What is the Rational Care Theory of Welfare?

A Comment on Stephen Darwall’s Welfare and Rational Care

When we speak of a “good life” there are several different things we might mean. We might mean a morally good life. We might mean a life good for others, or good for the world in general. We might mean a life good in itself for the one who lives it. This last may also be described as the life high in individual welfare.

In their attempts to help readers focus on the concept of individual welfare, a number of philosophers have appealed to what we may call the “Crib Test”. Imagine that you are the proud and loving parent of a newborn baby. Imagine that as you look into the crib where the baby is peacefully sleeping, your heart is filled with parental affection and concern. You hope that things will turn out well for your baby. You might express your hope by saying, “I hope that this baby gets to live a good life.” The idea behind the Crib Test is that when you speak of a “good life” in this context, you are speaking of the baby’s individual welfare. You are hoping (according to the Crib Test) that he gets a life that’s good for him – high in welfare. So the Crib Test is designed to help us identify the concept of individual welfare and distinguish it from other things that might be meant by talk of “the Good Life.”

The Crib Test is familiar and helpful, so far as it goes. It points us in the direction of the concept of individual welfare. Most of us wouldn’t put too much stock in it, since a misguided or confused parent might hope for nearly anything for his child, even with a heart filled with love. But Darwall adopts the vague idea behind the Crib Test and elevates it to a position of central importance in his book. In his hands, this rough idea becomes a fundamental doctrine in
metaethics. He calls this the “Rational Care Theory of Welfare” (RCTW). Approximately a third of Darwall’s book is devoted to the presentation and defense of this theory.²

Here I aim to make just one main point. It is that in spite of its central place in this book, RCTW remains seriously obscure. Darwall states the theory in several different ways. He suggests that they are intended to be interchangeable, but the statements are obscure. Some of them seem to be open to several different interpretations. It’s not clear that the different formulations really come to the same thing. In the end, there is no form of RCTW that is both plausible and plausibly attributable to Darwall.

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Darwall explicitly says that RCTW is a doctrine in metaethics.³ It is intended to give an account of the concept of individual welfare; it is supposed to display the meaning of the expression ‘p would be good for S’; it is intended to be a definition or analysis of the concept of individual welfare.⁴

Here are some passages⁵ in which Darwall seems to be stating RCTW:

A1. “... a person’s good is constituted ... by what one (perhaps she) should want insofar as one cares about her.”(p. 4)
A2. “What is for someone’s good or welfare is what one ought to desire and promote insofar as one cares for him.”(p. 7)
A3. “... what it is for something to be good for someone just is for it to be something one should desire for him for his sake, that is, insofar as one cares for him.” (p. 8)
A4. “...the claim that what we ought to desire for someone’s sake is what is good for him is a tautology.” (p. 10)
B5. “... welfare must be an explicitly normative concept. My proposal will be that it is the concept of what