THE GOOD LIFE

Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness

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Is there something to be discovered which is, in fact, the good life? Could I be mistaken about the character of the good life and describe it in mistaken ways? Are moral judgements really statements which may be true or false, or are they merely expressions of a speaker's desires and feelings? And is there really such a thing as the good life? Or is there merely the kind of life that I or someone else would like people to live?

I think that the view that moral judgements are not true or false but merely expressions of feelings or desire is one of those philosophical positions that nobody would hold unless she thought she had to, unless she thought that any alternative position must be untenable. It is held in the way that John Locke (1632–1704) held that secondary qualities, like colours, do not belong to physical objects, or the way that Aquinas held that God brings about my free actions.¹ Both these very implausible-sounding views were held because the apparently common-sense alternative was thought to be impossible. (The fact that in my view, whereas Locke's implausible view was wrong, Aquinas's was right, is neither here nor there for present purposes.)

¹ For Locke, see An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), Book II, Chapter VIII. For Aquinas, see De Potentia, 3,1.
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The common-sense view, held by most people, and even most off-duty philosophers, is that we are saying something true if we say that imprisoning innocent people is wrong or that rape is wicked. People who deny these propositions, we think, are not just bad (and perhaps not even bad), but mistaken. People only come round to thinking of such apparent propositions as expressions of will (of, for example, a sheer desire to bring about a society without such activities as rape), because they have become convinced that badness or wrongness could not be a property or characteristic, part of the description of, human activity; it could not be something we observe or discover in the world. They have become convinced that to say that some action is bad is to compare it with what it ought to be, and that what something ought to be is not an object of our experience. They have become convinced that we only see what is there and that when we look at the world we can only see what is the case, not what ought to be but is not the case. And they think that there is no way of deducing what ought to be from what is. What is the case, the facts, can be stated truly, or else we can be mistaken about them; but whether something ought or ought not to be, its value, can only be something we aspire to or want, or can only be something that we know others want.

You might think that we can save the objective, factual status of values by claiming that God wants us to do certain things and not others. If values were simply a matter of your will or mine, they would be subjective and not a descriptive feature of things in the world. But, so someone might reason, since they are a matter of God’s will, which is unchanging, we can make objective statements about
values if we happen to know what it is that God wills. We would then mean by ‘a bad action’ ‘something that God, as a matter of fact, wants us not to do, something that transgresses his commandment’. This would be an objective matter. It is the case that God does not want this done.

It would be an objective truth, however, at what I have called the second level. When we record that God does not want (has forbidden) some activity, we are speaking like the anthropologist who records that the Greeks did not want people to eat their dead parents. And nothing seems to follow from this about the nature of human activities in themselves, just as human activities. A view which would seek to make rational sense of ethical judgements simply in terms of the will or law of God is no less voluntarist than one which seeks to make sense of them in terms of my will. In neither case is any rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness, attributed to the human action because of what it is in itself.

So we seem left with, and thus compelled to, the view that it is one thing to give an account, a description, of what is the case, which, because it is ‘value-free’, will contain nothing but verifiable truths; and quite another human activity to speak of the moral value of this or that piece of behaviour: this latter does not tell us descriptive truths; it simply expresses the attitudes or options or feelings of the speaker, or, perhaps, of God. Ought (prescription) can never be derived from is (description). The classical statement of this conclusion comes from David Hume (1711–1776). In his A Treatise of Human Nature he famously writes:
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In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.

You cannot derive an ought from an is'. After Hume, this doctrine attained almost the status of a dogma in Western European thinking. It has, however, been questioned in recent times. And it is, indeed, highly questionable. The thing looks, in the first place, not quite so obvious if instead of talking about what ought to be, we talk about

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3 In a famous paper, 'Hume on “Is” and “Ought”' (The Philosophical Review LXVIII (1959)), Alasdair MacIntyre argues that, in the text I have just quoted, Hume is not, in fact, propagating an is/ought dichotomy but merely attacking one particular way (by an appeal to belief in God) of deriving what ought to be from what is. Hume does cont.
what is *good* or *bad*. For the kind of ethical thinking that I shall be trying to expound, doing what you *ought* is just one particular kind of morally good behaviour. It is behaviour that is sanctioned by just law, and obedience to such law is good because it is necessary for living in society, and living in society is part of the good life. So for this way of thinking *ought* is a secondary and derivative idea.

Let us, then, formulate the problem thus: Can we say that something is *good* because of what we know that it *is*?

People who follow Hume think that while you can, in principle, give a complete account of what a piece of human behaviour is in objective terms, upon which all observers can agree, you cannot derive from this the proposition that the behaviour is morally good or bad, that this is a subjective matter for each observer.

But this doctrine looks, in fact, pretty strange. For in every ordinary use of 'good' and 'bad', saying that something is *good* because of what it *is*, is *exactly* what we do. According to Humean thinkers, there is one tone of voice in which we say exactly what is being done, what a piece of human activity is, and quite another in which we praise it or say it is good or bad. But the truth seems to be that this separation of values from facts is ordinarily thought of as the mark of someone who is not very good at mak-

3. *cont.*

this, says MacIntrye, in order to prepare the way for his own more 'Aristotelian' appeal to human passions and desires. It seems to me, however, that, on the face of it, there is a difference between Hume's appeal to our empirically 'observed' passions and the Aristotelian appeal to human needs, interests, desires, and happiness. MacIntrye himself stresses this in later writings. Cf. *After Virtue* (Duckworth, London, 1981), especially Chapter 16.
ing value judgements, someone who is not a reliable guide to what is good or bad.

I once switched on the television and recognized, with a shudder, that it was showing yet another programme devoted to ice-skating. I was just about to change channels when I saw two people doing the most amazingly beautiful things. I was an instant convert to ice-skating, or, at least, to watching it, and I subsequently discovered they were people that everyone else had known about for months. I watched them avidly and incessantly. One day I was watching them and saying things like 'Beautiful', 'Lovely', 'Marvellous' – all expressions of value. With me was a friend who was equally enthusiastic but also knew something about ice-skating. He expressed his enthusiasm by saying things like 'Say, look at the way she did that ...', and there followed a stream of arcane jargon. The air became thick with talk about double salchows, the toeless lutz, reverse valley jumps, and the double cherry flip – all of which expressions were describing scientifically, and I suppose accurately, what my skaters had just done, or, in some cases, not done. It was I, the ignorant amateur, who used what are supposed to be pure value expressions, whereas the person whose opinions and value judgements were worthy of respect (the one whom my skaters would have been pleased to hear) expressed his view that something was good precisely by describing what it was. In this case, the account of what it was, was an account, and the best account, of it being good.

But, of course, an objector may say: 'That is all very well for ice-skating, but we are talking about morals. It is one thing to say that X is a good ice-skater and quite another to say she is a good person.' And this, of course is
true. But it would surely be very strange if the word ‘good’ in ‘good skater’ were used in some totally different way from its use in ‘good person’ – as though we were just making a pun with the word (a pun which, if it is such, is strangely made in many different languages). It would be very odd if ‘good skater’ could be spelt out in factual descriptions of what skaters do or can do (complex and open-ended descriptions, no doubt), whereas ‘good person’ were merely an expression of my feelings or desires.

I think people are forced into this very odd assertion because of a certain prejudice about persons. They are willing to agree that ice-skating is a particular definite art and activity – even though it is what I would call an open-ended activity. By calling it open-ended I mean that it is not just a technique which you either learn or do not learn. It is itself developing. What ice-skating henceforth involves will differ as new experts at it arise. Still, it is a definite human activity. These people I speak of, however, are unable to admit that human living, being a person, could be a definite human activity even in that open-ended sense. There may be many arts and skills within being human, but being human itself is not an art or skill. You may practise these arts well or badly, but you cannot practise being human itself well or badly. Now while I think, as I shall be saying, that there are important differences between those dispositions we call skills such as are constitutive of being a good skater, and those dispositions we call virtues, which are constitutive of a good person, nevertheless I think that being humanly good involves something very like skills.

The bone of contention here is this: To call people ice-skaters is to speak of them in terms of a role or function
or a job they perform which they can therefore perform well or badly. But when we call people human beings, are we in any sense ascribing some role or function to them which they could perform well or badly?

The answer which I shall label ‘individualist’ says that we are certainly not. The human subject simply exists and that is that. The philosophers called ‘existentialists’ were, I think, asserting this with especial emphasis. Saying that ‘existence is prior to essence’, they seem to have meant that people first of all just are, and what categories they may fit into, what kind of being they are, what relationships they have with others, is a subsequent and secondary matter determined, in the case of ‘authentic’ people, by their own choices. Human beings may, for their own purposes, ascribe functions to things. I may make a spoon in order to eat my porridge, and it will be a good one if it fulfils the purpose I have given it, and a bad one if it does not. In a similar way, a group of people may invent the art and institution of ice-skating and similarly decide what makes for good skating and what for bad; all these purposes are ascribed by the decisions human beings make. We cannot, says the individualist, in the same way speak of human beings themselves as having been ascribed a purpose or role. Of course, human beings can be given roles, as when we appoint them as teachers or carpenters, and then they may be judged on objective grounds as good or bad teachers or carpenters. But we do not appoint people to be human beings, and so we cannot on any objective grounds say that they are good or bad human beings. For this individualist way of thinking, purposes and roles are always human artifacts: there are no pur-
poses prior to human decisions; there are no purposes for human beings in themselves.

For this way of thinking, human societies are themselves simply human artifacts. There is no difference in principle between the *polis* and a club which a few congenial friends might decide to set up. I have called this way of thinking 'individualist' because it starts from the position that to be human is simply to be an individual; we are not equipped at birth with any role or function; we ascribe roles or adopt them by our own decisions. It is because people believe this to be self-evidently true that they are compelled to say that the phrase 'good man' must be used in a totally different way from 'good skater' or 'good spoon'. In the latter cases, 'good' can be spelt out objectively in terms of what is the case about the skater or spoon because their goodness is functional; in the case of 'good man', it cannot, because to be human is not to have a function.

Now, one way of replying to the individualist is to say: 'Ah, but it is not only human beings that ascribe purposes. God, too, can do this, and she has given human beings a purpose: we are thus objectively good or bad in so far as we fulfil these divine purposes in our lives.' Now this could mean one or other of two quite distinct things. It might mean that God has *happened to* give human beings a purpose as, if I have lost one of my chessmen, I might happen to use a button as a pawn. In that case God might easily not have had any purposes for human beings to be good or bad at, but he has in fact given them these roles to play, these jobs to do, these commands to obey. But if this is what is meant, my role as a piece in God's game is not in
principle different from my role as a skater or teacher. I might not have had, but in fact do have, this role as, say, a teacher, and in virtue of that I can be a good or bad teacher. But just as the role given me by the Education Committee concerns my being a good teacher and not, as such, a good person, so the role given me by God would not concern my being a good person. God happens to have given me the job of, say, honouring my father and mother, and because of this I can be judged as a good or bad hon- ourer of my father and mother, just as I might be judged a good or bad teacher. But in neither case would I be judged a good or bad human being. The penalties for being a bad honourer of my father and mother may be stiffer than the penalties for being a bad teacher, but that does not make any difference in principle. This kind of appeal to God as a role-ascriber does not, therefore, help us to find an actual role or purpose for the human being as such.

The other thing that might be meant by the appeal to God is not that God simply happened to equip human beings with a job or role but that in creating them as human beings God created things that intrinsically and necessarily, and of their nature, have roles or functions. God could no more have created a human being without function than she could have created a triangle without three sides.

Well that is fine: but in that case there is no need to bring God in at all (just as you do not have to bring in God to explain why triangles have three sides). If what you are claiming is that God just had to provide human beings with a role to be good or bad in, if what she created were to be human beings because that is the kind of thing that a human being is then you need to show that that is the
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kind of thing that a human being is. And if you can do that, you already have a sufficient answer to the individualist without mentioning God at all.

So the appeal to God is either inadequate or unnecessary. If the individualist is to be answered, it can only be by trying to show that just to be human is, in fact, to have certain roles or functions – so that we can speak of people being good or bad at being human just as we can speak of them being good or bad at ice-skating. And this, I think, can be shown starting from the fact that to be human is to be political, to be part of a polis.

Let me retrace the thread of the argument: I want to show that just being human (not being human plus being, for example, a teacher or a mineworker, but just being human) involves having a role or job, such that we can not only say of people that they are good or bad teachers or mineworkers, but just good or bad tout court, good or bad people, in a way that can be spelt out by describing how they behave. Certain kinds of objectively describable behaviour would count as a reason for saying that someone is good or bad tout court, just as certain kinds of behaviour would count as a reason for saying that someone is a good or bad teacher or ice-skater. To say 'He can give an accurate though simplified account of the notion of surplus value, intelligible to an audience of non-economists, in twenty minutes' just is to say that, in this respect, he is a good teacher. I want to argue that to say 'He would give you the shirt off his back' just is to say that in this respect he is a good man. In other words, 'good man' is a descriptive expression just as 'good teacher' is. And I argue this because I argue that everybody is ineluctably political. The reason why being human entails
having certain functions to fulfil and roles to play (which may be done well or badly) is that to be human is to be part of a society of other human beings. To say ‘This is a human being’ is not like saying ‘This is a red blob’. It is more like saying ‘This is a gear-lever’. It would be hard to know what to make of the question ‘Is this a good red blob?’ But it is not at all hard to make sense of ‘Is this a good gear-lever?’

Central to this argument is the claim that society is not the product of individual people. On the contrary, individual people are the product of society. There has to be at least some form of family society for people to be born at all and to survive and be brought up in a human way. And if you think of the family in the absolutely minimal terms of two parents producing a child, this structure itself depends on larger structures which ensure its survival and stability. The simplest social contract theory which supposes that individuals could come together initially for mutual support and protection to form a society is incoherent because it supposes these individuals to be already in possession of what only society could provide – institutions such as language, contract, agreement, and so on. The emergence of *homo sapiens* cannot have been (except maybe by a miracle) the evolution of strangely talented individuals. It must have been the evolution of new forms of animal grouping. We have to imagine the emergence of animal groups whose coherence is more and more a matter of conventional signs, language, rather than of innate signals. With this emergence of language, we begin to have rationality. Rationality is a special way of being in a group. It is because there is some form of linguistic community that there are rational individuals or ‘persons’.
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A linguistic community is a special sort of grouping in a very radical sense, for it changes the meaning of the word 'grouping'. The notions of whole and part are transformed. An individual person is, indeed, part of a society, but not simply in the sense that a gear-lever is part of a car. Individualism owes its popularity (despite its implausibility) to the sense people have that it must be wrong to treat persons as mere fragments or segments of a larger whole, as cogs or gear-levers. And this is understandable. There are, of course, totalitarian ways of thinking which are nothing but the obverse of individualism, which owe their popularity (despite their implausibility) to a craving people have to be treated as mere fragments of a larger whole, the craving to be rid of responsibility, to hand over decisions to the party, or the church, or the company, or the state. Both individualism and totalitarianism depend on the same mistake about the relationship of member and community in a symbol-using society. They see it as just like the relationship of part and whole in a pre-linguistic, non-rational group.

In the new kind of grouping, however, the linguistic community, what the part receives from the whole – language and rationality, the symbols in which she can represent herself to herself – are precisely what makes possible her specially human kind of individuality.

Let us contrast human individuals with cats. All cats are individuals, but this is because they are all born different and have had different things happening to them. But human beings are distinct from each other not just because of that. What they are like is the product not just of birth and what has happened to them but of their own rational decisions. Because we represent our world to ourselves
symbolically, and because we can represent ourselves to ourselves symbolically, we can make free choices which determine our individuality. Our individual characters are importantly the product of our own decisions – though not, of course, only of our free decisions. It is just because of our insertion in the symbolic institutions of the linguistic society that we can, to a greater or lesser extent, make ourselves, possess ourselves and be free.

Moreover, we are free just to the extent that we are inserted in this human way into human community. It is the child who has been welcomed into the society of her family and friends, and encouraged to play a full part in it, who is able to be herself and be free. She has acquired the self-confidence and self-acceptance that comes of being accepted by others. And so it is at every level: it is by being parts that we are wholes. Community and individuality are not rivals. The individual who can stand over against the community, who can make a critical contribution to the tradition of the community, who can make a genuine contribution to revolution, is the product of that community and tradition. The individual, you might say, is the way in which a linguistic community develops itself historically. Other animal groupings do not have individuals in this sense. They do not have a history. They only evolve.

So it is through belonging to the community that you can make yourself the kind of person you are – so that you are not just passively made but actually make yourself, determine your life and character. In this way you make yourself the kind of person who can yet more make herself, whose life is more and more her own. This is, to speak generally, the role or task or function that belongs to being human. It
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is the task of entering more into the life of the community so that you can enter yet more; or, what is the same thing, it is forming your personality by your own decisions so that you have the personality which is more and more capable of making its own decisions. And this, still speaking generally, is what virtue is about. Virtues are dispositions to make choices which will make you better able to make choices. The aim of virtue is to be virtuous. Or, to go back to the other way of putting it, virtues are dispositions to enter into community, not to be absorbed in some lifeless way by a collective, but to develop those specifically symbolic, linguistic, rational relationships with others which we can sum up in the word 'friendship' and which are characteristic of the groupings of human animals.

This is, of course, to speak generally. There are many virtues and, while they all have as their long-term aim the community life of persons, they are each concerned with particular human activities. And a study of the virtues must be a study of the manifold ways in which people interact in the community of friendship.

If this is true (and I have only sketched it in the crudest way), there are many objections to be answered and qualifications to be made. But if it is true, then since to be a human being is to have the task of making yourself, the task of entering into the life of the community so that your life is more and more your own, then we have a basis for saying that, just as a good teacher is one who teaches well, so a good human being is one who enters into community well. The good human being is the one who is, in this sense, politically good. Aristotle's Ethics is simply the first part of his treatise on politics, on the life of the polis. If
this is so, we ought to be able to describe what a good human being is in much the same way as we can describe what a good teacher is.

I am far from suggesting that you can easily describe what a good teacher is, or lay down simple rules for good teaching. It is fairly clear what a good typist is: he types accurately, neatly, and quickly, and that is it. Typing is simply a technique. It is not so easy to say what a good secretary is, for acting as a secretary involves many techniques. Being a teacher is more open-ended still, and being a human being immensely more so. There are clear rules for what counts as good typing. We cannot be anything like so clear about what counts as a good human being. Still we can say quite a lot. And that is what ethics is about.

What I have been saying has all been exceedingly abstract – far more abstract than, for example, Aristotle allows himself to be in his *Ethics*. There does not exist such a thing as a community in general any more than there is such a thing as a horse in general. There is, perhaps, not yet even a community in general in the sense of a single community of mankind of which particular communities are parts. There is certainly a single biological community, a ‘family of man’, a species in which we are all interfertile. But there is not yet a single political community. There are only particular geographical and historical communities, and to be a human being is to be born and brought up in one (or sometimes more) of these, with its own culture and tradition. A human being does not become herself by entering into community in general or into humankind, but by being educated into and responding creatively and critically to the tradition of her place and time.
The process of being educated in virtue is not one just of acquiring ideas. It is a matter of day to day living amongst particular structures and customs, as distinct from other structures and customs. It is in this sense a material business, a matter of this human body amongst others, even though the way of being among is not simply bodily in the sense that, say, a chip is among others in a computer, or even in the way that a wolf is among others in a pack. It is, as I have said, a matter of being among others through symbols and conventional signs. But these are still particular material symbols. Every language is a particular material language. The symbols of a society involve myths, manners, stories and language that belong especially to this people and not to others.

So even if we can show how we might make the phrase ‘a good person’ a descriptive expression in one culture, we have not yet shown how it might be universalized, how we might have a meaning for it which could be universalized, how it could be valid just for anybody of any culture who belonged to the human species. We face here the relationship of the biological and the historical/political, the two senses of human unity. And this is not just a theoretical but a practical problem. I suspect that we can speak of ‘natural law’ just to the extent that we have solved the practical political problem of bringing the biological and historical together, in so far as we have achieved ‘one world’, and not just one species.

Once we have taken account of the linguistic, the political, the historical (in order to make our case for seeing human beings as functional, role-playing beings), we have departed from the universality of the sheer biological species. Of course, membership of the biological species
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itself involves certain roles, especially sexual ones. But the natural life of a human being is immensely more complex than her sexual and species life alone. So although I can share my sexual *productivity* universally, being in principle interfertile with any member of the species of the opposite sex, when we come to cultural and moral creativity (and, thus, a transformed sexual creativity) – the activity by which I can create, not just the next generation, but myself and my own generation – we are in the realm of the local.