

In a recent article, Gerald Lang attempts to solve the WKR problem (Lang, 'The Right Kind of Solution to the Wrong Kind of Reason Problem', *Utilitas* 20 (2008): 472-89). After having discussed and dismissed several versions of BPV, Lang formulates his own version, which he takes to be resistant to all WKR cases:

BPV6

X is good *iff* *X* has properties (other than its being good) that give us reason to have a certain positive attitude towards *X*, just as long as those properties of *X* that give us reason to have that attitude towards *X* would still be reason-giving in the absence of the benefits to us of having that attitude towards *X*.

In two separate replies to Lang, Jonas Olson and John Brunero, respectively, point out serious problems with Lang's suggestion, and at least Olson concludes that the kind of solution that Lang proposes is of the wrong kind for solving the WKR problem (Olson, 'The Wrong Kind of Solution to the Wrong Kind of Reason Problem', *Utilitas* 21 (2009): 225-32; Brunero, 'Consequentialism and the Wrong Kind of Reasons: A Reply to Lang', *Utilitas* 22 (2010): 351-59). I argue that while both Olson and Brunero have indeed identified considerable flaws in Lang's particular suggestion for solution to the WKR problem, they have not provided sufficient grounds for dismissing the *kind* of solution that Lang opts for. I provide a modification of BPV6 that is resistant to both Olson's and Brunero's objections:

BPV12

X is good *iff* *X* has properties (other than its being good) that give us reason to respond in a positive way to *X*, just as long as those properties of *X* that give us reason to respond in that way to *X* would still be reason-giving in the absence of any consequences of so responding.

Olson argues against BPV6 by way of providing counterexamples – WKR-cases – that it cannot handle. The purpose of these counterexamples is to show that other factors than *benefits to us* may provide reasons of the wrong kind (e.g., *benefits to others*). Olson considers the possibility of saving the kind of BPV that Lang proposes by adding *more* conditions on *reasons of the right kind*, with the aim of excluding such factors, but

reaches the conclusion that no such rescue is available. However, this attempt of rescue is bound to fail, because Lang's mistake was to formulate his condition on *reasons of the right kind* too narrowly to begin with. He should not have restricted the relevant consequences to benefits. If a thing has value, then the corresponding reason to respond to it should not depend on *any* consequences of so responding.

Brunero objects that BPV6 is incompatible with consequentialism (in which case it would fail as a *formal* account of value). The reason is simple (but not clearly stated by Brunero). According to BPV6, if an entity has value there is reason to have a certain attitude towards it. But according to many consequentialists, whether there is reason to have a certain attitude towards an entity (irrespective of whether it is valuable) depends solely on the consequences of having that attitude towards it. This objection is much more easily taken care of than Brunero seems to think. We should simply formulate BPV in terms of responses instead of attitudes (cf. Scanlon's original formulation). Consequentialists do believe that we have reason to *have responses* towards valuable things; responses such as *bringing about* and *preserving*.

Neither Olson's nor Brunero's objection applies to BPV12. But it faces a possible problem. Suppose the property of *X* that gives us reason to have a certain response, *R*, towards it, is the property of benefitting those who have *R* towards it. Let us call this property *P*. Suppose further that *P* actually makes *X* valuable (this position is at least conceivable). In that case it doesn't seem true that *P* would be reason-giving in the absence of any consequences of having *R* towards *X*. The problem is that if we imagine that the consequence *that we are benefitted* (of our having *R* towards *X*) is absent, it seems that we also have to imagine *X* without *P* (and without *P* *X* is not valuable). I argue that this isn't a serious problem. We can indeed simultaneously imagine both that *X* has *P*, and that we are not benefitted by having *R* towards *X*. The only thing that could prevent us from imagining this would be if *X*'s benefitting us were an analytically necessary consequence of our having *R* towards *X*. But this consequence cannot be analytically necessary (it can at most be metaphysically necessary).