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## WHAT IS INTRINSIC GOODNESS?

RICHARD KRAUT

### AN UNCONTROVERSIAL DISTINCTION

TO SPEAK OF intrinsic goodness—or, as it is sometimes called, intrinsic “value”—is to refer to what is good in itself, or good for its own sake, or good as such, or good in its own right, or good without qualification, or good absolutely, or good *tout court*, or good *sans phrase*. All these phrases—“in itself,” “as such,” and so on—are used to isolate the thing that is called good from other things, and to affirm that the thing in question has the property of goodness quite apart from its relationship to those other things.

We are justifiably confident that there must be some such property as the intrinsic goodness of certain things. After all, we know that many things are good because they are *instrumentally* valuable. Things that are good in a merely instrumental way—a bicycle pump, for example—are not good *in themselves*, but owe their value entirely to the help they provide in achieving some worthwhile goal beyond themselves. Eventually, what they lead to must be something that is not merely instrumentally good, but good in itself. The pump fills a bicycle’s tires with air, which enables the rider to cycle safely and smoothly, which in turn allows him to take a pleasant ride along a country road on a summer’s day—something that might reasonably be taken as good *in itself*.

An argument of this sort appears at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but it was Plato who first proposed, in Book 2 of the *Republic*, a distinction between things that are to be welcomed solely for themselves, others that are to be pursued only for their results, and, best of all, a category of things that are both good in themselves and good because of their consequences. Aristotle will disagree: he thinks the best sorts of things are good *only* in themselves. But in any case, the earliest systematic moral philosophers of the West already took for granted some distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goodness, and that should reinforce our confidence, if reinforcement is needed, that there must be some things that are good in themselves. It is

I benefited from excellent critiques of some of the main ideas in this paper not only from Martha Nussbaum, who presented her criticism at the conference at which this paper was presented, but also from two referees from this journal, Rosalind Hursthouse and Agnes Callard. I am grateful for their many astute points. I do not have adequate space here to respond properly to the issues they raise, but hope to do so in some other venue.

a further question, then, which things have this property. The legitimacy of the distinction between intrinsic and merely instrumental goodness is evidently independent of the question which things go into these categories.

#### ABSOLUTE GOODNESS

We must nonetheless be careful to distinguish what is contestable in the discourse of intrinsic goodness from what is not. It is obvious and uncontroversial that some things must be noninstrumentally good *for* people or other living things. When we speak of what is good for this creature or that, we are referring to a relationship that holds between two things—the thing that is good for someone, and someone for whom it is good. Some of the things that are good for someone are good for that creature quite apart from any consequences they have, and this is one way in which a thing might be called intrinsically good.<sup>1</sup> Plato provides a nice example: what he aims to show in the *Republic* is that justice is, in itself, good for the person who is just. He sets aside the consequences that often accompany justice in order to show—not that being just is good *tout court*—but that it is good *for* the person who has this virtue. We might reasonably wonder whether Plato is right to hold that justice is part of what is good for a person, but we should not hesitate to admit the existence of the category into which he wishes to place justice. It is eminently sensible to suppose that there must be some things that are good for us quite apart from their instrumental value. No respectable philosopher, to my knowledge, has ever denied this.

The discourse of intrinsic value becomes bolder and more contestable when philosophers use the isolating phrases I mentioned earlier—“in itself,” “absolutely,” “*tout court*”—to assert that what is good *for* someone is not what they have in mind when they talk about what is *intrinsically* good. The philosophers who most clearly occupy this position in the twentieth century are G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross. Their idea is that to say of something that it is *intrinsically* good is to say that it owes its goodness not to its relationship to anything else, but solely to its own nature. And to say of it that it is intrinsically *good* is to say that it is something that anyone should value, desire, and seek precisely because of its goodness. Its very nature as a good thing—not its relationship to anything else—is the reason why it should be desired, valued, and sought.

According to Ross, for example, virtue, knowledge, pleasure, and the proper apportionment of happiness to virtue are to be sought for themselves, not because any of these things is good *for* someone. Here his allegiance to a Kantian framework, and his rejection of Plato's eudaimonism, is evident. Plato, he assumes, was wrong to think it a matter of philosophical importance to show that justice and virtue in general are good *for* the person who is virtuous. What Plato should have realized, according to Ross, is that virtue is intrinsically good in the proper sense of “intrinsic.” It is good—period. Whether it is good *for* the virtuous person is a side issue.

1. I discuss the concept of what is good for someone more fully in Kraut 2007.

Moore and Ross were moral realists: they assumed that what is intrinsically good is not made such by anyone's valuations, desires, or choices. Their realism has been rejected by many later movements and figures of the twentieth century, who hold that although there is such a thing as intrinsic goodness, it is not "out there," waiting to be discovered, but is, in some way, a product of the human mind.

But something else affirmed by Moore and Ross can be called into question, even by those who, like me, are comfortable with the assumption that some normative properties exist apart from the human mind. They hold that the property named by "absolutely good" (and other such expressions) has greater ethical significance than the relationship named by "noninstrumentally good *for*." And they are not alone in that conviction. When Kant asserts, in the *Groundwork*, that "it is impossible to imagine anything . . . that can be called good without qualification except a good will," he means that the good will is, on its own, something that is good—*period*—and that it is incomparably superior to anything that is good *for* this or that individual—including happiness (the complete satisfaction of one person's desires).

It might be said, in fact, that the notion that the most important kind of good is something that is absolutely good has been affirmed by philosophers ever since Plato posited the form of the good as the object of the highest intellectual discipline. Plato (so interpreted), Kant, Moore, Ross—and presumably many others—not only have the concept of absolute goodness, but hold that the property of absolute goodness is one we must understand and hold in view when we engage in practical reasoning.

The principal proposal I would like to make here is that this doctrine of the primacy of absolute goodness should be recognized as a hypothesis that can be reasonably doubted. I will go farther: I regard it as an open question whether there is such a thing as absolute goodness. That form of skepticism is certainly not original to me. I trace it back to doubts that Aristotle expresses in the *Nicomachean Ethics* about Plato's equation of the good with that which is common to all goods. But I will set aside Aristotle's contribution to this debate, and speak henceforth in my own voice.

It is worth repeating that I see no reason to doubt that there is such a thing as what is intrinsically (that is, noninstrumentally) good *for* someone. In fact, I place that relationship at the center of good practical reasoning. My skepticism about intrinsic goodness is directed at the idea that there is such a thing as what is good—not good for someone or other, but, by itself, just plain good—and that this property has the highest practical importance.

#### SCANLON'S BUCK-PASSING APPROACH TO VALUE

Recently T. M. Scanlon has proposed what he calls a "buck-passing" account of value.<sup>2</sup> That label conveys the deflationary nature of his approach to goodness, and since my thoughts about intrinsic goodness are also deflationary, it might be asked what relationship my skepticism about goodness has to his doubts about its importance. The answer is that there is none.

2. Scanlon 1998, 95–100.

Scanlon's thesis is that philosophers have long been mistaken in supposing that when we say of something that it is good or valuable, we are thereby citing the very reason why we should value it. What we are doing instead, he thinks, is claiming that there is some reason to value it—a reason that has not yet been given by the mere assertion that it is good. Here is an example of what he has in mind: As I pass an ice cream shop, I might ask myself whether I should indulge in the vanilla gelato advertised on the window. Yes, I tentatively tell myself—and then I ask whether I can find a reason to support my tentative practical proposal. I will have found a reason, Scanlon supposes, if I can correctly tell myself that eating a vanilla gelato would be highly pleasurable. The fact that doing something would be a pleasure is, at least in this situation, by itself a reason for doing it. It is true, of course, that it would be valuable or good in itself for me to experience this pleasure by eating a cup of ice cream. But the goodness of eating the gelato or experiencing this pleasure is not a further reason in favor of my tentative decision. It is not a reason at all. It is normatively inert; the work of giving a reason is done by the property that gives eating the cup of ice cream its value—and that is not its valuableness or goodness, but its pleasantness.

Scanlon's proposal that goodness passes the buck rests on the questionable assumption that the job of reason-giving is performed by good-independent properties. In the case just mentioned, for example, he must assume that pleasure by itself is a reason for action, apart from whether the pleasure in question is valuable or good. That premise is rejected by every philosopher—and there are many of them—who holds that when pleasures are to be pursued, that is precisely because it is good that they be pursued. Epicurus and his followers, for example, begin with the assumption that whatever we do should be done because it is good, and then argue that the sole good is pleasure. Those who reject hedonism nonetheless typically share with hedonism the assumption that goodness has reason-giving force; they disagree about whether other things besides pleasure have the property of goodness, not about whether goodness is reason-giving.

Of course, for all that I have said, Scanlon may be right to reject this whole tradition. But my reluctance to take his side is not mere conservatism. Rather, I doubt that the things that, on Scanlon's account, have the job of stopping the job are adequate to play that role. Pleasure, for example, is not on its own a buck-stopper, because, as Plato and Aristotle saw, it is only good pleasure—pleasure taken in what it is good for someone—that should be pursued. I conjecture that the same point could be made with equal plausibility about any other property or activity that would be affirmed as a buck-stopper by a buck-passing account of good.

There is another major difference between Scanlon's approach to goodness and my own. On my view, one of our most important normative notions is that of something being good *for* someone, and I am confident that facts about what is good for people are by their nature reason-giving facts. The fact that a certain project would be good for you to undertake gives you a reason to adopt it and devote yourself to it. I also hold, along with the philosophical tradition initiated by Plato, that what is good for a human being is not something that every adult language-using human being already completely

understands. On the contrary, the specification of what is good for us requires wide experience and philosophical reflection. To understand fully what we have reason to do, then, we need a philosophically defensible conception of what is good for us.

Scanlon, by contrast, denies that a philosophical study of the concept of what is good for us has practical importance. On his theory, good practical reasoning requires the ability to recognize which reasons one has, but since something's being good for someone does not have reason-giving force, a skilled deliberator need not ask which things have this property. He must keep track of the things that provide reasons, but goodness—and this includes what is good for someone—is not one of those things.

#### PLATONIC AND CHRISTIAN CONCEPTIONS OF ABSOLUTE GOODNESS

To explain why I think the existence of absolute goodness is open to doubt, let me begin with some remarks about Plato's form of the good. I assume that although for Plato goodness and beauty are not identical, they are nonetheless so closely related that it is no accident that everything that is non-instrumentally good is beautiful, and everything beautiful noninstrumentally good.<sup>3</sup> The explanation for these universal truths lies in Plato's hypothesis that goodness and beauty alike have to do with proportion, harmony, unification, measure, balance, and the like. Everything that is good, then, is good to the extent that it is unified in a balanced and harmonious way, and its being good is explained by its unification. The best kinds of body and soul are those that are unified, because the goodness of anything consists in its unification.

Let us suppose, further, that, according to Plato, the form of the good is itself a highly unified object. Perhaps that is because it lacks parts; or perhaps it is because whatever components it has are organized in a way that exemplifies maximal unity. The form of good, so understood, is itself a good thing—in fact, a *very* good thing. Is it also something that is good *for* someone? Or more precisely: does its being a good thing consist in its being good for someone—for some disembodied or embodied souls, perhaps? The answer, I suggest, is no. The goodness of the form of the good consists in its mathematical perfection, and it has this perfection quite independently of its relation to any soul. It will, of course, be good for souls to apprehend the form of the good. But its being good does not consist in its being apprehended by other things. It has its goodness by virtue of properties that are intrinsic to it, not because of its external relations to souls or other sorts of objects.

Plato's theory contains several elements that may reasonably be questioned. Some or all of them might, with much philosophical work, be vindicated, but none has the status of an immediately self-evident proposition. It would be reasonable to ask: (1) Does the goodness of a thing consist in its unification, or should goodness instead be identified with some other property? (2) Might goodness be a primitive property, that is, one that cannot be under-

3. For fuller discussion, see the contribution of Rachel Barney to this issue (pp. 363–77 above).

stood in terms of something more basic? (3) Is there precisely one property that all good things have in common, or might there be one explanation of what makes certain things good, and a different explanation of what makes others good? (4) Are we justified in assuming that there is anything at all that is just plain good? Why assume that when we talk about goodness, we are talking about a property rather than a relation that holds between two things? Equality, for example, is not a property that a thing can have by itself; equality always holds between two things. Perhaps goodness is also a relation. After all, when we speak about goodness, we often are prepared to say of what is good that it is good for someone or other. We say, for example, that virtue is good, but what we often have in mind is that a virtue is something that is both good for the person who possesses it and for those whom he treats well. Are we ever justified in saying of anything that it is good, but not good for anyone? If not, then what Plato should have sought was an understanding of the relation that holds between two things when one of them is good for the other. And presumably it would be a mistake to suppose that that relationship is either good in itself or good for someone.

The Platonic conception of goodness is modified in familiar ways by Christian philosophers, who conceive of the highest instance of goodness not as an impersonal property or a relation but as a divine person who has every possible perfection. Everything in the worldly realm that is a good thing is a mere image of divine goodness, who is the highest conceivable good object. God consists in infinite goodness, and so we can acquire some dim understanding both of what God is like and which finite, worldly objects are good by bringing them into some orderly relationship with each other. Since justice, for example, is reasonably regarded as a good thing, and all good things are images of God, we can be reasonably confident that God is, in some way, just—although the justice of God will presumably be a higher form of justice than ordinary, human justice. Furthermore, by studying sacred texts, we can learn about the ways in which God has been made manifest in human life, and by taking God's plans as an exemplar of goodness, we will increase our understanding of what we should pursue because it is an image of God's goodness.

The reasonable questions that can be asked about this theory are no less familiar to us than the theory itself. We can have doubts about whether the divine person posited by the theory really exists, but in addition, we can again raise some of the questions that arose in our survey of the problems faced by Platonism. Why should we assume, for example, not only that the exemplar of goodness is a divine person, but that somewhere or other, whether in the perishable world or beyond it, there is something that is just plain good—good absolutely? To repeat my earlier question: Are we ever justified in saying of anything that it is good, but not good for anyone?

#### METAPHYSICALLY MODEST CONCEPTIONS OF ABSOLUTE GOODNESS

Many modern philosophers—Moore and Ross provide excellent examples—have set aside, at least for philosophical purposes, the metaphysically or theologically ambitious tenets of traditional Platonism or Christianity, and



have put in their place a conception of absolute goodness that is far less exposed to doubt. They do not posit the existence of some eternal or timeless exemplar of absolute goodness, and so they do not assert that we must come to love and understand that object, in order to know which things are good. Furthermore, they do not claim that goodness must be or can be understood in terms that are explanatorily more basic. What is central to their approach is simply the tenet that there is such a property as absolute goodness—goodness that is not good for someone.

Which things have this property is a further question, but it is a rather common assumption that pleasure is a good thing, or sometimes a good thing, and similarly that pain is a bad thing, or is sometimes a bad thing. Pleasure and pain may or may not be, in addition, good *for* us, or bad *for* us. But if they are, those would be further truths about pleasure and pain, truths that should not be confused with the fact that they are good *full stop* or bad *full stop*.

According to these theories of absolute goodness and badness, the fact that pleasure is good, or that some kind of pleasure is good, is a reason for pursuing pleasure. Goodness, they hold, by itself does normative work, and does not, in Scanlon's phrase, "pass the buck." On the contrary, absolute goodness, according to these theories, is one of the most important items in our toolkit of normative concepts. A good person, they hold, is someone who is properly oriented toward what is absolutely good, and that is one of the features that makes a person good.

#### THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF HUMAN BEINGS

Before I explain why I think that even this metaphysically more modest approach to absolute goodness is open to question, I would like to consider an argument that might be given in its favor. Let us reflect on the common idea that not all living things are of equal value, and that human life is, in some sense that needs to be elucidated, more precious, more worthy of our devotion, respect, and concern, than certain other forms of life. That ranking is reflected by what we tolerate in the treatment of animals and would not tolerate in the like treatment of human beings. Many people, for example, favor carefully controlled experiments on mice, even if some pain is inflicted, if these experiments are well designed to alleviate or prevent human suffering. But we would never tolerate such experimentation on human beings. Human beings are, as it were, placed in a higher moral category than other living things. Why so? It is tempting to reply: because human life has greater value, that is, a greater degree of absolute goodness. To spell out the idea more fully, we might say that when a human being suffers, that is *absolutely* a worse state of affairs than a mouse's feeling pain. There is, of course, some badness (absolute badness) brought into the world when a mouse feels pain. But more absolute badness is brought into the world when a human being suffers. The badness in the world increases more when a human being is in pain than it does when a mouse is in pain. Similarly, more absolute goodness is created when a million human beings are saved from death than when that number, or even larger numbers, of mice are saved.



I would like to suggest, however, that we can understand the greater value of human life without positing the existence of absolute goodness. We can do so by thinking instead of the relation that holds between an individual and what is good for that individual. Let us begin with the uncontroversial assumption that some things that are good for us are not as good for us as others. We can, in other words, be reasonably confident in some of the comparative judgments we make about the types of things that are non-instrumentally good for us. It would, for example, be a far smaller disadvantage for me to lose the ability to enjoy the taste of carrots than it would be for me to lose the capacity to enjoy the worlds of sound and color.

Now, these sorts of comparative judgments about what is good for someone can coherently and confidently be made not only about two items within a single life, but also about two items that belong to two different persons. A disease that deprives one person of his ability to taste carrots is not as bad for him as a disease that deprives another person of his ability to hear and see would be for that person. If money from the public purse is to be spent combating one of these diseases rather than the other, it should be devoted to combating the worse disease—and here the notion of worse is not that of what is worse *period*, but what is worse *for* someone. Something that is bad for person A can be not as bad for him as something else that is bad for person B. From here, it is but a short step to the conclusion that these comparisons can also be made across species. Some animals that experience pain are not subject to the emotional suffering that often accompanies severe and debilitating *human* pain. The pain of these brutes is not as bad for them as pain is for us when it is surrounded by anguish and humiliation. Furthermore, even 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.

The preciousness of human life, then, in comparison with the lives of certain other biological kinds, can be understood in the following terms: 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. If we can protect ourselves against depredations that would rob us of much that is best in our lives only by doing something that, unfortunately, causes some pain to mice, then our choice can be justified without positing absolute goodness and without supposing that we are increasing the amount of absolute goodness in the universe. What we protect, in tests performed on animals, is something that is noninstrumentally good *for us*, at the cost of some diminution in what is good *for others*. What justifies that policy is simply the assumption that greater goods (things that are better for some beings) are to be chosen over lesser goods (things that are less good for other beings).

An alternative approach to the special status of human beings is to hold that it is our capacity for free and autonomous choice that elevates us above

the brutes and justifies our using them for our own purposes. Our freedom consists in the fact that we can choose the kinds of lives we lead; we can reflect on the impulses and feelings that push us this way and that and fashion ourselves into something that is not the mere product of natural forces or social manipulation. It might be said that this capacity for self-governance does not have to be used wisely or well, in order to be the basis of our superiority to other living forms. We might make choices that are very bad for ourselves and others—but even if they are, our freedom, according to this line of thought, is a precious quality that justifies our intervention in the lives of other creatures, even when this harms them.

That thesis strikes me as morally problematic. Suppose a certain religious ceremony requires considerable animal sacrifice, and suppose further that although this practice is the expression of the individual freedom of each member of the religious community, it does not constitute or produce anything that is good for any of its members. They *believe* that the slaughter of animals is mandated by the gods, and that it is best for them to be on good terms with these divinities—but (let us assume) there are no such gods, and their religious custom could be dropped without any sacrifice in their well-being. We should hope that these religious ceremonies are replaced with something that benefits the community without causing the suffering of any animals. More generally, we should reject the idea that human freedom by itself provides a justification for any social practice or individual choice. Someone who rebels against his own reason and wills something precisely because it goes against reason is, in a way, acting freely, but nothing recommends what he does. Freedom has justificatory force only if it is understood as a valuable form of freedom, and for freedom to be valuable, it must be—not good *tout court*—but good for someone.

#### KANT AND THE ABSOLUTE VALUE OF VIRTUE

The best kind of argument for positing the existence of absolute goodness would be that if we failed to recognize this category of reasons, our practical deliberations would be impoverished—we would, in other words, have failed to acknowledge, in our practical reasoning and the conduct of our lives, something of considerable value. To pursue that strategy, a defender of absolute goodness should point to something that has the property of being good, whether or not it also has the further property of being good *for* someone or other.

Perhaps the most plausible candidate for such an item, one that has certainly played an important role in modern moral philosophy, is moral virtue. And of course the most profound and influential defender of the thesis that moral virtue is just plain good, without necessarily being good for anyone, is Kant. A central feature of his ethics is the doctrine that the good will, alone of all things, is unconditionally good. Let us leave aside his claim that it *alone* has these features. What is important, for our purposes, is simply the idea that moral virtue is always and necessarily a good *thing* without having to be good *for* anyone—either the agent or anyone else. The usefulness of a good will—its success in producing something that is actually good for someone—

is no part of its intrinsic worth, according to Kant. "Like a jewel," he says, it "glistens in its own right, as something that has its full worth in itself."<sup>4</sup> To fail to recognize the goodness of virtue, apart from its being good for someone, is, according to Kant, to miss the most essential element of the moral life.

In Kant's hands, the absolute and unvarying goodness of moral virtue figures importantly in his subsidiary thesis that it would be wrong to commit suicide merely out of the conviction, however well founded, that one is and always will remain unhappy. His idea is that so long as one remains a rational agent, one will continue to possess the capacity to perform moral acts with the proper motivation, and the goodness of having this moral power is so great that it can compensate for any personal loss one might suffer, however large. Kant does not merely assert, for no reason, that it would be wrong to commit suicide because of one's unhappiness. Rather, he offers a reason for taking it to be wrong: the value of having a moral personality is unsurpassable. No matter how large the disvalue of being unhappy, it must always take second place, in our deliberations—or be given no place at all—when it competes with the great value of having the power to perform acts of good will. To commit suicide out of the recognition that one will always be unhappy would not be a rational decision, because it would give more attention to a lesser value—namely, what is good *for* oneself—than to the infinitely superior value that consists in what is unconditionally good, even when it is not good for anyone.

Kant's views about suicide should make us realize, if we have not appreciated the point until now, that the question whether there is such a thing as absolute value is no mere academic matter, but has a bearing on some fundamental dilemmas that many ordinary people face. But I suggest that they also reveal a serious difficulty for theories of absolute goodness, because it is far from clear that Kant has identified a consideration that ought to play a role in our reflections about the rationality or morality of suicide.

No doubt, a person who is living through a period of deep unhappiness, and who is justifiably confident that his suffering will not end while he remains alive, will be ignoring a powerful reason to remain alive, if he fails to ask himself whether he might, in spite of his deep unhappiness, yet still be able to bring about much that is good for other people, were he to remain alive. He might also reflect that if he is still able to exercise such virtues as compassion, kindness, and intelligence, that would be good not only for others, but for himself as well. His virtues, in other words, and not merely his happiness, are items that should figure in his judgment about whether anything in his future life will be good for him or others. But it is plausible to suppose that once he has reminded himself that being a good person can be good not only for others but for himself as well, he has estimated the virtues at their true value. There does not seem to be such a thing as the goodness of virtue, apart from its being good for oneself and others. So, positing the absolute goodness of virtue would detract from moral understanding, not

4. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4: 394.

enhance it. For if someone knows that his future life would contain nothing but misery, and that he could do nothing good for himself or anyone else, suicide would be rational.

Kant's error is not confined to the issue of suicide. If we turn now to the ethics of creating rather than destroying life, we find that positing the absolute goodness of virtue is no less a distortion of sound practical reasoning. A man and woman ask themselves: should we have a child? Presumably they ought to take into consideration whether having and raising a child would be good for each of them. But it would be monstrous of them to pay no attention to the question whether any child they might have would live a life that would be good for *him* or *her* to live. It would be utterly selfish for them to raise a child whose life was likely to have little or nothing in it that is good for the child—even if being the parents of such a child were good for *them*.

But is there still another consideration that they ought to take into account? Not what is good for them, and not what is good for the child, but what is good—period? After all, Kant would point out, any normal child will develop into a moral agent, and will have the power to exercise a good will, which is a jewel beyond price, whether it has any use beyond itself or not. But once again, it seems doubtful that Kant has identified a factor by which sound deliberation should be guided. After a couple has taken into account what will be good for them, in having a child, as well as what will be good for the child, and for the rest of society, there is nothing left for them to consider.

I conclude that moral virtue does not provide a clear example of an item that must be placed in the category of things that are good *tout court*. It is plausible to suppose that what makes something a human excellence is its being good *for* someone or other. So, if we want to show that, for practical purposes, we need to acknowledge that there is such a thing as absolute goodness, we need a more convincing example of something that has that property.

#### PLEASURE AND PAIN

A defender of absolute goodness might, at this point, propose that pain is a clear example of an item that goes into the category of absolute badness, and similarly that pleasure is just plain good. Now, the first point that should be made about this proposal is that it is quite doubtful that pain is both something that is bad for people and also something that is bad, period. Similarly, it is implausible to suppose that pleasure has a double value, being both good absolutely and good for the person who experiences it. After all, no one has ever taken both of these factors into account in his practical thinking. Ordinary agents are of course sensitive to whether or not the alternatives they face promise pleasure or pain, but they are not aware that pain has a double disvalue, being both bad period and bad for them, or that pleasure has a corresponding double value. It is hard to believe that they are overlooking something important. So, a philosophical theory should not assert that pleasure and pain are doubly good or bad. We philosophical theorists should make up our minds: we must ask ourselves whether the value of pleasure consists in its being good period, or in its being good for the person who feels pleasure.

If pain is just plain bad, but not bad for the person on whom it is inflicted, then someone who cruelly and needlessly inflicts pain on others is not thereby making them worse off than they were before. What he does has no effect whatsoever on what is good *for* them, because pain is just plain bad, not bad *for* them. The objection that can be made to what he is doing is that he is creating a bad thing for no reason. Perhaps the point could be expressed by saying that he is adding to the amount of badness that exists in the universe, without compensating the universe by adding enough good to justify his act.

It should be evident that to think in these terms would be perverse, because it would depersonalize what we all regard as something that is essentially personal in nature. If I cause you needless pain, you have a complaint against me, and I am rupturing my relationship with you, because what I am doing affects your good—what is good *for* you—and I am showing my indifference towards your good, or my carelessness about it. Attention to the pleasure and pain of others is one of the many ways in which we manifest our attitude towards what is good for them. To think of pleasure and pain as just plain good or bad, but not good or bad *for* anyone, would be to miss this fundamental aspect of human relationships.

#### CONCLUSION: MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND HUMAN NATURE

Should we conclude, then, that there is no such thing as what is intrinsically good? Not at all. It is more judicious to say that the term “intrinsically good” can be interpreted in many different ways, and that on one reading there clearly is such a thing as intrinsic goodness, and on another this becomes a far more problematic category. Nothing could be more certain, in moral philosophy, than the assumption that some things are non-instrumentally good for people; nothing more fraught with difficulty than the thesis that virtue, pleasure, or any other item is just plain good.

The theories of absolute goodness that I find most fascinating are the ones that seek to transform our everyday moral consciousness by positing a hidden reality that underlies our usual categories. Platonism, Christianity, and other religious and metaphysical systems hold out that promise. They posit an absolute goodness that is not only absolutely but overwhelmingly good, and they invite us to see all the other things we hold valuable as less estimable by far than they are ordinarily taken to be. Our quotidian existence is transfigured when we see the goods of everyday life as reminders of a transcendent goodness.

Less metaphysically demanding doctrines—those of Kant, Moore, and Ross, for example—are less transformative in ambition, and instead seek to articulate the assumptions of commonsense morality. The difficulty they face is that the category of absolute goodness seems to be an intrusion upon common sense, which is far more at home with the category of what is good *for* someone. If we find it difficult to accept the hypothesis of a transcendent good, of either the Platonic or Christian variety, then our best option will be to put aside the category of absolute goodness as a chimera and to think instead in terms of what is good for someone or other.

If what is good for someone is one of the central properties with which practical reasoning must reckon, and what is absolutely good an empty category, then the kind of ultrarationalism favored by some philosophers—Kant, Moore, and Ross have been my constant examples—will have to be abandoned, and we will need a moral epistemology more sensitive than theirs to empirical facts. I am sympathetic to the idea that *some* of what we know in the normative realm is known a priori—that is, not on the basis of our experience of the world, but through the sort of abstract reflection that sometimes occurs in philosophical thinking. I know, for example, that coercive agreements cannot create moral obligations, and I know this not by means of perception but by a priori reflection. I take the ultrarationalists to be saying that the *entirety* of moral theory is knowable to us in the same purely reflective way. In particular, they hold that we can know which sorts of things are good without having any knowledge of the empirical world. We need merely reflect and we will see that a good will is absolutely good, that pleasure is good, knowledge good, virtue good, pain bad, and so on. Which things are right and which things are good, are, according to these ultrarationalists, knowable to a mind that is sufficiently attentive to the findings of philosophical reflection. The whole of ethics, so conceived, is knowable without empirical inquiry.

But if the absolute goodness posited by these philosophers does not exist, and what is good for someone is a central concept of ethics, then moral theory must contain an empirical component. For there is no way to know which sorts of things are good or bad for someone or something without having empirical knowledge of that person, or animal, or plant, or artifact. Ask yourself, for example, whether it is bad for cars to sit in the garage without ever being driven, or for pianos to remain unplayed, or for pencils to sit in a drawer without being put to use: you cannot answer these questions unless you know something about cars, pianos, and pencils. Similarly, and more important, you cannot know what is good for a human being unless you rely on some empirical assumptions about human psychology. Ethics, therefore, cannot be oblivious to the findings of experimental social science.

That leaves open the possibility that most or even all of what ethics needs are facts about human beings that are already known by some people. We can learn a great deal about humanity through introspection and normal interaction with other minds, as well as reading biographies, histories, novels, and so on. The most insightful psychologists are not necessarily academic experimentalists. But, in some way or other, our knowledge of what is good for human beings must be inferred from premises that rest on an understanding of the human mind and cannot be derived by reason alone from mere reflection on the nature of such properties as goodness and rightness.

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