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Ethics, Vol. 100, No. 1. (Oct., 1989), pp. 116-126.

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Consequentialism and Respect for Persons*

Philip Pettit

In *A Theory of Freedom* Stanley Benn provides a detailed and useful mapping of elements he discerns in the concept of freedom.¹ Among other things he maps the interpersonal requirements for the enjoyment of freedom: requirements like noninterference, equal consideration, and privacy. I have no particular quarrel with this mapping, certainly none that I will pursue here. What I do resist, however, is the deontological cast which Benn gives to his cartography.

Benn argues that agents honor the sorts of requirements mentioned, thereby contributing to one another's freedom, only if they recognize certain "person-centered" as distinct from "value-centered" reasons in their deliberation (p. 7); that to recognize such reasons is to respect one another as persons (p. 11); and that respect in this sense is a "basic deontological notion" (p. 240). He maintains therefore that consequentialists cannot endorse the sort of deliberation required if people are to enjoy freedom vis-à-vis one another. I wish to argue, however, that on this point Benn is wrong. Useful as his book is in other regards, it underestimates the resources of consequentialism.

The article is in three sections. First, I set up the contrast between deontological and teleological views, identifying the sort of deontology which Benn embraces. Next I show that none of the arguments he offers provides convincing support for that deontology. And finally, in the third section, I indicate how a consequentialist might justify honoring the sorts of requirements which Benn associates with the ideal of freedom. I write in the role of a consequentialist and do not try here to provide a defense of the doctrine; that is a task for other places.² Neither, by the same token, do I provide a critique of deontology. My aim is only to show that there is more to consequentialism than is dreamed of in Benn's philosophy.

* I am grateful for comments on an earlier draft by Bob Goodin and Alan Hamlin.

1. S. I. Benn, *A Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); references to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.

2. See John Braithwaite and Philip Pettit, *Not Just Deserts: A Republican Theory of Criminal Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press); and Philip Pettit, "Consequentialism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, in press).

Ethics 100 (October 1989): 116–126

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I

Consequentialists and deontologists may share a theory of the good: a view as to what universal properties are valuable, making for the desirability of a bearer of those properties. Where they have to differ is in the theory of the right, the theory of what makes one among a set of options the correct one to choose. Consequentialists say that the right option in any choice is that which promotes the realization of the relevant valuable properties. Deontologists deny this. They say that, in some cases at least, the right option is that which honors a relevant value by exemplifying respect for it in this particular instance, whether or not honoring the value in this way promotes its realization overall.

This initial characterization of the difference between the two approaches is readily intelligible. With a value like that of being peaceable, I promote it if I do whatever promises the maximal realization of the value; this may include not being peaceable myself, as in fighting the war to end all wars. I honor that value on the other hand if I choose options that exemplify it, being peaceable myself, even if this means that there is less peace overall. But however intuitive the distinction is, it requires more exact definition; in particular, the notion of promoting a value needs to be elaborated. In order to provide this elaboration, we will first have to define the notion of an option and then the notion, as I describe it, of an option-prognosis.

An option may be a directly behavioral option such as that expressed by a proposition like “I do A,” but equally it may be only indirectly behavioral, as with options such as “I will let my instincts of loyalty to friends prevail in normal circumstances,” “I commit myself to being faithful to the principle of benevolence,” or “I endorse this trait of competitiveness in myself: I shall do nothing to change it.” The defining feature of an option is that it is a possibility which the agent is in a position to realize or not. He can make it the case—or not—that he does A, that he acts on his instincts of loyalty, that he lets the principle of benevolence dictate his actions, or that he remains complacently competitive.

Although an option is a possibility that can be realized, the agent will almost never be able to determine how exactly the possibility works out; that will depend on other agents and on other things in the world. I may do A and it rains or not, I may do A and there is a third world war or not: the list is open. Given the differences in how such conditions can work out, any option has different prognoses. If an option is a possibility that can be realized, its prognoses are the different possible ways in which the possibility can come to be realized. The notion of a prognosis picks up one version of the familiar notion of a consequence. It corresponds to the technical notion of a possible world, so far as a prognosis of an option is one way the world may be if the option is realized.

Returning now to the definition of consequentialism, we can identify two propositions which consequentialists generally defend.

1. Every prognosis for an option, every way the world may be as the result of a choice of an option, has a single value, a value that is determined by the valuable properties realized there: in particular, determined by its universal properties, such as how far it is a happy world, a world in which liberty is respected, a world where nature thrives, and so on.³

2. Every option, every possibility which an agent can realize or not, has its value fixed by the values of its prognoses: its value is a function of the values of its different prognoses, a function of the values associated with the different ways it may lead the world to be.⁴

The motivation for going into this level of detail was to give clearer content to the notion of promoting a value. An agent promotes certain values in his or her choices, we can now say, if—and indeed only if—the agent ranks the prognoses of options in terms of these values (proposition 1) and ranks the options—where the ranking determines the choice—in terms of their prognoses (proposition 2). There is an indeterminacy in proposition 2, since it has been left open how exactly the value of an option is fixed by the values of its prognoses. The usual approach among consequentialists, though not the only possible one, is to cast an option as a gamble among the different possible prognoses and follow decision theory in computing its value. On this approach you find the value of the option by adding up the values of the different prognoses, discounting each such value by the probability the prognosis has—say, a quarter or a half—of being the correct one. Suppose that the agent's concern is to save life and that in some dire circumstances two options present themselves: one gives a 50 percent chance of saving one hundred lives, the other a certain chance of saving forty. Other things being equal—which they will rarely be—the approach would favor the first option.

Perhaps the most important thing to recognize about our account of consequentialism is that it does not involve a commitment to the following proposition.

3. If the properties are allowed to be nonuniversal—specifically if I may evaluate a prognosis by how far it involves me in particular doing this or that—then even a deontological view could be represented as consequentialist. The deontologist would be promoting his honoring such and such values. See Amartya Sen, "Rights and Agency," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11 (1982): 3–39.

4. Notice that the thesis does not require that the values of the less abstract prognoses determine the value of the more abstract options, only that they are coordinated suitably. See Philip Pettit, "Decision Theory and Folk Psychology," in *Essays in the Foundations of Decision Theory*, ed. Michael Bacharach and Susan Hurley (Oxford: Blackwell, in press).

3. The decision maker should deliberate about the values of the options he faces by calculating the values of their prognoses and computing the relevant function.

There is a simple argument which shows that this proposition is not a necessary part of the consequentialist credo. The first two consequentialist propositions are relevant, as already noted in passing, to options that are not directly behavioral—alternative motives or principles that can be adopted over a certain period or in a certain setting—as well as to directly behavioral options: alternative possible actions. If the consequentialist endorses 3, then he begs the question about how to choose in any area of behavior among the following higher-level options: (a) I let my choice among behavioral options be determined by certain motives or principles already chosen; (b) I determine each such choice independently. If the consequentialist endorses 3, then in any area of behavior he counsels *b*: the independent determination of each choice. But it ought to be an open question whether *b* is actually a better option than *a*. The answer depends on the prospects associated with those higher-level options. Thus a commitment to 3—in effect an endorsement of *b*—is not a necessary tenet of the consequentialist faith.

Opponents have often willed proposition 3 onto consequentialists, but from the earliest days the proposition has been resisted.⁵ Consequentialists have generally wanted to hold that, while it is appropriate to assess or evaluate an option by reference to the values of its prospects, it may not be appropriate for an agent to use such assessment in his deliberation. It may be better for him—it may improve his chances of getting a desirable prognosis, for example—if he restricts his deliberation, making his decisions by using certain rules of thumb or whatever.⁶ Thus if I indulge my instincts of loyalty to my friends on suitable occasions, and it is clear that I do so, then I may produce desirable consequences that would escape me if I calculated the pros and cons of every response.

We now have a better grasp of what it is the consequentialist says. The consequentialist holds that the proper way for an agent to respond to any values recognized is to promote them: that is, in every choice to select the option with such prognoses that it is, as one version has it, the best gamble with those values. But we can now also be somewhat more specific about what the nonconsequentialist says. There are two varieties of nonconsequentialism, two ways of holding that certain values should

5. See the discussion in Philip Pettit and Geoffrey Brennan, "Restrictive Consequentialism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1986): 438–55.

6. This position, restrictive consequentialism, is not a form of restricted or rule-consequentialism, as distinct from extreme or act-consequentialism. The rule-consequentialist wants only rules to be assessed in the consequentialist way; acts are assessed by how far they comply with suitable rules. The restrictive consequentialist endorses act-consequentialism, wanting all options to be assessed in the consequentialist way, but denies that this means the agent should deliberate over all options in that manner.

be honored, not promoted. One variety insists that, while there are respectful or loyal options, for example, there is no sense to the notion of promoting the universal value of loyalty or respect. This is to deny the consequentialist's first proposition, holding that certain values like loyalty and respect cannot be used to determine abstract scores for different prognoses of options, different ways the world may be; while such values can be honored then, they cannot be promoted. The other position which the nonconsequentialist may take is to admit the first proposition, acknowledging that the notion of an agent promoting values at least makes sense, but deny the second: that is, deny that the best option is necessarily determined by the values of its prognoses.

We may turn at last to Stanley Benn's views. Benn maintains that there are—at least (p. 15)—two different sorts of reasons on which agents act: value-centered and person-centered reasons (pp. 6–11). Person-centered reasons involve considerations of freedom, justice, equal regard, and the like; they are, more generally, the considerations deployed in respecting persons. Value-centered reasons involve considerations about how to maximize the realization of desirable states of affairs, how to promote certain values: certain good or valuable properties.

Benn is a deontologist in the sense that he endorses person-centered reasons of respect and thinks that only a deontologist can do so. He apparently allows that we can regard the condition of people's respecting one another as a desirable feature, so that all prognoses can be ranked as more or less good, depending on how they realize the property (p. 111). But he denies that the rightness of respecting persons comes of the fact, where it is a fact, that respect promotes that value (pp. 111–12). More generally, indeed, he denies that the rightness of respecting persons is constituted by the promotion of any sort of good: "Person-centred reasons have to do with principles, such as freedom, justice, equal respect for persons' rights, and fidelity to truth, inasmuch as we are committed to these principles in our dealings with any other person, simply by virtue of that subject's being a person and *quite irrespective of the outcomes of our conforming to or departing from these principles*" (p. 8; my italics).

What emerges then is that Benn is a deontologist of the second kind distinguished above. He is prepared to admit that prognoses each have a value, a value determined by how far it realizes various attractive properties, among them the property of people's respecting one another to a greater or lesser extent (cf. p. 65). But he wants to deny that the rightness of respecting persons comes of any association with valuable prognoses. If it is right for us to respect a person, if it is right not to interfere with him, for example, or to give him equal consideration with others, that is not because doing so promotes some desirable property; it is not even because doing so promotes the property of people's being respected. Not interfering, and giving equal consideration, are right "quite

irrespective of the outcomes of our conforming to or departing from these principles.”⁷

II

Benn’s defense of his deontological stand is offered, primarily, in the course of explaining how we come to be moved by reasons of respect. His deontology means that it may be right to respect someone, even if disrespecting him would mean that respect of people by people would generally increase: say, because of the shock created by the act of disrespect. Benn embraces that result, suggesting that it is tolerable because of why reasons of respect move us: specifically, because reasons of respect move us in virtue of the attitude we take toward others as natural and moral persons. “If in just one instance acting without respect would have the consequence of maximizing over all cases the observance of the principle of respect, there would still be reason, within the terms of the pure principle, for observing it even in that instance, since the reason for acting on the principle is to be found in the conceptual connection between natural and moral personality, not in the optimality of the outcome of its being observed” (p. 111).

So what is the conceptual connection between natural and moral personality in virtue of which reasons of respect are supposed to move us? To be a natural person is to be a maker of choices, a pursuer of projects. To be a moral person is, in addition, to enjoy certain claims against other natural persons, being able more or less effectively to command their noninterference, their equal consideration, and the like: in short, to command their respect. The link alleged between the two notions seems to be this: that a natural person will come to resent, and be indignant at, other natural persons who do not respect him; that, indulging such feelings, he will see himself as a moral person deserving of respect; and that, recognizing that others are symmetrically positioned, he will also come to see them as moral persons.

Resenting another person’s lack of consideration, however, we are already committed to the general principle that every natural person, being conceptually equipped to grasp what it is to have and to value projects of his own, is thereby committed to respecting the standing of every other person as an originator of projects. Seeing ourselves as natural persons, as project makers, in a world with others like ourselves, we have developed a conception of ourselves as *moral persons* too, entitled to a degree of forbearance from any other natural person conceptually capable of grasping that self-perception and of sharing it. Claiming respect—the recognition of our moral personality—on the grounds of our natural personality, we are then

7. Notice, however, that the break with outcomes does not mean for Benn that there is no rational resolution of certain conflicts. He renounces consequentialism but, unusually among its opponents, not this commitment to rationality; see Benn, chap. 3.

committed to extending it to anyone else satisfying the same conditions. [P. 98; cf. p. 9]

What Benn provides here is not really the analysis of a conceptual connection between the notions of natural and moral personality. Rather it is a sort of genealogy for the attitude we take when we see someone, not just as an object, but as a person such that, *prima facie* at least, there is reason to respect him: a reason not to interfere with him, a reason to consider him equally with others, a reason to grant him privacy, and so on. The genealogy is given a social gloss, so far as the development of the notion of moral personality in a society is likened to Rousseau's social contract (p. 98). It is given a psychological gloss, so far as we are offered a sketch of how a child may come to think of himself and others as moral persons (p. 99).

Benn's idea is that once we have adopted the notion of a moral person, the belief that here is another person who will suffer interference, say, if I do such and such, provides me with a motivating reason—albeit a reason I may override—for not doing it. Is desire necessary for such a motivating reason? No, he says, because the belief that there is a consideration favoring an option, be it a value-centered or a person-centered consideration, can motivate an agent to adopt it, without desire figuring (chap. 2). As beliefs in propositions can commit me to believing something they entail, so beliefs in suitable propositions can commit me, if not overridingly, to taking a certain course of action.

The issue about desire is not central to our concerns.⁸ The important point in Benn's account of how we become sensitive to reasons of respect is that he thinks the sort of sensitivity developed in us makes a reason of respect deontologically binding. I see someone as a moral person and

8. I have no quarrel with the idea that as my beliefs can provide me with a reason to believe something entailed by their contents, so they can provide me with a motivating reason to act. I have no quarrel with this idea and neither, *pace* Benn, need the Humean who insists on the necessity of desire. The Humean can say that the role of desire in the having of a motivating reason is like the role of a habit of inference in the case of having a reason to believe a proposition entailed by other things I believe; see Philip Pettit and Huw Price, "Bare Functional Desire," *Analysis*, vol. 49 (1989), in press. I may believe that if *p*, then *q*, and that *p*, but unless I am constructed so as to conform to *modus ponens*, unless I display the *modus ponens* habit of inference, I will not have a reason—in the sense analogous to motivating reason—to believe that *q*. And similarly, the Humean will say, I may believe that Φ -ing has feature *F*, and that *F* is a desirable feature, but unless I have the habit of tending to adopt any option with that feature—unless, in effect, I have a *prima facie* desire for states of affairs with that feature—I will not have a motivating reason to Φ . The Humean is on solid ground, and ground undisturbed by Benn's observations, when he makes desire essential for having a motivating reason; see Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36–61. If there is a weakness in his argument, it is in the further claim that desire—unlike, e.g., the *modus ponens* habit—is necessarily a noncognitive state, a state whose suitability is not subject to the sort of constraints that govern belief; see Philip Pettit, "Humeans, Anti-Humeans and Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 530–33; and Michael Smith, "On Humeans, Anti-Humeans and Motivation: A Reply to Pettit," *Mind*, vol. 97 (1988).

not only do I thereby have a reason to respect him, but I am supposed to have a reason which may compel me independently of the outcomes associated respectively with acting on it or not. “When one has learned to make the conceptual link between natural and moral personality, one has learned also that one may be bound to show forbearance even when one doesn’t expect it in return” (p. 99). More than that, Benn suggests: one has learned that one may be bound to show forbearance “quite irrespective” of any outcomes (p. 8).

We had been presented previously with a not implausible account of how we come to countenance reasons of respect. But now we are informed that this account also shows that reasons of respect have deontological status. They bind us other than in virtue of a link with outcomes, and in a particular case a reason of respect may require me to do something which decreases respect overall. Here the plausibility runs out. It is hard to see how the genealogy provided for respect could have any result as strong as the deontological one alleged. What does Benn have in mind?

Here is a suggestion. There is a contrast between value-centered and person-centered reasons. The value-centered reason directs my attention to a property, usually a universal property, which is hailed as desirable and worth promoting: the property may be that of sentient beings enjoying happiness, the natural world being well looked after, or even people’s respecting one another. The person-centered reason, however, as Benn’s genealogy highlights, does not direct me in the first place to a property I should promote but rather to an action I should perform: I should not interfere with this person, I should give him equal consideration, or whatever. The value-centered reason directs me also of course to an action I should perform but it does so via directing me to a feature I should promote. The person-centered reason directs me to an action I should perform without specifying such a property to be promoted.

In resting his deontology on the genealogy of respect, it is not implausible that Benn has this observation in mind. After all, the observation means that whereas in acting on a value-centered reason we deliberate like consequentialist agents—we calculate roughly as our earlier proposition 3 would have us calculate—in acting on a person-centered reason we do not do so. Here we are deliberating without explicit concern for the promotion of any particular desirable property, without explicit concern for ensuring the realization of a more rather than a less desirable prognosis. Benn may well think that since person-centered reasons are not explicitly consequentialist considerations, that is evidence that a consequentialist cannot endorse them.

My suggestion then is that what is really moving Benn in his claim that a consequentialist cannot endorse reasons of respect is the phenomenology of deliberation. In deliberating with value-centered reasons I am conforming explicitly to consequentialist procedure. In deliberating with person-centered reasons I am not. “A person-centered reason affects deliberation quite unlike a value-centered reason. One sort of effect has

already been suggested: A person-centered reason can impose a constraint on an otherwise appropriate action without there being any alteration in the evaluation of expected outcomes. If a person-centered reason is at issue, it is not enough to show how much better things would be overall if the principle were set aside. To deny a person his rights for the sake of a good outcome is not like investing a dollar to gain five" (p. 13).

But if Benn is invoking the phenomenology of deliberation in support of his deontological claim, then he has little support to provide. As we saw in the last section, the consequentialist is not committed to proposition 3 and is free in principle therefore to endorse forms of deliberation which are not explicitly consequentialist. No argument from the phenomenology of deliberation alone can establish that certain reasons are incapable of being endorsed by consequentialists. Thus, for all that Benn shows in his genealogy of person-centered reasons, consequentialists may still be able to endorse those reasons. They may value such properties and prognoses that they believe that in certain settings agents should act on reasons of respect without adverting explicitly to outcomes. They may see that pattern of deliberation and action as uniquely suited to the promotion of value, the maximization of the good.

III

Stanley Benn's position, as described in the first section above, is that person-centered reasons—reasons of respect—should be endorsed and that the consequentialist is incapable of doing this. But the argument with which he supports the claim that the consequentialist cannot do this, as it is characterized in the second section, is not a solid foundation. It remains now to consider, however briefly, whether Benn is in fact wrong about consequentialism: whether the consequentialist can endorse the idea of an agent's acting on reasons of respect, without explicit concern for the outcomes of doing so.

Whether the consequentialist can endorse any pattern of reasoning or behavior depends on what properties he takes to be desirable: what values he cherishes. Opponents of consequentialism too easily assume that the only value which real consequentialists can espouse is one in the utilitarian family: pleasure, preference-satisfaction, interest-satisfaction, or whatever. But this is a crude mistake. There is no reason why consequentialists should be any less sophisticated than their opponents in charting the lineaments of the good.

Consider any allegedly desirable property of prognoses or options: say, the property F. For any property of this kind the consequentialist is as well positioned as the deontologist to countenance it.⁹ If he does countenance it, of course, he will say that agents ought to promote that property, though perhaps only as one among others: they ought to act

9. Generally he is better positioned. Deontologists focus only on properties such that an agent is able to tell for certain of any option whether it has one of these properties or not. Their position is not defined for properties—surely, the general run—whose realization by options is often a matter of risk or uncertainty.

so as to maximize its expected realization. The deontologist differs from him here, on the question of the response that desirable properties require, not on questions to do with what the desirable properties are. The deontologist says that at least some properties call to be honored rather than promoted. Thus where the consequentialist might argue that respect for persons is one of the properties an agent should promote—even if in the exceptional case that means acting in a nonrespectful way—deontologists like Benn will say that it is a property which an agent ought to honor in his behavior, it is a property which he may be required to exemplify, even when exemplifying it is not the best way of promoting it.¹⁰

The question then is whether there is any property such that it is a plausible value for a consequentialist to want promoted and such that the best way of promoting it is, plausibly, for agents to act on person-centered reasons, at least in certain settings: at least, say, when no emergency threatens. I believe the answer is that there is indeed such a value and, paradoxically, that Benn himself directs us to it. It is the value—perhaps better, the cluster of values—of having a certain sort of interpersonal security prevail in people's dealings with one another.

It is mere common sense that if I think a person I am dealing with is generally malevolent, then I cannot feel at ease with him or put my trust in him: I cannot rest assured that any of my personal interests are safe in his hands. What is less commonly recognized, however, is that if I think the person is generally benevolent, then I may still lack a sense of interpersonal security in dealing with him. Suppose that he is benevolent about promoting precisely that sort of security among people. I may still lack that security in dealing with him, for under the most normal of circumstances he is liable to let me down, and perhaps to let me down very seriously, if in his calculations that promises to maximize such security overall.

The lesson of this observation is that if the consequentialist wants agents to promote interpersonal security, then assuming a degree of interpersonal scrutability among agents, he should want them to eschew calculation in their normal dealings with one another—even about how best to maximize such security—in favor of acting on person-centered reasons. He should want them to tie their hands in deliberation, allowing considerations like “That would interfere with so-and-so” normally to be decisive for them; and he should want them to make it clear to one another that that is what they are doing.¹¹ Here, briskly sketched, is a

10. Though only when other things are equal. The qualification is important, since Benn is not an absolutist about any value: of no value does he suggest that an agent ought to exemplify it, come what may; see Benn, chap. 3.

11. For more on this line of thought, see Philip Pettit, “The Consequentialist Can Recognise Rights,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1988): 537–51; and, for a debate, Alan Hamlin, “Rights, Indirect Utilitarianism and Contractarianism,” *Economics and Philosophy*, vol. 5 (1989), in press. For more far-reaching considerations about loyalty as distinct from respect, see Philip Pettit, “The Paradox of Loyalty,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988): 163–71.

reason, then, for thinking that consequentialists may be able to endorse the idea of people's acting on reasons of respect, without explicit concern for the outcomes of doing so.

It is a paradoxical feature of Benn's book that despite its deontological aspirations, he gets very close to suggesting the sort of consequentialist line advocated. He suggests that there is a consequentialist rationale for holding onto the concept of moral personality: in effect, a consequentialist rationale for normally recognizing person-centered reasons of respect. "Someone who did have a concept of personality that linked the natural and the moral would have the possibility of the forms of life, such as friendship, love, and trustful collaboration, which depend on them, and which he would have reason not to want to abjure. . . . So for someone who understood and valued them, it would be irrational to repudiate an understanding of personality to which they were necessary" (pp. 99–100).¹²

As against the consequentialist line suggested, it may be said that someone's interpersonal security requires more than the belief that others will normally countenance reasons of respect in dealing with him or her. It may be said that it requires a more absolute commitment on the part of others to such reasons. But this is not an objection which Benn himself can endorse. For while he is a deontologist about reasons of respect, he is not an absolutist about them. He denies that the validity of such reasons derives from consequentialist considerations, but he also denies that they are absolutely valid, valid in all circumstances (pp. 111–12).

As I read his book, then, Benn ought not to find consequentialism as uncongenial as he professes to find it. The consequentialist line suggested here would enable him to continue to distinguish person-centered from value-centered reasons and to argue for the importance of the former if people are to enjoy security and freedom vis-à-vis one another. Certainly I find it possible, embracing that line, still to see interest and merit in *A Theory of Freedom*. However warped by Benn's deontological bent, it is a major contribution to our understanding of the area.

12. Elsewhere Benn rejects the consequentialist line mooted here, but without much argument; see Benn, p. 112.