



Response to Kraut

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RESPONSE TO KRAUT

MARTHA NUSSBAUM

It is not so easy for me to comment on Richard Kraut's excellent paper, because I agree with so much of it. I agree with Kraut in doubting that there is such a thing as absolute goodness, as Plato, Ross, and Moore conceive of that category. I believe that he has done a very good job, even in this short paper, of persuading us all to have doubts on this score and to consider with sympathy, at least, the contention that all value is value for some being or other. I am also in agreement with some of the subsidiary theses of the paper, such as its remarks about good and bad pleasures, its critique of Scanlon's buck-passing approach to value, and the discussion of disputed issues in bioethics at the end. In this comment, then, I shall do three things. First, I shall mention an attempt to rescue Plato's form of the good from the problems Kraut identifies; I shall conclude that in the end it fails. Second, I shall look closely at a slightly different distinction that Plato makes, between need-relative and non-need-relative value, and ask whether that distinction stands up, once we extricate it from the distinction between goodness-for-a-being and absolute goodness, with which Plato so clearly associates it. Finally, I shall turn to the one area of real disagreement I have with Kraut's paper, namely, its ranking of human life over animal lives. I believe that, although his own approach to this ranking is far more promising than the Platonist approach, he cannot actually make good on this overall ranking, without helping himself to some notion of species-independent goodness, which, with good reason, he rejects.

1. DEFENDING THE FORM OF THE GOOD?

First, the rescue attempt. This is a version of ideas long ago articulated by Gerasimos Santas (1980). I shall not dwell on the details of his argument or its textual credentials, but shall just put the key moves in my own voice. According to Santas, Plato's form of the good is nothing more or less than the group of all those properties that make something better for someone or something, whoever that someone or something is. Let me put the main point intuitively as follows. We can all agree that the human good is different from the good for a horse, or a cow, or a tree. Nonetheless, there are some properties that cross the species divide, properties that it is always good to have in a career: deathlessness and stability, but also less obvious things, such as not being all mixed up with its opposite (being "single-natured"), being clear or well articulated, and so on. Now if we look at the contrast between forms and particulars that Plato's readers often find intuitively compelling, we find that such readers are willing to believe that forms are better than particulars, whatever the particulars are, because they have this group of properties. So, the form of the good is the sum of the good-making properties that forms have and particulars don't have: they make a thing better, whatever that thing is.

Put this way, the Santas version of the form of the good evades Kraut's critique: it does not posit absolute goodness, or at least not directly. It just observes a commonality among the beings: they are all better (as themselves) for having this set of good-making properties. So, these properties (hence their aggregation in the form of the good) can be said to be good *for them*, whatever they are.

I put to one side the textual credentials of this thesis, which are thin. We may still have two serious worries about the proposal. First, does the fact, if it is one, that all beings have some common good-making characteristics justify giving these properties the special importance that Plato evidently means to give them? The fact that all mammals have lungs and livers is a fact about commonality, but, so far as I can see, it does not justify giving the lung and the liver any special importance within the list of things that are good for each of the mammalian species. Similarly, the group of properties aggregated in the form of the good might be *among* the good-making properties for all particulars, but why should we think them especially salient?

Second, is it at all plausible to suppose that there is any such list of common good-making properties? Even if we grant for the sake of argument that immortality is a good for a human being (which may surely be doubted), we still have been given no reason for thinking that it is also good for a fish, or a leaf, or a cloud. If even this intuitively appealing property runs into difficulty, far more difficulty comes when we try to make sense of some of the others, such as not being mixed with an opposite. Once we look into things with a skeptical eye, we will find, I think, that the Santas thesis is not plausible unless we have already subscribed to the existence of absolute goodness and are conducting a search for its criteria.

The rescue attempt, then, is not likely to prove successful.

2. NEED-RELATIVE AND POSITIVE GOODNESS

Suppose we agree with Kraut that Plato's idea of absolute goodness is not terribly persuasive. Suppose we agree, at least for the sake of argument, that all goodness is goodness for someone (or something). Nonetheless, there is a related distinction that Plato introduces that should hold our attention. It is introduced in the *Gorgias* and present in several other texts, though I am after its philosophical rather than its textual significance. Some activities that we choose with alacrity are chosen because there is a pain or felt need that they assuage. The classic example of such an activity (presented to Callicles, late in the dialogue) is scratching an itch. Scratching an itch is a good thing for the being who has itches. Indeed, so agonizing is itching that it may well be intensely important to scratch. On the other hand, it seems ridiculous to suppose that scratching is intrinsically valuable. It is valuable just to the extent that it relieves that itch, and if there had been no itch there would have been no reason to do it. We would much prefer to have no itching and no scratching than to have itching and scratching. Scratching, then, has only a need-relative or pain-relative value. We can add, pursuing our own concerns and parting company with Plato, that it seems absurd to think that scratching

is intrinsically good *for a human being*. We don't need a notion of absolute value to make sense of the contrast Plato has in view.

The idea of need-relative or pain-relative value is not the same as the idea of instrumental value. Many things that have instrumental value do not assuage a felt need or pain. Exercise is not typically undertaken because bad condition is felt as painful. And it may be that not every activity that is chosen because it assuages a pain is valuable only as an instrument to the resulting state of satisfaction: thus one could believe that all human love is the expression of incompleteness and need without believing that love is only instrumental to a state of love-satisfaction, or completeness. So let's leave the instrumental/intrinsic contrast to one side for the time and focus on the one that interests Plato.

What Plato hopes to get his interlocutor to believe is that the most common bodily activities, eating, drinking, and having sex, are all like scratching: we choose them because we are in pain, and they are valuable only to the extent that they relieve that pain. If we had never had the pain of hunger, or of thirst, or of distracting sexual tension, we would never have engaged in any of these activities. He calls such activities "replenishments." The suggestion is that replenishments are not very admirable types of activity—not positive choices, we might say. We do them only because we are slaves to the pain that they assuage. (Remember Cephalus' expression of pleasure, when he observes that old age has made him stop wanting sex: it is like being freed from "many mad masters.")

There are several different ways in which we might articulate this concept. One uses the notion of *pain*: the activities in question quiet or still a felt pain. Another uses the notion of *need*, meaning felt need: the activities in question satisfy a need. This one is dependent on the first, I think, for the needs are imagined as demanding satisfaction only because they are so agonizing. A third is the idea of *deficiency*: the activities are chosen as ways of curing something that is wrong with us. This third notion is evidently broader than the other two: one might seek to cure an illness that is not, or not yet, felt as painful. Plato seems to oscillate among these three, and it is hard to say which is the concept that interests him most.

What lies on the other side? Well, there appear to be certain things that we do just because of their own value, things that we don't do simply because we are impelled by some pain. Plato seems to think that this category is the same as that of absolute goodness, but we needn't agree with that dubious contention if we want to pursue the contrast he suggests. For we find such a contrast in much of human life. We think, at least, that much of what we choose to do we choose for the value that *it* has, not because of something bad about *us*. When we fight for justice, or give love to our friends, or study philosophy, or take care of our children, we think, and would strenuously insist, if challenged, that these pursuits are chosen because of what they are, not because we are in agony longing for children, or a better world, or whatever. We can bracket the whole question of whether there is such a thing as absolute value, while still insisting that it is the intrinsic quality of those

activities, together with the worth of the other people involved, that is crucial to their value. I am sure Kraut agrees with this.

In other words, some things we choose involve a *push*: we are trying to get away from something, we are impelled by something bad that we think the activity will remove, assuage, or still. Other things we choose involve a *pull*: we see the value they have, and we go for that. Whether the value that attracts us is in another person, in a state of society, or in something beautiful, we feel that we are called out of ourselves to pursue it.

We now must ask two things: first, is there really such a contrast, or is it merely apparent? Second, can we make sense of it, in the end, without recourse to the notion of absolute goodness?

There are theories of human nature that deny the contrast, asserting that all the things we do, we do at some level because of pain or need. Thus Proust argues that all human adult love, and all friendship too, is an attempt to assuage the pain of the young child's loneliness, as he tries to fall asleep in a room without his mother. Love looks as if it is directed outward, as if it has something to do with the other person, and activities of intrinsic value connected to that other person. Not so, says Proust, for it is really all an attempt to fill an aching void. It is all like scratching an itch. We all know similarly reductive accounts of the pursuit of justice or altruism. Probably if we probed many forms of utilitarianism we would find such a reductive thesis lurking there, though utilitarians need not be reductive about the good in this way. (For example, they need not hold that we are always trying to escape from pain, if they hold that pleasure is to some degree independent of the absence of pain, and hold, as well, that we sometimes pursue pleasure for its own sake.)

Such reductive theories seem in the end most implausible. Proust buys plausibility by the profound psychological insight of his fictional portrayal. Because we find the description of Marcel's way of loving so utterly convincing, so true of many people, we may be temporarily inclined to think that it is true of us all, however much we pretend or even believe otherwise. However, it seems to me that there is no reason to be bullied into that cynical conclusion, even by Proust's greatness and undoubted insight. There seems to be no good reason to think that Proust's thesis is universally true, nor any other such reductive thesis either.

What, then, of those pursuits that engage us through a pull? Can we make sense of the pull they exert on Kraut's picture, or will we need to fall back on some notion of absolute goodness? I believe that we needn't do the latter, and I agree with Kraut that we should not if we can help it. But then, I think we do need to do more work than Kraut does in his paper to make sense of the notion of intrinsic value involved in these pursuits. In particular, I think we will need to press hard on a notion of value *relative to a species form of life*, as Aristotle does, in order to make sense of them. For we want to say: look, you have reason to pursue social justice and love even if you don't feel like it. Even if nothing is goading you or urging you, you should get up and join in. These things exert their own pull, because they are *valuable*. But if they are not valuable absolutely, how exactly are they valuable? Well,

one plausible thing to say is that on reflection we can argue that the best account of human flourishing includes them.

In one of his most interesting papers, John McDowell (1980) notes that utilitarians often misread Aristotle here, thinking of the components of human flourishing as good because they produce satisfaction. Well, with McDowell and Aristotle we need not say anything as simple as that. We may say that the pursuits have value in themselves, but not absolutely, rather, as constituent parts of the flourishing human life. (I also agree with McDowell when he contends that we must not equate this sort of value with value relative to biological or evolutionary drives, thus reducing their ethical content to some sort of biological content; but that is an argument for another time. I cannot tell, from the discussion of this topic in Kraut's book [2007], whether he sides with McDowell or with Foot and Hursthouse concerning the type of "naturalism" that it is philosophically worth endorsing. My own views line up firmly with those of McDowell, but we cannot pursue that issue further here.)

We have rich materials in Kraut's wonderful book for the further exploration of these questions, for he develops a subtle hybrid variety of an informed-desire approach that does indeed make at least some use of the notion of a species form of life. I have many questions and thoughts about the book, and if this were a symposium on it, my task would have just begun. However, I shall confine myself to Kraut's paper and, therefore, turn to my central disagreement with it.

3. KRAUT ON THE LIVES OF ANIMALS

Now to animals. Kraut speaks of the notion of the superior value of human life as a notion we need to make sense of, one of the intuitions we need to preserve in our finished theory. I take issue with him right there, for I think our perceptions of value are profoundly self-serving and corrupt at just this point. Kraut mentions the fact that many people favor experiments on mice that they would not tolerate if the subjects were human, and he suggests that we need to account for this widely shared intuition. The fact that we approve certain types of experiments, however, is neither here nor there. Fifty years ago we approved of deliberately infecting African-Americans with syphilis. Why? Because we thought African-Americans were mere objects for the use of the dominant group. I think, however, that Bentham was utterly correct: a day will indeed come, though it has been long in coming, when species difference will seem to reflective people as morally irrelevant as race. So, I do not see any reason why we should insist on a theory that preserves that ranking, and now let me try to give Kraut a reason why *he* should not insist on it. For I believe that in the end one cannot make out the idea of a superior dignity of the human form of life without the suspect notion of absolute value.

Kraut is ready to grant that most past ways of making sense of the superior value of the human have rested on the notion of absolute value, and he urges us, rightly in my view, to reject those approaches. He proposes one that seems not to trade on a notion of absolute value, while nonetheless ranking human lives above other animal lives. It goes like this. When we consider the pursuits

of animals, we find that, although there are many similarities between their pursuits and ours, theirs are in some sense less intense, matter less *to them* than ours do to us. Their emotions, for example, are less keen, and appear less central to their well-being. So, we may conclude in general that there is less mattering in animal lives than in human lives. Or so I understand this very brief argument. But let me make a preliminary observation before I examine it further.

Kraut and I will no doubt agree on this: many activities that are valuable in human lives are utterly pointless in animal lives. Practical reason, the search for god, the effort to build a just society—all these make no sense as pursuits for a rabbit or a snake. We can also grant that where there is a related activity, it will often take a very different form. The emotions of animals are indeed different from human emotions, their forms of social organization are different, their abilities of spatial perception, their perceptual capacities, their communicative capacities, all different again.

So far so good. But of course this just tells us that there are different sorts of value belonging to different sorts of lives, not that one is better. Some of these differences have ethical consequences: thus Bentham thought that the fact that animals cannot plan long into the future made a sudden painless death not bad for an animal, as it would be for a human. But in saying that he was not ranking humans above horses, he was just saying, sensibly, that the capacities of a creature affect what can be good or bad for it. Whether we agree or disagree with his treatment of this particular example, with its large consequences for the ethics of killing animals, we should surely grant that there are many cases like this. I do not harm an elephant when I deny her the freedom of political speech, or equal employment opportunities, although I do harm her if I treat her cruelly or deny her a chance to associate in social groupings with members of her own kind.

The way Kraut gets to his stronger conclusion is a little obscure, but it seems to turn on his notion of “being good for.” Certain elements in animal lives are not as good for them as their analogues are to us. Well, this might be just our familiar point about differences: if you do not have certain capacities, the pursuits associated with those capacities do not matter to you. To deprive a rabbit of the freedom of religion is not to deprive it of something that is good for it. But Kraut clearly wants something more, and that is where I think he runs into difficulty. Let me look closely at his text at this point. Comparing the emotions of humans and other animals, he says (p. 457 above), “[E]ven when animals feel emotions, as some do, we have no reason to suppose that these feelings have the depth and resonance of human emotion. A mouse’s fear is not as bad for the mouse as is the fear of a human being forced to live in perpetual danger.” Kraut then immediately generalizes this point: “The things that are good for human beings—love, friendship, civility, respect, music, poetry, science, philosophy—exemplify the relationship of being better for someone more fully than do the things that are good for mice. What is best for mice is not as good for them as are the things in human life that are best for us.”

Kraut begins with an innocuous contention: some elements of animal lives that are comparable to similar elements of human lives do not have the same importance in those lives that they have in human lives. We can easily grant that point (though I am not sure that the case of emotion is the best one to use to make it, given the large amount of fascinating current research on animal emotions). I have already observed that some elements of human life just do not play any role in animal lives, and it makes sense to grant that others that do turn up are not as important in animal lives as in human lives. (Similarly, some things, such as the sense of smell, that are very important in many animal lives are not so important in a human life.) But then Kraut shifts course, toward a more contentious thesis: there is, across the board, a lack of "resonance" or "depth" in animal emotions, and this contrast gives us reason to conclude that animal lives have less of the good-for property than do human lives. How does he get there?

It seems that Kraut thinks of being good-for or bad-for as a matter of the intensity and complexity of a being's experience of the thing in question: thus, "The pain of these brutes is not as bad for them as pain is for us when it is surrounded by anguish and humiliation" (p. 457 above). Now I think that it is here that he smuggles in something like a notion of absolute value. For the contrast, and the ranking, make no sense unless we are thinking of conscious awareness, intensity of experience, complexity and depth of experience (whatever that means; I am not sure I understand this notion), and so forth, as crucial cross-species goods, things that animals are "lower" for not possessing in as high a degree as humans. Well, it may be that if these are our criteria, some human lives do better than some animal lives. Animals of many sorts seem to get along well without self-consciousness, or reflexive awareness of their physical and mental states, and to live rich full lives. But this makes them lower only if we have already decided to make these criteria, drawn from human life and human value, cross-species indices of the good. But why should we do that? Kraut seems to say, "Because they do not consciously feel their emotions as we do, reflect on them, et cetera, for this reason they are lower." (That is an interpretation, but an accurate one, I believe.) His argument, however, justifies only a weaker conclusion: "For this reason they are different." Their form of life just has other things going on in it. It is only if we exalt certain things we value in our own lives into cross-species templates of value that we would be tempted to the stronger conclusion. And I do not see why we would do that, unless we were either flagrantly self-serving, determined to use the things we like best about ourselves as cross-species indices of good, or, tacitly trading on a notion of absolute value, and determined to manufacture this notion out of some familiar human materials.

Why do we not say, instead, "Humans cannot find their way around in space with nearly the accuracy of many animals, so they are 'lower' on the scale of value"? Or, "The human sense of smell is much less keen than that of many animals, so humans are lower in value?" We do not say these things because we, being human, don't attach particular value to the sense of smell, or to the spatial perception of a carrier pigeon. We like intensity and self-consciousness.

Well, fine for us. But then why denigrate the lives of other species because they contain goods different from our own?

Certainly, Kraut could not be saying that animals do not value living. That would be an odd claim, for all animals are heavily invested in fighting for life against death. Indeed most animals do not get tired of living the way humans sometimes do, so if there were to be any general comparison along these lines it might go the other way. It is just that their valuing living does not involve self-conscious reflection, or not to the same degree.

We should not even admit that all acuity of perception is higher on the human side. Many animals have much keener and more complexly structured senses than humans do, and their ability to navigate in space, to smell, to hear, is often superior. As I have said, we could try to rank all the species using those criteria, and in that case we would not do so well. But again: we really should say not that one is higher and the other lower, but that the different species have different goods, each suited to its own form of life.

There is room for cross-species comparison in the following sense: sometimes we feel that we are out of joint with ourselves, lacking abilities that might make our lives more successful *as human lives*, and we notice that some of these abilities are present in other species. Thus, we might wish to have quadrupedal locomotion, so as to avoid the pain of back trouble; or to hear a wider range of frequencies like a dog, since it would open up aural experiences that are now closed to us. Many of us wish, even, to fly, and it makes sense to some extent to say that birds are better off because they can fly and we cannot—because we can imagine flying as a part of a glorious human life, one that we would love to have. In general, however, we only say “superior” because we have identified something that from our own point of view, from the point of view of our own human form of life, is a deficiency, something we would like to be better at, that cross-species comparison makes any sense at all. And certainly in the case adduced by Kraut we have not identified anything like that: there is no reason to suppose that elephants would be better off if they could grieve like the characters in Proust, rather than in their own quite suitable elephantine way.

No, I think these cross-species comparisons are usually a reflection of human vanity, and, when not that, of human dissatisfaction with the limitations involved in human faculties. They do not make much sense at all, and they certainly do not justify a cross-species ranking.

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