

Methods of Ethics

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Book I

Chapter IX

GOOD

§1. We have hitherto spoken of the quality of conduct discerned by our moral faculty as 'rightness', which is the term commonly used by English moralists. We have regarded this term, and its equivalents in ordinary use, as implying the existence of a dictate or imperative of reason, which prescribes certain actions either unconditionally, or with reference to some ulterior end.

It is, however, possible to take a view of virtuous action in which, though the validity of moral intuitions is not disputed, this notion of rule or dictate is at any rate only latent or implicit, the moral ideal being presented as attractive rather than imperative. Such a view seems to be taken when the action to which we are morally prompted, or the quality of character manifested in it, is judged to be 'good' in itself (and not merely as a means to some ulterior Good). This, as was before noticed, was the fundamental ethical conception in the Greek schools of Moral Philosophy generally; including even the Stoics, though their system, from the prominence that it gives to the conception of Natural Law, forms a transitional link between ancient and modern ethics. And this historical illustration may serve to exhibit one important result of substituting the idea of 'goodness' for that of 'rightness' of conduct, which at first sight might be thought a merely verbal change. For the chief characteristics of ancient ethical controversy as distinguished from modern may be traced to the employment of a generic notion instead of a specific one in expressing the common moral judgments on actions. Virtue or Right action is commonly regarded as only a species of the Good: and so, on this view of the moral intuition, the first question that offers itself, when we endeavour to systematise conduct, is how to determine the relation of this species of good to the rest of the genus. It was on this question that the Greek thinkers argued, from first to last. Their speculations can scarcely be understood by us unless with a certain effort we throw the quasi-jural notions of modern ethics aside, and ask (as they did) not "What is Duty and what is its ground?" but "Which of the objects that men think good is truly Good or the Highest Good?" or, in the more specialised form of the question which the moral intuition introduces, "What is the relation of the kind of Good we call Virtue, the qualities of conduct and character which men commend and admire, to other good things?"

This, then, is the first difference to be noticed between the two forms of the intuitive judgment. In the recognition of conduct as 'right' is involved an authoritative prescription to do it: but when we have judged conduct to be good, it is not yet clear that

we ought to prefer this kind of good to all other good things: some standard for estimating the relative values of different 'goods' has still to be sought.

I propose, then, to examine the import of the notion 'Good' in the whole range of its application;---premising that, as it is for the constituents of Ultimate Good that we require a standard of comparison, we are not directly concerned with anything that is clearly only good as a means to the attainment of some ulterior end. If, indeed, we had only this latter case to consider, it would be plausible to interpret 'good' without reference to human desire or choice, as meaning merely 'fit' or 'adapted' for the production of certain effects---a good horse for riding, a good gun for shooting, etc. But as we apply the notion also to ultimate ends we must seek a meaning for it which will cover both applications.

§2. There is, however, a simple interpretation of the term---which is widely maintained to be the true one---according to which everything which we judge to be good is implicitly conceived as a means to the end of pleasure, even when we do not make in our judgment any explicit reference to this or any other ulterior end. On this view, any comparison of things in respect of their 'goodness' would seem to be really a comparison of them as sources of pleasure; so that any attempt to systematise our intuitions of goodness, whether in conduct and character or in other things, must reasonably lead us straight to Hedonism. And no doubt, if we consider the application of the term, outside the sphere of character and conduct, to things that are not definitely regarded as means to the attainment of some ulterior object of desire, we find a close correspondence between our apprehension of pleasure derived from an object, and our recognition that the object is in itself 'good'. The good things of life are things which give pleasure, whether sensual or emotional: as good dinners, wines, poems, pictures, music: and this gives a *prima facie* support to the interpretation of 'good' as equivalent to 'pleasant'. I think, however, that if we reflect on the application of the term to the cases most analogous to that of conduct---*i.e.* to what we may call 'objects of taste'---we shall find that this interpretation of it has not clearly the support of common sense. In the first place, allowing that the judgment that any object is good of its kind is closely connected with the apprehension of pleasure derived from it, we must observe that it is generally to a specific kind of pleasure that the affirmation of goodness corresponds; and that if the object happens to give us pleasure of a different kind, we do not therefore call it good---at least without qualification. For instance, we should not call a wine good solely because it was very wholesome; nor a poem on account of its moral lessons. And hence when we come to consider the meaning of the term 'good' as applied to conduct, there is no reason, so far, to suppose that it has any reference or correspondence to *all* the pleasures that may result from the conduct. Rather the perception of goodness or virtue in actions would seem to be analogous to the

perception of beauty¹ in material things: which is normally accompanied with a specific pleasure which we call 'aesthetic', but has often no discoverable relation to the general usefulness or agreeableness of the thing discerned to be beautiful: indeed, we often recognise this kind of excellence in things hurtful and dangerous.

But further: as regards aesthetic pleasures, and the sources of such pleasures that we commonly judge to be good, it is the received opinion that some persons have more and others less 'good taste': and it is only the judgment of persons of good taste that we recognise as valid in respect of the real goodness of the things enjoyed. We think that of his own pleasure each individual is the final judge, and there is no appeal from his decision,---at least so far as he is comparing pleasures within his actual experience; but the affirmation of goodness in any object involves the assumption of a universally valid standard, which, as we believe, the judgment of persons to whom we attribute good taste approximately represents. And it seems clear that the term 'good' as applied to 'taste' does not mean 'pleasant'; it merely imports the conformity of the aesthetic judgment so characterised to the supposed ideal, deviation from which implies error and defect. Nor does it appear to be always the person of best taste who derives the greatest enjoyment from any kind of good and pleasant things. We are familiar with the fact that connoisseurs of wines, pictures, etc., often retain their intellectual faculty of appraising the merits of the objects which they criticise, and deciding on their respective places in the scale of excellence, even when their susceptibilities to pleasure from these objects are comparatively blunted and exhausted. And more generally we see that freshness and fulness of feeling by no means go along with taste and judgment: and that a person who possesses the former may derive more pleasure from inferior objects than another may from the best.

To sum up: the general admission that things which are called 'good' are productive of pleasure, and that the former quality is inseparable in thought from the latter, does not involve the inference that the common estimates of the goodness of conduct may be fairly taken as estimates of the amount of pleasure resulting from it. For (1) analogy would lead us to conclude that the attribution of goodness, in the case of conduct as of objects of taste generally, may correspond not to all the pleasure that is caused by the conduct, but

¹ It is, however, necessary to distinguish between the ideas of *Moral Goodness* and *Beauty* as applied to human actions: although there is much affinity between them, and they have frequently been identified, especially by the Greek thinkers. No doubt both the ideas themselves and the corresponding pleasurable emotions, arising on the contemplation of conduct, are often indistinguishable: a noble action affects us like a scene, a picture, or a strain of music: and the delineation of human virtue is all important part of the means which the artist has at his disposal for producing, his peculiar effects. Still, on looking closer, we see not only that there is much good conduct which is not beautiful, or at least does not sensibly impress us as such; but even that certain kinds of crime and wickedness have a splendour and sublimity of their own. For example, such a career as Caesar Borgia's, as Renan says, is "beau comme une tempête, comme un abîme". It is true, I think, that in all such cases the beauty depends upon the exhibition in the criminal's conduct of striking gifts and excellences mingled with the wickedness: but, it does not seem that we can abstract the latter without impairing the aesthetic effect. And hence I conceive, we have to distinguish the sense of beauty in conduct from the sense of moral goodness.

to a specific pleasure, in this case the contemplative satisfaction which the conduct causes to a disinterested spectator: and (2) it may not excite even this specific pleasure generally in proportion to its goodness, but only (at most) in persons of good moral taste: and even in their case we can distinguish the intellectual apprehension of goodness---which involves the conception of an ideal objective standard---from the pleasurable emotion which commonly accompanies it; and may suppose the latter element of consciousness diminished almost indefinitely.

Finally, when we pass from the *adjective* to the *substantive* good, it is at once evident that this latter cannot be understood as equivalent to 'pleasure' or 'happiness' by any persons who affirm---as a significant proposition and not as a mere tautology---that the Pleasure or Happiness of human beings is their Good or Ultimate Good. Such affirmation, which would, I think, be ordinarily made by Hedonists, obviously implies that the *meaning* of the two terms is different, however closely their denotation may coincide. And it does not seem that any fundamental difference of meaning is implied by the grammatical variation from adjective to substantive.

§3. What then can we state as the general meaning of the term 'good'? Shall we say---with Hobbes, and many since Hobbes---that 'whatsoever is the object of any man's Desire, that it is which he for his part calleth Good, and the object of his aversion, Evil'? To simplify the discussion, we will consider only what a man desires for himself---not as a means to an ulterior result,---and for himself---not benevolently for others: his own Good² and ultimate Good. We have first to meet the obvious objection that a man often desires what he knows is on the whole bad for him: the pleasure of drinking champagne which is sure to disagree with him, the gratification of revenge when he knows that his true interest lies in reconciliation. The answer is that in such cases the desired result is accompanied or followed by other effects which when they come excite aversion stronger than the desire for the desired effect: but that these bad effects, though *fore-seen* are not *fore-felt*: the representation of them does not adequately modify the predominant direction of desire as a present fact. But, granting this, and fixing attention solely on the result desired, apart from its concomitants and consequences---it would still seem that what is desired at any time is, as such, merely apparent Good, which may not be found good when fruition comes, or at any rate not so good as it appeared. It may turn out a 'Dead Sea apple', mere dust and ashes in the eating: more often, fruition will partly correspond to expectation, but may still fall short of it in a marked degree. And sometimes---even while yielding to the desire---we are aware of the illusoriness of this

² It would seem that, according to the common view of 'good', there are occasions in which an individual's sacrifice of his own good on the whole, according to the most rational conception of it that he can form, would apparently realise greater good for others. Whether, indeed, such a sacrifice is ever really required, and whether, if so, it is truly reasonable for the individual to sacrifice his own good on the whole, are among the profoundest questions of ethics: and I shall carefully consider them in subsequent chapters (especially Book iii. chap. xiv.). I here only desire to avoid any prejudgment of these questions in my definition of 'my own good'.

expectation of 'good' which the desire carries with it. I conclude, therefore, that if we are to conceive of the elements of ultimate Good as capable of quantitative comparison---as we do when we speak of preferring a 'greater' good to a 'lesser',---we cannot identify the object of desire with 'good' simply, or 'true good', but only with 'apparent good'.

But further: a prudent man is accustomed to suppress, with more or less success, desires for what he regards as out of his power to attain by voluntary action---as fine weather, perfect health, great wealth or fame, etc.; but any success he may have in diminishing the actual intensity of such desires has no effect in leading him to judge the objects desired less 'good'.

It would seem then, that if we interpret the notion 'good' in relation to 'desire', we must identify it not with the actually *desired*, but rather with the *desirable*:---meaning by 'desirable' not necessarily 'what *ought* to be desired' but what would be desired, with strength proportioned to the degree of desirability, if it were judged attainable by voluntary action, supposing the desirer to possess a perfect forecast, emotional as well as intellectual, of the state of attainment or fruition.

It still remains possible that the choice of any particular good, thus defined as an object of pursuit, may be on the whole bad, on account of its concomitants and consequences; even though the particular result when attained is not found other than it was imagined in the condition of previous desire. If, therefore, in seeking a definition of 'ultimate Good' we mean 'good on the whole', we have---following the line of thought of the preceding paragraph---to express its relation to Desire differently. In the first place we have to limit our view to desire which becomes practical in volition; as I may still regard as desirable results which I judge it on the whole imprudent to aim at. But, even with this limitation, the relation of my 'good on the whole' to my desire is very complicated. For it is not even sufficient to say that my Good on the whole is what I should actually desire and seek if all the consequences of seeking it could be foreknown and adequately realised by me in imagination at the time of making my choice. No doubt an equal regard for all the moments of our conscious experience---so far, at least, as the mere difference of their position in time is concerned---is an essential characteristic of rational conduct. But the mere fact, that a man does not afterwards feel for the consequences of an action aversion strong enough to cause him to regret it, cannot be accepted as a complete proof that he has acted for his 'good on the whole'. Indeed, we commonly reckon it among the worst consequences of some kinds of conduct that they alter men's tendencies to desire, and make them desire their lesser good more than their greater: and we think it all the worse for a man---even in this world---if he is never roused out of such a condition and lives till death the life of a contented pig, when he might have been something better. To avoid this objection, it would have to be said that a man's future good on the whole is what he would now desire and seek on the whole if all the consequences of all the different lines of conduct open to him were accurately foreseen and adequately realised in imagination at the present point of time.

This hypothetical composition of impulsive forces involves so elaborate and complex a conception, that it is somewhat paradoxical to say that this is what we commonly *mean* when we talk of a man's 'good on the whole'. Still, I cannot deny that this hypothetical object of a resultant desire supplies an intelligible and admissible interpretation of the terms 'good' (substantive) and 'desirable', as giving philosophical precision to the vaguer meaning with which they are used in ordinary discourse: and it would seem that a calm comprehensive desire for 'good' conceived somewhat in this way, though more vaguely, is normally produced by intellectual comparison and experience in a reflective mind. The notion of 'Good' thus attained has an ideal element: it is something that is not always actually desired and aimed at by human beings: but the ideal element is entirely interpretable in terms of *fact*, actual or hypothetical, and does not introduce any judgment of value, fundamentally distinct from judgments relating to existence;---still less any 'dictate of Reason'.³

It seems to me, however, more in accordance with common sense to recognise---as Butler does---that the calm desire for my 'good on the whole' is *authoritative*; and therefore carries with it implicitly a rational dictate to aim at this end, if in any case a conflicting desire urges the will in an opposite direction. Still we may keep the notion of 'dictate' or 'imperative' merely implicit and latent,---as it seems to be in ordinary judgments as to 'my good' and its opposite---by interpreting 'ultimate good on the whole for me' to mean what I should practically desire if my desires were in harmony with reason, assuming my own existence alone to be considered. On this view, "ultimate good on the whole", unqualified by reference to a particular subject, must be taken to mean what as a rational being I should desire and seek to realise, assuming myself to have an equal concern for *all* existence. When conduct is judged to be 'good' or 'desirable' in itself, independently of its consequences, it is, I conceive, this latter point of view that is taken. Such a judgment differs, as I have said, from the judgment that conduct is 'right', in so far as it does not involve a definite precept to perform it; since it still leaves it an open question whether this particular kind of good is the greatest good that we can under the circumstances obtain. It differs further, as we may now observe, in so far as good or excellent actions are not implied to be in our power in the same strict sense as 'right' actions---any more than any other good things: and in fact there are many excellences of behaviour which we cannot attain by any effort of will, at least directly and at the moment: hence we often feel that the recognition of goodness in the conduct of others does not carry with it a clear precept to do likewise, but rather

the vague desire
That stirs an imitative will.

In so far as this is the case Goodness of Conduct becomes an ulterior end, the attainment of which lies outside and beyond the range of immediate volition.

³ As before said (chap. iii. §4), so far as my 'good on the whole' is adopted as an end of action, the notion of 'ought'---implying a dictate or imperative of Reason---becomes applicable to the necessary or fittest means to the attainment of the adopted end.

§4. It remains to consider by what standard the value of conduct or character⁴, thus intuitively judged to be good in itself, is to be co-ordinated and compared with that of other good things. I shall not now attempt to establish such a standard; but a little reflection may enable us to limit considerably the range of comparison for which it is required. For I think that if we consider carefully such permanent results as are commonly judged to be good, other than qualities of human beings, we can find nothing that, on reflection, appears to possess this quality of goodness out of relation to human existence, or at least to some consciousness or feeling.⁵

For example, we commonly judge some inanimate objects, scenes, etc. to be good as possessing beauty, and others bad from ugliness: still no one would consider it rational to aim at the production of beauty in external nature, apart from any possible contemplation of it by human beings. In fact when beauty is maintained to be objective, it is not commonly meant that it exists as beauty out of relation to any mind whatsoever: but only that there is some standard of beauty valid for all minds.

It may, however, be said that beauty and other results commonly judged to be good, though we do not conceive them to exist out of relation to human beings (or at least minds of some kind), are yet so far separable as ends from the human beings on whom their existence depends, that their realisation may conceivably come into competition with the perfection or happiness of these beings. Thus, though beautiful things cannot be thought worth producing except as possible objects of contemplation, still a man may devote himself to their production without any consideration of the persons who are to contemplate them. Similarly knowledge is a good which cannot exist except in minds; and yet one may be more interested in the development of knowledge than in its possession by any particular minds; and may take the former as an ultimate end without regarding the latter.

Still, as soon as the alternatives are clearly apprehended, it will, I think, be generally held that beauty, knowledge, and other ideal goods, as well as all external material things, are

⁴ Character is only known to us through its manifestation in conduct; and I conceive that in our common recognition of Virtue as having value in itself, we do not ordinarily distinguish character from conduct: we do not raise the question whether character is to be valued for the sake of the conduct in which it is manifested, or conduct for the sake of the character that it exhibits and develops. How this question should be answered when it is raised will be more conveniently considered at a later stage of the discussion. See Book iii. chap. ii. §2, and chap. xiv. §1.

⁵ No doubt there is a point of view, sometimes adopted with great earnestness, from which the whole universe and not merely a certain condition of rational or sentient beings is contemplated as 'very good': just as the Creator in Genesis is described as contemplating it. But such a view can scarcely be developed into a method of Ethics. For practical purposes, we require to conceive some parts of the universe as at least less good than they might be. And we do not seem to have any ground for drawing such a distinction between different portions of the non-sentient universe, considered in themselves and out of relation to conscious or sentient beings.

only reasonably to be sought by men in so far as they conduce either (1) to Happiness or (2) to the Perfection or Excellence of human existence. I say “human”, for though most utilitarians consider the pleasure (and freedom from pain) of the inferior animals to be included in the Happiness which they take as the right and proper end of conduct, no one seems to contend that we ought to aim at perfecting brutes, except as a means to our ends, or at least as objects of scientific or aesthetic contemplation for us. Nor, again, can we include, as a practical end, the existence of beings above the human. We certainly apply the idea of Good to the Divine Existence, just as we do to His work, and indeed in a pre-eminent manner: and when it is said that “we should do all things to the glory of God”, it may seem to be implied that the existence of God is made better by our glorifying Him. Still this inference when explicitly drawn appears somewhat impious and theologians generally recoil from it, and refrain from using the notion of a possible addition to the Goodness of the Divine Existence as a ground of human duty. Nor can the influence of our actions on other extra-human intelligences besides the Divine be at present made matter of scientific discussion.

I shall therefore confidently lay down, that if there be any Good other than Happiness to be sought by man, as an ultimate practical end, it can Only be the Goodness, Perfection, or Excellence of Human Existence. How far this notion includes more than Virtue, what its precise relation to Pleasure is, and to what method we shall be logically led if we accept it as fundamental, are questions which we shall more conveniently discuss after the detailed examination of these two other notions, Pleasure and Virtue, in which we shall be engaged in the two following Books.