

Personal and Impersonal Goods

An Intractable Problem in Ethics?

The Central Problem of Ethics

- * '[T]he central problem of ethics: how the lives, interests, and welfare of others make claims on us and how these claims, of various forms, are to be reconciled with the aim of living our own lives.' —Nagel (*VN*, 164)

A Simple Case with a Complex Context

- * Walking home from work one day, you see a toddler flailing in the shallow, muddy banks of a river, in imminent danger of drowning.
- * If you act quickly by wading into the muck, you can save the child; if you do not, the current will carry her away, in all likelihood resulting in her drowning.
- * Acting to save her is not cost free to you, but the costs are hardly on par with the cost she and her loved ones will suffer should she drown. (Your nice new shoes will be muddied, perhaps ruined, and your expensive trousers will need to be cleaned; you will be late for an anticipated date, which you will perhaps miss altogether.)
- * Evidently, this child has a claim on you. Or, perhaps, just perhaps, the good itself imposes a requirement: the good is to be desired and this is the good thing to do; so, you should desire to do this.

Goodness Itself?

- * Two relevant distinctions, one quite general and one more specific, though not quite subordinate to the more general distinction:
 - * Quite general: absolute goodness *vs.* domain-specific goods
 - * More specific: impersonal *vs.* personal goods

Absolute Goodness

- * There is, many, but not all, suppose, something we may call *the Good*.
- * This, one may think, is what Plato had in mind in postulating his Form of the Good.
- * This is absolute goodness, goodness *tout court*, simple, unqualified goodness, often taken to be indefinable, even if it can be grasped and characterized.

Domain-indexed Goods

- * These form a motley of indexed goods—not necessarily mutually exclusive:
 - * being good for someone (exercise is good *for* human beings)
 - * being good for something (correct humidity is good *for* a piano's sounding board)
 - * being good as something or in some respect (being a good as a carpenter, being good as a mathematician, even being good as a forger or a thief)
 - * being functionally good (being a good knife, a good computer, a good doorstop, a good can-opener, a good shepherd)

Two Questions in Axiology

- * . . . which we will introduce mainly only to set aside—but we need them for clarity when discussing Nagel:
 - * What is the relation, if any, between absolute goodness and these various domain-indexed goods?
 - * Is there really such a thing as absolute goodness?
 - * (There are, after all, not many card-carrying Platonists around these days.)

Personal *vs.* Impersonal Goods

- * Suppose there is an absolute good, something admired and desired simply because it is good.
 - * This is an impersonal good, and is agent-neutral.
- * We can contrast this with personal goods, which are good *for* someone but not simply good.
 - * This is a personal good, which is always agent-relative.
 - * What is good for the mongoose is not good for the snake.
 - * In this case, at least, there is something desired as good for the mongoose by the mongoose which is dreaded by the snake as not good for the snake, namely, the snake's being eaten by the mongoose.
 - * Evidently, then, personal goods do not magically align with one another.
 - * So, yes, it seems, the toddler's being saved is good for the toddler, but not good for you, because it is not good for you to muddy your new shoes or miss your date.

Nagel's Central Problem Recast

* Twice over:

- * How do (if they do) the agent relative goods of others make claims on me, when, as often happens, those goods for others are not also good for me?
- * How does an impersonal good make claims on me when those claims are not (or are not obviously, or are not by my reckoning) good for me?

Objective and Subjective Goods

- * An absolute good would be what was good objectively good, not in any domain-indexed way.
 - * But some goods might be objectively good despite their being domain-indexed.
 - * Arguably, e.g., health is good for humans, and this is not consequent upon its being regarded as good by those whose good it is.
 - * Similarly, ample sunshine is good for a rosebush, but not because of its being so regarded by rose bushes (which, the claims of panpsychists notwithstanding, have no intentional or affective attitudes of any kind). Same again for the sounding board of a piano.
- * A subjective good would be a good whose goodness was partially constituted by the intentional or affective attitudes of some subject.
 - * Such a good would obviously not be absolute; its value as good would perforce be domain-indexed, and, indeed, be relative to an agent.
 - * The goodness of Gabriel's watch, which is only so-so as a chronometer, consists in its being regarded affectionately because it was given him by his grandfather, with whom he had a loving relationship.

Another Way to See This

- * Let us be hedonic Utilitarians: we are value monists who think that pleasure is *the* good (and not merely *a* good), and suppose that it is always best to maximize pleasure, whether or not that pleasure is our pleasure or someone else's pleasure.
- * Pleasure would remain the good were all sentient creatures temporarily or even permanently erased from the universe.
- * Question: why does pleasure maximization make a claim on me when my pleasure is not the pleasure which will be realized?
- * In sum, as understood by its proponents and critics alike, Utilitarianism is agent-neutral.
 - * Then an agent might ask: why should *I* maximize general utility?

Three Kinds of Agent-relativity

- * Autonomy: some of my reasons for valuing a course of action stem solely, or very nearly, from their being my own, and not someone else's, from their being peculiar to me.
 - * An avid cyclist wants to cycle from New York City to San Francisco—her desires place no constraints or obligations on anyone else.
 - * Contrast this with her desire to avoid pain, if possible.
- * Obligations: some of my reasons flow from relationships I have, not all of which are chosen by me, including filial duties, parental obligations, and community-grounded concerns.
 - * Perhaps I should postpone and even cancel my undergraduate education in order to return home to care for my ailing mother, who has no other source of care.
- * Deontology: some of my reasons derive from what is permissible in the pursuit of impersonal goods.
 - * It might be good to maximize pleasure, but I may not snatch a passer-by off the street and donate her organs to sustain the lives of seven others who would otherwise die in the hospital by which she happens to be walking.

Autonomy

- * ‘There is no independent value of preference-satisfaction per se, which reserves its force even from an impersonal standpoint.’ —Nagel (*VN* 171)

Deontology

- * These are non-optional, agent-relative reasons which depend not upon one's one desires or interests, but on the claims of others.
- * They set constraints on how one can treat others, even in the pursuit of an impersonal good—where these are not themselves given by simple agent-neutral considerations.

From Here and From Nowhere

- * ‘To see the matter in this light is to see both the appeal of agent-neutral, consequentialist ethics and the contrary force of agent-relative deontological ethics. The detached, objective view takes in everything and provides a standpoint of choice from which all choosers can agree about what should happen. But each of us is not only an objective self but a particular person with a particular perspective; we act in the world from that perspective, and not only from the point of view of a detached will, selecting and rejecting world-states.’ —Nagel (*VN*, 183)

And so. . .

- * . . . an intractable problem?