

What Ends are Good For

I'd like to begin with a very schematic characterization of some forms of rational behaviour, a characterization which I hope you will find familiar. It involves hierarchies of rational choice directed towards a goal or goals, and it makes use of a distinction between (on the one hand) a thing's being good in itself, and (on the other) a thing's having a merely auxiliary, derivative and posterior form of goodness, being good for something else. While not entirely wrong, I believe that this familiar picture is incomplete and, in certain ways, very misleading. The main purpose of this paper is to point out some problems with the picture, using ancient and more recent work.

A Story About Goodness and Choice

But first, a more detailed version of the account under consideration: it says that when we act deliberately, we sometimes choose things for the sake of other things. For example, one might buy a toothbrush, floss regularly and visit the dentist for the sake of maintaining dental health. Given the opportunity, prudent people choose to pursue dental health for the sake of avoiding future inconvenience, and to maintain an attractive appearance, all of which in turn is pursued for the sake of experiencing greater pleasure, less pain and a happier life.

The example shows the possibility of iteration, x for the sake of y, y for the sake of z, where x, y and z are all mutually distinct. But (the account continues) not everything chosen is chosen for the sake of another thing. Some things are said to be chosen and pursued for their own sake. For example, pleasure, happiness, or moral

excellence, may be chosen for their own sake. Since one may choose something for more than one reason, choosing a thing for its own sake and choosing it for the sake of something else need not exclude each other. Thus we have the result that there are chains of deliberate choice, with some things being chosen purely for the sake of other things; some things chosen both for their own sake and for the sake of something else; and some things chosen entirely for their own sake and not for the sake of other things. Pleasure, happiness, and moral excellence are terminating links in at least some of these chains.

Much more can be said about the expression ‘for the sake of’ and about the structures of the practical reasoning in which it figures. For one thing, choosing x for the sake of distinct y is not necessarily to treat x as an instrument or as a means to y, inasmuch as parts may be chosen for the sake of a whole, and a part may not be a means or instrument to a whole of which it is a part. For another, nothing so far has ruled out the possibility of circular or reciprocal for-the-sake-of patterns, of multiple and perhaps incommensurable terminating points, of intersecting or networked chains, or of chains with no final end point. These possibilities can be left open for now.

Granting for the sake of argument that certain things can be chosen for their own sake, it may seem natural to think of at least some of those things as being good in themselves. We need not pause at this point to consider whether such goodness exists independently of agents pursuing it. In choosing a thing for its own sake we can suppose agents are treating that object as if it has value for them, that is, as if it is in some way good. And it may also seem natural to think of a thing which is chosen, not at all for itself but merely for the sake of other things, as having merely auxiliary and secondary value. Since it is good for something other than itself, its value would seem to that extent

to be derivative and hence posterior to what is good or valuable in itself. On this line of thought, if there is to be genuine value, the source of that value must ultimately be those things which are good in themselves.

It has accordingly seemed appropriate to some philosophers to distinguish between two, possibly overlapping, classes of good things: the class of those things which are (or are treated by the agent as being) good in themselves, and that of things which are good via something other than themselves. A famous discussion of this distinction occurs in Book I of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Reasoning about objects of choice or desire (*prohairesis*), Aristotle recognizes cases where things good through something else (*di'allo*) and cases where things are good in virtue of themselves (*kath'hauta*). In the course of discussing whether things are said to be good in a single way he criticizes the Platonic view that things are good in virtue of their participation in the Form of the Good. In fact he attributes to such theorists a distinction between things good according to themselves, and those good in virtue of being useful:

Thus it is clear that the good would be said in two ways, some things in themselves, others through these. Separating therefore the things good in themselves from the useful, let us inquire if the former are said in virtue of one Form. (NE 1096b 14-16)¹

While Aristotle is attributing this view to philosophers he is criticizing, he does himself endorse a distinction between things being good in themselves and being good in derivative ways, though he complicates matters by invoking his theory of categories and arguing that good is said in as many ways as being is:

¹ δῆλον οὖν ὅτι διττῶς λέγεται ἂν τὰγαθὰ, καὶ τὰ μὲν καθ'αὐτὰ, θάτερα δὲ διὰ ταῦτα. χωρίσαντες οὖν ἀπὸ τῶν ὠφελίμων τὰ καθ'αὐτὰ σκεψώμεθα εἰ λέγεται κατὰ μίαν ἰδέαν.

The good is said both in the category of the what is it and in that of quality and the relative; but that which is in itself, the substance, is prior in nature to the relative (for the latter seems to be an offshoot and an accident of what is): so that it would not seem to be some common Idea with respect to these. (NE 1096a21-23)²

It isn't clear how Aristotle's theory of categories shows that good is said in many ways, since it is not obvious that goodness in qualities and goodness in relations (say) must be fundamentally different.³ Without delving too deeply into the problematic theory of categories and its equally problematic application to goodness we may note that Aristotle distinguishes between, on the one hand, a thing's being good in itself; and on the other hand derivative cases of goodness, such as things good in virtue of contributing to what is good in itself.⁴ These two cases of goodness may coincide in things chosen both for themselves and for the sake of something else. Thus, wealth, flutes, and instruments generally are said to be chosen for the sake of other things but not for their own sake (1096a26, 1096a6); but honour, pleasure, reason and every excellence are chosen both for themselves and for the sake of happiness or eudaimonia (1097b1-5).⁵

A test Aristotle offers for whether a thing is chosen for itself (and hence good in itself) is this: is the thing chosen even if it does not lead to anything else? He says of honour, pleasure and every excellence that even if nothing resulted from them we would

² τὸ δ' ἀγαθὸν λέγεται καὶ ἐν τῷ τί ἐστὶ καὶ ἐν τῷ ποιῶ καὶ ἐν τῷ πρὸς τι, τὸ δὲ καθ' αὐτὸ καὶ ἡ οὐσία πρότερον τῇ φύσει τοῦ πρὸς τι (παρὰ φύσιν γὰρ τοῦτ' ἔοικε καὶ συμβεβηκότι τοῦ ὄντος): ὥστ' οὐκ ἂν εἴη κοινὴ τις ἐπὶ τούτοις

ιδέα.

³ A more extended discussion of Aristotle's discussion of the homonymy of good may be found in Ch. 8 of Shields (1999).

⁴ Things good in themselves, *kath' hauto*, are also said to be good in many ways (1096b20-25).

⁵ Cf. Plato, *Republic* 367c-d, where Adeimantus takes it for granted that justice is one of the greatest goods, worth getting for the sake of what comes from it, but much more so for its own sake. Other examples he gives: seeing, hearing, knowing, being healthy and all other goods fruitful by their own nature and not simply by reputation.

still choose each of them (1097b2-5; cf. 1096b16-19); and he certainly thinks this also true of eudaimonia, which is chosen for itself but not for the sake of anything else. A significant further conclusion Aristotle draws is that when one thing is pursued for the sake of something else, the latter is better and more choiceworthy than the former. This introduces asymmetry into the chain of choices.

We should bear in mind that Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia as the terminating good in itself and ultimate object of choice for its own sake is not a vision of a completely static life. Eudaimonia, whether construed as socially engaged or a state of contemplative thought, is a life of activity. But there is a way in which he thinks the chains of choice come to a stop when they culminate in this life that is chosen for itself.

Being an object of choice is an important marker of being good, in Aristotle's view. Bearing in mind the claim expressed at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "the good is that at which all things aim", it is plausible to interpret him as holding that choice enters into the distinction between prior or primary use(s) of the word 'good' (agathos) and derivative uses. Primarily good are objects chosen for themselves, while those things which contribute to, and are ultimately chosen for, the sake of objects of primary choice are good in derivative ways.

Some Further Developments

In more recent times the theory of choosing so as to realize a goal has been extended by taking account of probabilities. Aristotle had not come in sight of the quantitative treatment of chances, which was not developed until centuries later.⁶ If decision outcomes can be given cardinal values and the probabilities of achieving them

⁶ Hacking (2006) places the beginning of systematic inquiry into probability in the 17th century.

are understood, then an agent's choices may be treated as if they maximize the quantity of a certain theoretical entity, namely "expected utility". John von Neumann and Sidney Morgenstern showed how agents satisfying a small number of basic rationality conditions (notably admitting no circular preference structures, and being able to rank a complete set of proposed lotteries in a way consistent with the probability calculus) can have their preferences represented on a scale that is unique up to the limit of a positive linear transformation. That is to say, roughly, that prospective outcomes can be assigned numerical values which reveal not only the order of preference but also the relative distance that the preferred items have between one another. This is significant because some knowledge of relative gaps between outcomes, and not merely ordinal ranking, is necessary in order to choose intelligently among risky prospects.

The introduction of probabilities is an important development: since it is seldom that we know with certainty what the effects of our actions will be, we must be able to trade off risks and possible benefits. However, it is rare for us to be able to assign precise probabilities to the results of our acts, and even rarer that we are completely clear, consistent and complete in our preferences. While mathematically interesting, the von Neumann-Morgenstern conditions make unrealistic demands on agents. It is safe to say no one ever actually makes a significant practical decision by producing a von Neumann-Morgenstern style utility scale and then calculating the expected utility of competing alternatives so as to discover an optimal choice. People are likely to be at least as confident about a prospective decision itself as about their preferences among compound lotteries. Moreover, probabilities do not touch the alleged distinction between what is good in itself and what is good for something. Overall, the introduction of probabilities

extends the account but does not seriously undermine the story mentioned above about for-the-sake-of structures.

In addition to allowing for probabilities, however, the basic story of goal satisfaction also needs to take heed of the dynamic nature of goals in experience. It is not merely that some ends are themselves chosen for the sake of further objectives. Upon experience and reflection, some goals are given up, some that are more or less indeterminate become sharpened as we consider and pursue them, and in an ongoing process those that are satisfied often generate new objectives. Harry Frankfurt points out that ends (in particular, things we love) are important because they give us something to pursue.⁷

John Dewey has emphasized how ends are appraised by reference to the means available to bring them about as well as by their own future consequences. We are not striving towards a final stasis on his view, but we are rather in an ongoing state of acting for the sake of new ends, an activity punctuated by temporary rests. In Chapter VI of his 1939 book *Theory of Value*, entitled, ‘The Continuum of Ends-Means’ he expresses himself forcefully as follows:

...[I]t is at least a sign of immaturity when an individual fails to view his end as also a moving condition of further consequences, thereby treating it as *final* in the sense in which ‘final’ signifies that the course of events has come to a complete stop. Human beings do indulge in such arrests. But to treat them as models for forming a theory of ends is to substitute a manipulation of ideas, abstracted from the contexts in which they arise and function, for the conclusions of observation of concrete facts. It is a sign either of insanity, immaturity, indurated routine, or of a fanaticism that is a mixture of all three.⁸

⁷ Frankfurt (2004) pp. 55-9.

⁸ Dewey (1939), p. 44.

Dewey rejects the idea that there are finite hierarchies of rational choice culminating in a static condition chosen for its own sake. The chains of choice do not terminate in a state of rest, because goals reached give rise to new goals.

Every condition that has to be brought into existence in order to serve as means is, *in that connection*, an object of desire and an end-in-view, while the end actually reached is a means to future ends as well as a test of valuations previously made.⁹

As we saw, Aristotle does allow that the highest end of eudaimonia is an active state, but Dewey holds that the idea of an end-in-itself is actually self-contradictory: he thinks there is a fallacy involved in the view that ends have value independent of our appraisal of means involved, and independent of their own further causal efficacy.¹⁰ If true, this appears to undermine the idea that there is any final end to the chain of choices, chosen for its own sake and good in itself, whose primary value confers a derivative value on things chosen for its sake. We shall return to this claim later.

Coherence

Since Aristotle believes that all ends are chosen for the sake of eudaimonia, on his view agents must determine what is suited to realize that goal most fully. But it often occurs that an agent has multiple ends in view which facilitate or, in other cases, interfere with one another. Incompatibility among these ends may lead to a change of plans, and some goals can be postponed, altered or abandoned entirely. For instance, visiting the supermarket to buy food for dinner you learn that the ingredient you wanted may not be fresh, or is unavailable at this location. Buying the intended item would thus interfere with the objective of having fresh food or saving time while shopping. You could go to another store, but at the same time you notice a sale on some other appetizing thing, so

⁹ Dewey (1939), p. 43.

¹⁰ Dewey (1939), p. 41.

instead you revise your menu and buy what is at hand. Goal, act and subordinate goal are also often altered to accommodate one another: ingredients are sought for a dish while the dish is tailored to ingredients available. Thus, the abstract sketch of chains of teleological reasoning needs to be enhanced by adding complex networks of mutually facilitating or mutually hindering goals, goals which the agent experiences as a dynamic process of tradeoff and adjustment.

According to this more complex picture of rational choice, in adjusting multiple acts and goals one to another we are seeking a certain coherence in our lives. Plans which foster this coherence among our acts and goals are preferable to others which do not. Recent work by Paul Thagard, among others, has investigated how the role of coherence in decision making can be described more formally, and how the coherence of certain systems can be compared and ranked.¹¹

A way to do this is to start with a set of elements and relations. Very roughly, the elements of a decision system include both acts and goals, while the relations amongst these goals include facilitation, entailment, inconsistency, incompatibility and so on. Our intention is to partition the elements into two disjoint sets such that there is maximum coherence in one of the two sets. The relations place constraints, some positive and some negative, on the coherence of elements. These constraints are given values, as are the elements. Then, if one goal facilitates another (e.g. flossing, dental health), they cohere with each other to that extent, as measured by the weight of the facilitation relation between them. Certain elements can now be seen to cohere with one another better than others do, according to the sum of the values of the weighted constraints in different sets.

¹¹ The following account draws on Thagard and Millgram (1995), Millgram and Thagard (1996), Thagard (2000), *Coherence* (MIT Press, 2000), *Hot Thoughts, The Brain and the Meaning of Life*.

Given a set of acts, goals and subgoals which either facilitate or impede one another to various degrees, one can determine which sets of these elements cohere best with one another or with a given element.

In practice, the degree of a system's coherence can be determined using different methods. Brute calculation, for example, considers all possible partitions to decide which set maximizes the sum of the weights of the constraints among elements. But this is seldom feasible for large systems, given that the number of combinations increases exponentially with the number of elements and constraints.

A more promising method makes use of connectionist algorithms analogous to those employed in neural networks.¹² Very roughly, in a connectionist network, units which represent the elements of the system are connected to one another by excitatory links. Some units are given an initial activation of a greater or lesser degree, and these could be interpreted as elements which have some priority, perhaps as being valued "in themselves". Positive constraints between elements are represented by a symmetric excitatory link between the units in the network, while negative constraints are represented by a symmetric inhibitory link. In a series of cycles, the activation is updated until stability is reached. (There may be a decay parameter that also diminishes activation between cycles.) A coherent partition is identified by the set of those elements activated after a sufficient number of cycles.

¹² Thagard (2000), Ch. 2.

Goodness In Itself and Goodness for an End

This brief overview of the coherence of constraint-based choices is itself very abstract and incomplete, but it allows us to ask how the rational pursuit of coherence fits with the for-the-sake-of structures that were outlined earlier. First of all, we should bear in mind that mutual adjustment among two goals does not necessarily mean that one goal is being chosen for the other's sake. The agent may just be seeking a coherent combination suited to serve some further end. Yet sometimes, distinct objects are indeed chosen for the sake of each other, as when a certain route is chosen in part for the sake of reaching the destination, and the reaching of the destination is chosen in part for the sake of taking that route; all in turn subordinate to a rewarding vacation. When asked why a rewarding vacation is sought, one might point to the way in which it refreshes one for work, while work is performed in part to enable leisure activities like travel.

But why strive for coherence anyway? Here it is important to see how the coherence of the whole system relates to its elements. The coherence of the whole is not another internal element to be accommodated with the rest. It is a second order goal, one consisting in the satisfaction of mutually adjusted goals. If someone were to ask, "Why should I choose coherence in my actions and goals?", the answer would be, that given the resources available one necessarily has the aim of acting so as to satisfy the goals that one is finally trying to satisfy. In a different way, coherence of the sort described is thus necessarily pursued, whether consciously or unconsciously. To the extent one is rational, it will be pursued more effectively. Its attainment is just the best possible adjustment of actions and goals to one another.

To put it in different terms, a desire for coherence is a desire for success as an agent. This success itself is not the apex of a chain of for-the-sake-of reasoning, its terminating end. Reflecting on one's desires, one may desire their satisfaction; but satisfaction is not the object of the first order desires. A desire that my desires are satisfied is not like a desire for food or sleep or companionship. It is not in a straightforward way the goal of those first order desires, though in a way it has to be the goal of anyone trying to satisfy them. It can therefore be quite misleading, a category mistake, to treat the object of such a higher order desire as the final end in the series, to say that success is the highest goal in life. Success is not the last link of a for-the-sake-of chain, even if the success of a chain is a termination of it. Insofar as it is pursued, (and it must be pursued by any rational person who reflects on it) success is the object of a higher order choice.

The desirability of coherence for an agent can be expressed by saying that the coherence is a good in itself, because it is itself the goodness of the rational activity whose success it is. That is, the satisfaction, to the extent possible, of the mutually adjusted goals that one has, is satisfactory. We could say that it is pursued "for its own sake", but this should not lead us to think that its goodness-for-itself is some primary form of good, a property capable of attracting us to itself. To say that coherence is good is to say that satisfying our goals to the extent that available resources permit is satisfactory. Goodness-in-itself in this instance is not a special property that exerts a magnetic force upon the will; instead, its attraction is simply due to the knowledge that good things are those adequate to achieve our mutually adjusted goals to the extent possible.

This may help to explain the intrinsic, *kath'hauto*, goodness, such as it is, of a rationally coherent life. And sometimes, it seems that when Aristotle talks about eudaimonia he is talking about a successful life overall, rather than happiness as any state of pleasure.¹³ But pleasure is also said to be a good in itself, and chosen for its own sake. How should this be understood?

I believe in the spirit of Dewey that it is also wrong to attribute to pleasure a goodness of a privileged sort, “intrinsic” goodness, to which “instrumental” goodness is posterior. Of course, pleasure is pleasant, of necessity it is satisfying, and there is a sense in which its pursuit is rational. But like coherence it is not usually the terminating point of a chain of first order choices. Consider the pleasure of eating an apple. When you are hungry and choose to eat an apple, it would be odd to say that you pursue a chain of goods ending with the intrinsic good which is the pleasure of apple consumption. Apples are good to eat, because eating them is in its own way adequate (against a normal causal background) to maintain health. They are also good to eat because they taste good and satisfy hunger: eating an apple when hungry is normally pleasurable. But you do not in general desire the pleasure in addition to desiring the apple: when you want an apple it would often be wrong to describe yourself as having two goals, one the eating and the other (in addition) a resulting enjoyment. You might be focused on eating and not reflecting on your own pleasurable states of mind.

It is therefore misleading to say that you must desire to eat the food for the sake of pleasure, though you might say this to emphasize that you mainly desire to reflectively experience the taste. Nevertheless, there are times when you can be said to primarily

¹³ In contrast to Aristotle, see Feldman (2010).for a subtle and extended defense of the view that happiness is really a hedonic state, namely a certain state of “attitudinal” pleasure.

pursue your own pleasure. While stocking your pantry you might purposely lay in a store of apples because you reflect that you will enjoy eating them. In that way you can be said to choose a pleasure, even though when hungry and desiring food you need not also be desiring the pleasure of eating. Many things are chosen for their own sake, in the sense of being simply desired, and a state of pleasure can also be deliberately chosen. This does not mean it partakes of a goodness that is not adequacy for a further end.

What has changed in the sketch of rational choice with which we began? The alternative that I have been suggesting looks like this: Goodness is primarily goodness for some goal, and not primarily a property of the goals themselves. Contrary to what was initially suggested, goodness-in-itself does not inhere in ends chosen for their own sake, such as happiness and pleasure, with goodness-for being somehow “instrumental” and derivative. If good for anything, ends are good for other ends.

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