

On Susan Wolf's "Good-For-Nothings"

1. Introduction

In her recent Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association, "Good-For-Nothings", Susan Wolf (2011) argues against *welfarism* about value by appeal to great works of art, literature, music, and philosophy. According to welfarism, something is good *simpliciter* just in case it is good *for* some being or beings.¹ Wolf provides three main arguments against this view, which I will call The Superfluity Argument, The Explanation of Benefit Argument, and The Welfarist's Mistake. In this paper, I will reconstruct these arguments and explain where, in my view, each goes wrong.

2. The Superfluity Argument

The Superfluity Argument begins with a distinction between two senses in which something may benefit a person: the *Ordinary Sense* and the *Robust Sense*. Something benefits a person in the Robust Sense just in case it results in his ending up with a higher net level of lifetime welfare than he would have ended up with if this thing had not been the case. Something benefits a person in the Ordinary Sense just in case it benefits him, but *not* in the Robust Sense. To illustrate the difference, Wolf gives the example of a man who rescues a drowning child even though another person would

¹ Note that the good in question is not the *moral* good, but the good *simpliciter*.

have done so if he had not. The actual rescuer benefits the child in the Ordinary Sense (for he was the one who saved her), but due to the presence of this other person, he does not benefit her in the Robust Sense.

A welfarist, Wolf claims, must hold that it is only by benefiting beings in the Robust Sense that things get to count as good. However, most great works, she argues, if they Robustly benefit anyone, Robustly benefit only their *creators*, by “giving them something to do and possibly advancing their careers” (2011, 48). The vast majority of great works, considered individually, Robustly benefit nobody else. This is because there

is more great art, literature, music, and so on around than I, or anyone, has time to appreciate in a lifetime. If the excellent novel or film you actually enjoyed had not been available, or the painting you contemplated on your last trip to an art museum had been on loan to another gallery, there would have been another just as good and worthwhile that you could have read, watched, or pored over instead...If it were not one Rembrandt self-portrait, it would have been another. If not the *Palliser* novels, then *Barchester Towers* (2011, 48).

This is a problem for welfarism, Wolf thinks, because it is intuitively obvious that these great works have value *over and above* any they derive from benefiting their creators. It is good that Trollope wrote *Barchester Towers* not only because this benefited *Trollope*. Similarly, it would have been “a great shame” if the Dutch painter “[Gerrit] Dou had become a chemist instead of a painter [and so his] works never been created” (2011, 49), and not only because this may have been bad for *Dou*.

What further value does a great work of art have? Wolf's answer (by her own admission, underdeveloped) is

its *beauty*, broadly conceived, or, to use an even vaguer term, its *aesthetic excellence*. And at least part of what is good about philosophy, history, and science is similarly noninstrumental (2011, 52).

How should a welfarist respond? He should begin, I believe, by disputing Wolf's claim that great works robustly benefit only their creators. Almost every great work, it seems plausible to think, finds what we might call 'a special connection' with *some* individuals. That is, for almost any great work there will invariably be some people who are so taken with it that it contributes more to their lifetime welfare than would have been contributed by the works these people would have "read, watched, or pored over instead" had the work in question not been produced.

I, for example, especially love the music of Joanna Newsom. If Newsom had never picked up a harp, then the time when I first heard her music on the radio would have been a time when I heard the music of some other musician instead. It is incredibly unlikely that this other person's music would have appealed to me to anywhere near the same degree as Newsom's. Therefore, other things being equal, there will end up having been more joy in my life as a result of Newsom's having written and recorded her songs.

Moreover, as a result of hearing Newsom's music, I have been more powerfully motivated to discover and listen to other artists in the indie/folk genre—not to mention recommend their music to others. Consequently, there will be more good

music in my life, and in the lives of my friend, as a result of my having heard Newsom.

While not everyone finds this sort of connection with the music of Joanna Newsom (to say the least!), almost everyone finds a connection of this kind with *some* great artist's work. There are few great works that do not in this way appeal to and inspire some people.

The second thing a welfarist should do in responding to Wolf's first argument is dispute her claim that a welfarist must hold that it is only by benefiting people in the *Robust* Sense that things get to count as good. It is enough on welfarism properly conceived for something to count as good that it make someone better off *in some way* in his life considered as a whole—i.e., positively affect in some way the *make-up* or *constitution* of his lifetime welfare. A *net* positive contribution to lifetime welfare is simply not required.

Your reading *Barchester Towers*, for example, rather than some other great work—say, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*—even if this does not result in your ending up with a higher *net* level of lifetime welfare, will nonetheless make you better off *in one way* in your life considered as a whole. This is because the contribution made to one's lifetime welfare by reading the former work is not just the same kind as that provided by one's reading the latter (assuming one understands the works in question). It is not as if reading these works contributes to one's lifetime welfare by adding to a tally of 'great novels read'. Instead, the benefits conferred are qualitatively different, involving, for example, different kinds of pleasurable experiences, different insights, and so on. (More on this shortly.) If you will never read *Barchester Towers*, then you will miss out on a particular kind or quality of benefit that is obtainable only by reading *Barchester Towers*. It is for this reason that

a welfarist can say that there is value in your reading *Barchester Towers* even if it doesn't confer a *net* lifetime benefit upon you.

3. The Explanation of Benefit Argument

As I have said, Wolf believes that most great works Robustly benefit only their creators. She accepts, however, that they benefit many people in the *Ordinary* Sense. Indeed, she argues, this latter benefit is so great that it cannot be accounted for in purely “naturalistic” (2011, 54) terms, by reference to things such as the pleasures these works provide. Plenty of people, she claims, get as much (or even more) pleasure from experiencing works that are, intuitively, nowhere near as good for them as contact with a great work would be. Many people, for example,

seem to like [the *Da Vinci Code*] more [than *Middlemarch*]*—*to read it more avidly, to recommend it more to friends. They get more enjoyment, in other words, out of reading Dan Brown than George Eliot (2011, 54).

Many of these people, however, Wolf thinks, would be better off reading the Eliot.

If we are going to account for how good *for* us great works are, Wolf maintains, we need to hold that they have value independently of their being good *for* anybody, and then say that

it is a kind of good fortune to be able to interact with these [works], in a way that involves going some way toward understanding and appreciating [this independent] value (2011, 55).

Why is it better *for* us to read *Middlemarch* than the *Da Vinci Code* even if we would enjoy the latter more? It is because in reading the former we would be coming into contact, in a pleasurable or appreciative way, with one of “the works of supreme human accomplishment”, whose primary value is prior to, and not dependent on, its tendency to benefit anyone (2011, 55).

How should a welfarist respond? One strategy would be to argue that, while it is true that we cannot account for the value *for* us of great works purely by reference to the *pleasures* they provide, we can do so by reference to certain *other* naturalistic features of these works or of the world. Suppose, for example, that the right theory of welfare is an *idealised desire-based* one, on which welfare consists in getting what one would want if one were suitably idealised (say, fully informed and vividly imagining all relevant facts). In this case, a welfarist could say that the reason many of us would be better off reading *Middlemarch* than the *Da Vinci Code*, even if we would enjoy the latter more, is that suitably idealised we would prefer to have the former work in our lives. As evidence for this hypothesis about people’s idealised preferences, a welfarist might claim that many well-educated people with wide experience of the world seem to prefer to have great, rather than lesser, works in their lives.

But this proposal has little to recommend it. Quite apart from its controversial claim about what most well-educated people would prefer, it is implausible that great works are so good for us *because* we (would) want to read (or to have read) them. Our wanting to read (or to have read) *Middlemarch* does not seem to be what *makes* our reading this novel so very good for us. On the contrary, it seems to be that when we want to read (or to have read) such works this is because we have come to see how

good it is for us to read them, or at the very least because we are in some way responding to whatever feature it is in virtue of which they are so very good for us.

A different possibility is that some *perfectionist* theory of welfare is true, on which what is intrinsically good for a given creature is just to exercise or realise whatever capacities are definitive of that creature's nature. A welfarist could then say that great works have value for human beings over and above any pleasure they offer us because they enable us to exercise or realise our capacities for intelligent thought, sympathetic identification, or imagination.

But there are many well-known and, frankly, devastating problems with perfectionism. First, there is the problem of how to identify the nature of a given creature. Why should human nature, for example, be identified with capacities for intelligence, sympathy, and imagination, rather than, say, capacities for cruelty, avarice, idolatry, and so on? Second, and more problematic still, it is tempting to think that it can be bad for creatures *that they have the particular natures they do*. Cows, for example, cannot appreciate great art, literature, music, and so on. This seems bad for cows. By contrast, it is our good fortune to have a nature that allows us to create and enjoy such works.²

What, then, is the right response for a welfarist to make? It is, I believe, to return to pleasure. We can account for the value *for us* of great works just in terms of the pleasures they provide.³ Not only are some of these pleasures *more* pleasurable than

² Note, however, that depending on how we are to understand the 'nature' of a particular being, there may be some aspects of a being's nature that this being *could not be without*. Such aspects of a being's nature could not count as good or bad for this being (unless, of course, they were to affect its ability to fulfill *other* aspects of its nature).

³ Note that I do not wish to be committed here to hedonism about welfare. My point is more narrow: that hedonism can account for the value *for us* of *great works*.

any offered by lesser works, many of them (unlike the pleasures of lesser works) are *qualitatively unique*, which greatly increases their contribution to lifetime welfare.

Let us start with the question of quantity. Wolf endorses a *desire-based* theory of pleasure when she says that lesser works are more pleasurable *because* they are more avidly read and recommended to friends. On desire-based theories of pleasure, it is our desires to be having, or to continue having, particular experiences that make them count as pleasurable. But desire-based theories face major problems. Wanting an experience because, say, one finds it interesting, or because one's friends have told one that one would find it pleasurable, or because one has been exposed to advertisements recommending it, does not entail that this experience would be pleasurable for one.

This worry, admittedly, can be overcome by stipulating that it is only an *intrinsic* desire of one's that a particular experience of one's be occurring that makes it count as pleasurable.⁴ But this more sophisticated desire-based theory faces problems of its own. It cannot, for example, account for pleasures whose subject has no awareness of them (even on an unconscious level) at the time of experience.⁵ One cannot have an intrinsic desire that a particular experience be occurring if one has no awareness whatever that it is occurring. Furthermore, all desire-based theories of pleasure (like their cousins, desire-based theories of welfare) seem to get the order of explanation the wrong way around. When we like or want, say, a particular experience of orgasm, it seems not to be our liking or wanting it that *makes* it pleasurable. Rather, we like or want it *because* it is so very pleasurable. What, after all, in the case of orgasm, is the

⁴ See Heathwood (2007).

⁵ See Bramble (2013).

affectively neutral experience supposed to be that we take up our pro-attitude to? And why would we like or want *it*?

What, then, is the correct theory of pleasure? It is, I believe, a *felt-quality* one. On felt-quality theories, pleasures (along with degrees of pleasurable-ness) are determined just by the phenomenology of the experiences in question (i.e., ‘what it’s like’ to be having them). A welfarist should adopt a felt-quality theory of pleasure, and then say that there is phenomenology that is available from great works like *Middlemarch* and *Barchester Towers* that is more pleasurable than any that is available from lesser works like the *Da Vinci Code*. The idea, of course, is not that *every* individual’s experience of reading *Middlemarch* is going to contain or give rise to this phenomenology. Some people’s experience of reading *Middlemarch* is not pleasurable at all. The idea is rather that *for those who understand and appreciate* a great work like *Middlemarch* there are more pleasurable pleasures available from it than there are for those who fully understand and appreciate a lesser work, like the *Da Vinci Code*.

What pleasures am I talking about? Consider three of the main sorts of pleasures provided by reading novels:

1. The pleasures of *being mentally transported*—i.e., of being drawn out of one’s ordinary surroundings or everyday life and immersed in a strange or unfamiliar world that may be beautiful or interesting in various ways.
2. The pleasures of *getting to know the main characters of the novel*—i.e., of coming to see the world from their perspective, whether it is a familiar or an alien one.

3. The pleasures of *being provoked to think*—just as there are the pleasures of exercising one’s body, there are the pleasures of exercising one’s mind, of seeing things in new or different ways, or with deeper levels of understanding.

It is virtually a platitude that great novels are far more effective at transporting or immersing one, portraying realistic or interesting characters, and provoking thought or deepening one’s understanding of the world. It therefore seems reasonable to think that they are better also at delivering the associated pleasures.

Let me consider several objections to this argument. The first is that even if it were true that great works are better at providing these three sorts of pleasures, many lesser works offer *other* sorts of pleasures that are no less intense, and that may on certain occasions be even more intense. Consider, for example, the pleasures of excitement, suspense, steamy romance, or witnessing good triumph over evil.

But it is crucial not to confuse the pleasurable-ness of a pleasure (i.e., the degree to which it is pleasurable) with its intensity in other senses, for example its *introspectability*, or its *tendency to issue in obvious bodily manifestations*. Reading Matthew Reilly’s *Ice Station*, for example, may be a gripping experience, in some ways like a rollercoaster ride. One may periodically shiver, gasp, or feel goosebumps, sigh with exhilaration, break into a smile, have quickened breathing or sweaty palms. One may be able to focus very clearly via introspection on the particular pleasures it gives one while one is reading it or even keep them in mind immediately after putting it down. None of this entails, however, that these pleasures are intense in the sense of being highly *pleasurable*. Some of the *most* pleasurable pleasures are extremely hard

to direct one's attention to. In a recent paper, Daniel Haybron asks us to consider pleasurable *moods*, which

[unlike] sensory affects (viz., physical pleasures and pains)...have no particular location or object. (If they have an object at all, it is everything, which phenomenologically is pretty much like having no object.) They are also highly diffuse, pervading the whole of one's consciousness. They are, moreover, comparatively diaphanous, offering us not so much distinct objects within the field of consciousness as alterations of the field itself, coloring the entirety of our experience (2007, 398).

Nonetheless, Haybron rightly points out, such moods are

quite central to the experienced quality of our lives...A vague sense of malaise might easily go unnoticed, yet it can sour one's experience far more than the sharper and more pronounced ache that persists after having stubbed one's toe...Presumably being tense, anxious, or stressed detracts substantially from the quality of one's experience, even when one is unaware of these states (2007, 398).

Consider also the following, highly illustrative example of one of Oliver Sacks' patients, who had lost his sense of smell. This patient remarked:

Sense of smell? I never gave it a thought. You don't normally give it a thought. But when I lost it—it was like being struck blind. Life lost a good deal of its

savour—one doesn't realise how much 'savour' is smell. You smell people, you smell books, you smell the city, you smell the spring—maybe not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else. My whole world was suddenly radically poorer.⁶

Some of the most pleasurable pleasures are noticeable only if and when they come to an abrupt end. There may even be certain pleasures that it is *logically impossible* to attend to when they are occurring. Consider the pleasurable experiences of 'flow' or utter absorption in some activity (say, playing tennis, making love, or meditating). As soon as one begins to turn one's attention toward them, they change or vanish, scattering like beetles under the refrigerator when the kitchen lights are switched on.

Returning now to the pleasures offered by great works, many of these are precisely immersive or 'flow' pleasures. While they may be considerably harder to introspect or imaginatively pinpoint in oneself, or to discern in the faces or bodily reactions of others just by looking, than the pleasures offered by thrillers like the *Da Vinci Code* or *Ice Station*, they may be considerably more pleasurable nonetheless. Indeed, the fact that they are immersive or flow pleasures is some reason to think that there is quite a bit more to them than we can easily introspect, that what we can introspect of them is merely the phenomenological tip of the iceberg, so to speak.

The second objection I want to consider is that some great works are not pleasurable *at all*. Consider, for example, Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes From A Marriage*. Of its third episode, "Paula", in which a husband returns home only to tell his wife that he has fallen in love with another woman and is leaving that night for a long journey, one philosopher, Aaron Smuts, writes:

⁶ Sacks, quoted in Rachels (2004).

I would not describe my experience of this episode as in any way pleasurable, but I find it to be one of the most effective affair fictions ever created. Indeed, pardon my gushing, it contains some of the most powerful moments in cinematic history. I would recommend it to others, largely for the experience. But it is not pleasurable. No, it is nothing less than emotionally devastating (2011, 247).

But like the previous objection, this one relies on an overly narrow conception of pleasure or enjoyment. There is, it goes without saying, a *kind* of enjoyment that is necessarily *light*. This is the sort of enjoyment that finds its natural expression in smiles or laughter. It is the sort that we normally associate with *having fun*. Of course, no-one finds watching *Scenes From A Marriage* fun, and so enjoyable in *this* sense. But it is very implausible to think that all pleasure must be enjoyment of this particular kind.

Sitting in the dark of the cinema by oneself watching “Paula” unfold, one is carried away for a brief while from one’s own life and everyday concerns, and is utterly immersed in a world of tremendous interest and beauty. The characters are flawed and unhappy, their lives fraught and complex, but this is partly why the film is so engrossing. While watching it, one has many thoughts about life and the world we all share (thoughts that are not necessarily conscious)—both insights concerning and improved understanding of the world. All of this is deeply pleasurable, though not fun.

Moreover—and this point is crucial—tragedies like “Paula” offer the viewer significant pleasures of *catharsis*. Just as there are pleasures of exercising one’s cognitive powers, there seem to be pleasures of exercising one’s *emotional* capacities.

Just *feeling deeply*, whether the emotion in question is itself a pleasurable or a painful one, can be exhilarating, and so in this way a source of pleasure. At such times, and in a familiar way of putting it, one may ‘feel alive again’. One is rejuvenated.

Furthermore, these emotional reactions can be incredibly *therapeutic*. Part of what is so tremendously affecting about a tragedy like “Paula” is its tendency to call to mind (once again, in most cases unconsciously) similar difficulties, sadness, or even tragedy in one’s own life or in the lives of people one knows. When reminded of these things, the painful emotions associated with them—emotions that one may have repressed or ignored—come bubbling again to the surface, where they can be dealt with or flushed out of one’s psyche. By vividly showing that we are not alone in facing such troubles, tragedies like Paula can help us to feel better about things.⁷

So, while Smuts is right that these works are emotionally devastating—they can be extraordinarily sad or painful to watch—our experiences of them are *mixed*. There is great pleasure here, too. One simplifies the experience if one ignores these pleasures.

The third objection I want to consider is that, even if the argument I have provided is successful, it succeeds only for films and novels in particular, and not for any other kinds of artworks.

Great paintings, too, however, are often pleasurable by transporting their audiences to the places they depict, or by depicting people whose perspective one is

⁷ Moreover, these works might help us to develop or grow as people in ways that might improve our ability to experience pleasures (or avoid pains) *further down the track*. For example, one’s watching *Scenes From a Marriage* might make one a more sympathetic person, and so better able to experience the pleasures of love later in one’s life. Alternatively, one may learn things from watching it that could help one to save one’s own marriage (or perhaps to realise that one should not get married in the first place!).

invited to consider or share. Similarly, great pieces of music often work precisely by carrying us out of our ordinary day lives to places that are either described or alluded to in the lyrics or (when there are no lyrics) suggested to us by the emotions that the music causes us to feel. And, of course, great paintings and music are often highly thought-provoking, and so capable of delivering the pleasures of thought.

Some great works, I am willing to concede, do not make available highly pleasurable pleasures (either immediately or later on). They may only make us think, or may even assault our senses in a purely unpleasurable way. Such works, however, I believe, are not among those that are intuitively so very good for us to come into contact with. My claim is just that *of those great works contact with which seems especially good for us*, all have intense pleasures to offer.

Let us move on, then, to the second thing I believe a welfarist should say in response to Wolf's second argument. This consists of two claims:

1. Many of the pleasures offered by great works (unlike those made available by lesser works) are *qualitatively unique*.
2. Qualitatively unique pleasures add considerably more to a person's lifetime welfare.

Consider (1). It is a platitude that the characters, plots, themes, etc., of lesser works are none too original—they are, in their most essential features, just the same as or very similar to what one finds in many other works, with only minor superficial differences. Same product, different packaging, as one might put it. By contrast, all great works are original in various ways. If they are especially immersive, then they

may take one to places that no other work does. If their characters are highly realistic, then they will be, like real people, unique. If they are highly thought-provoking, then it is likely that they are giving us thoughts, or a perspective on the world, that no other work conveys.

These differences between lesser and great works naturally have implications for the qualitative character of the pleasures they provide us with—these pleasures, after all, are bound up with the places these works take one to, the characters they portray, and the ideas they explore. This makes such works very different from lesser ones, which are merely different vehicles for what are essentially the same set of pleasures.

Now, consider (2). It is common these days for philosophers to hold that lifetime welfare is not equivalent simply to the *sum* of momentary welfare throughout one's life. David Velleman (1991), for example, says that some momentary misfortunes may not detract from lifetime welfare at all if they are suitably *redeemed* by later events (whether they are so redeemed, on Velleman's view, depends on their place in what Velleman calls the story of one's life). Others, like Michael Slote (1983), hold that the *timing* of an event makes an intrinsic difference to its contribution to lifetime welfare (events happening during one's biological prime, Slote believes, contribute more).

My claim belongs in the same family as these claims. On the view I am proposing, pleasures that bring nothing new to the table qualitatively speaking—*purely repeated pleasures*, as we might call them—count for little or perhaps even nothing toward a person's lifetime welfare. By contrast, pleasures that add something new to the palate of pleasures felt throughout one's life contribute considerably more.

If this were so, then it would explain what is deficient in a number of famously wasted lives. Consider:

1. Roger Crisp's *Oyster*, whose life consists "only of mild sensual pleasure, rather like that experienced by humans when floating very drunk in a warm bath" (2006, 630).
2. Susan Wolf's *Blob*, who "spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies" (2007, 65).
3. David Wiggins' *Hog Farmer*, who "grows more corn to feed more hogs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more hogs" (1976, 100).

These lives are utterly unenviable. Their subjects have little or no self-interested reason to go on living. Extra days, weeks, months, would add little or nothing to their lifetime welfare. Why is this so? I believe it is because, while these individuals continue to have pleasures (pleasures they may never tire of!), these pleasures are just more of the same. There is nothing qualitatively new in any of them.⁸

Still, some readers may find it hard to accept that purely repeated pleasures add little or nothing in and of themselves to lifetime welfare. For example, it may be suggested: "I love oatmeal for breakfast and I have it every morning. I never tire of it. Are you telling me that it would be better for me to have a breakfast that I would enjoy less?" Or: "I re-read *Middlemarch* every three years and I never get bored with

⁸ An anonymous reviewer suggests to me that these lives seem wasted not because they involve no qualitatively new pleasures, but because the pleasures they do involve are merely sensual or bodily ones. But it seems to me that a life spent having the same *higher* pleasure over and over again (say, of re-reading *Middlemarch* well beyond the point at which there is anything new to be gleaned from it) would also be a largely wasted life.

it. I love those characters. Are you telling me that I should read works that give me less enjoyment and that I consider inferior?”

It is important to realise, however, that purely repeated pleasures, while they add little or nothing *in and of themselves* to lifetime welfare, may still have considerable *instrumental* value for one. The pleasures of porridge may be essential in order for one to get off on the right foot each morning. Without them, or other similar pleasures, one might have great difficulty being productive or taking joy in various other things. Similarly, if one has read *Middlemarch* so many times that there is truly nothing new in terms of pleasure for one to get from reading it another time, then the pleasures of re-reading it every few years may add nothing in and of themselves to one’s lifetime welfare. But re-reading it might still be very good for one—if, for example, one finds this a rejuvenating, relaxing, or stimulating activity—all of which may help one to better function in one’s life and so reach pleasures that *are* qualitatively new (or perhaps, depending on the right theory of welfare, other things besides pleasures that are intrinsically good for one).

I conclude that by distinguishing the pleasurable-ness of a pleasure from its intensity in other senses, and emphasising the importance of qualitative diversity in one’s pleasures, a welfarist can account for the value *for* us of great works simply by appeal to the pleasures these works can provide those who understand and appreciate them.

4. The Welfarist’s Mistake

Wolf's third argument is a diagnosis of the welfarist's mistake. According to Wolf, many philosophers who are attracted to welfarism start with a plausible claim like one of the following:

(a) "A great painting locked in a vault that will self-destruct if humans tampered with it would not be worth saving" (2011, 56).

(b) "Contemplating a future in which human life has been destroyed, there [is] nothing further to regret when one learns that the Louvre and all its contents have been destroyed as well" (2011, 56).

They then infer from the truth of such a claim that it is a condition of the value of such works that they benefit people.

But this is a bad inference, Wolf says. While (a) and (b) are indeed plausible claims, this is not because it is a condition of the value of such works that they *benefit* people. Instead, it is merely because it is a condition of the value of such works that they have a "*capacity to give rise to human experiences of certain sorts*" (2011, 59). Why is the painting locked in a vault not worth preserving? It is not because, if it were preserved, it would benefit nobody, but instead because it could never lead to certain kinds of human experiences.

But there is a problem with Wolf's argument. It is not plausible that the reason that the works in (a) and (b) are not worth preserving is that they lack a *capacity* to give rise to certain human experiences. It is more plausible that they are not worth preserving because they *would not* give rise to any such experiences. To see that this is so, consider a painting that is not in a vault at all, but rather buried in a place where,

as it happens, it will never be found. Is this painting worth preserving? Presumably not. However, it, unlike the paintings in (a) and (b), clearly *has* a capacity to lead to human experiences of certain sorts.

Wolf might respond that, in her sense of capacity, the buried painting also lacks the capacity to lead to the relevant human experiences. But in that case we might reasonably wonder what sense of capacity Wolf has in mind (regrettably, she is not explicit about this). What would be an example of a painting that if preserved would not lead to any such experiences, but nonetheless has the capacity to do so?

Faced with these worries, Wolf might accept that talk of a capacity here is misleading, and suggest instead that her point is really that a great work is worth preserving only if it *would* lead to human experiences of certain sorts. It is this claim, she might insist, that explains why the paintings in (a) and (b) are not worth preserving, but does not entail welfarism (since leading to certain kinds of human experiences is not the same thing as *benefiting* anyone).

The trouble with this response is that if the reason that the paintings in (a) and (b) are not worth preserving is that they would not lead to certain kinds of human experiences, then it is extremely tempting to think that the paintings are valuable as mere *means* to the relevant experiences. But this conclusion—while it does not entail welfarism—is clearly in conflict with Wolf’s Explanation of Benefit Argument. This argument, remember, says that coming into contact with great works is so very good for us because in doing so we are coming into contact with things that are valuable independently of their effects on us.

Furthermore, it would be exceedingly odd, to say the least, if these paintings were valuable only as means to our having pleasurable experiences of appreciation, but not solely because—by being such means—they were good *for* us. This is because

it would be exceedingly odd to think that these pleasurable experiences of appreciation, while among the things that are paradigmatically good for us, were not solely good by being good for us.

Finally, Wolf might suggest that her view is rather that, while the value of great works depends on their actually leading to certain kinds of human experiences, these works are not valuable as mere means to such experiences. Instead, it is just these works that are valuable, but it is a condition of this value that they be eventually experienced.

This is, admittedly, a possible view. But it does not seem very appealing. We might reasonably ask: *Why* must these works be experienced if they are to have value? The most natural answer is *because of the value of these experiences*.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have reconstructed and evaluated Wolf's three main arguments against welfarism in her great work "Good-For-Nothings". While none of these arguments is ultimately successful, Wolf's work is valuable indeed. Its value lies in its significant contribution to the welfare of its readers and those whom we will benefit.

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