

WHAT IS GOOD & WHAT IS BETTER - THE ORDER OF THE DISCOURSE

When a machine does not work, we sometimes hang up a sign on it saying *out of order*. Likewise, when our thoughts are out of order, our reason does not work well. Our reason is out of order when it puts the unknown before the known and even when it puts the less known before the more known. Plato and Aristotle teach us what should come before and what after in our thinking or knowing. And they do this in particular about the good and the better. But Kant's thinking about good is out of order because he does not know where to begin, or what should come before and what after, in our thinking about good. He want to begin with the good will before he knows what is good.

In what follows, following Plato and Aristotle, I shall try to outline the order to be followed in coming to know what is good and what is better.

WHAT IS GOOD – ORDER OF THE DISCOURSE

Plato frequently represents Socrates asking the question what is something. The respondent is then represented as giving examples of the thing to be defined rather than the universal definition sought by Socrates. This order of giving examples before defining is natural for it follows the road from the senses into reason. The senses know only examples while it is reason that comes to the universal definition. Socrates then must explain the difference between giving examples of a thing and defining it. Then the respondent can attempt to give the universal definition bringing out distinctly what is common to the many examples. Hence, the order in the *first* part of a discourse about what is good would be as follows:

The question: What is good?

Examples of good things

The distinction between giving examples of a thing and defining it

The first definition of good: the good is what all want

If Socrates asked the slave boy of Meno or a modern boy what is good, he would get examples of things the boy thinks to be good. This is natural. If after Socrates pointed out to him the distinction between giving examples of a thing and defining it, the boy tried to say what is common to all the things he calls good, all he could probably say at first was that he wanted each of them. The good then is what all want. In criticizing Meno's attempted definition of virtue, Socrates point out that bad men as well as good men want good things for themselves. The good then is what all want. Aristotle also shows this in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by an induction. This then is the first definition of good: the good is what all want.

The *second* part of the discourse about what is good begins with the *kind of question* which Socrates asks about Euthyphro's definition of piety. (Is something pious because the gods approve of it, or do the gods approve of it because it is pious?) The order in this second part of the discourse about what is good would be as follows:

The kind of question Socrates taught us to ask in the *Euthyphro*

Asking that kind of question about the good: Is something good because we want it or do we want it because it is good? (Is wanting the cause or the effect of the good?)

Dialectic about this question:

The objection to saying something is good because we want it: Everyone has the experience of having wanted something that they themselves afterwards recognized was not good for them.

Objections to saying something is wanted because it is good:

The good is not always wanted.

And since contrary causes have contrary effects, the bad should be a cause of aversion. Why then is the bad sometimes wanted? And if the bad is sometimes wanted, then what all want is not convertible with good.

The induction from the basic desires and the goods corresponding to them (hunger and food, thirst and water, sleep and the desire for it, health and the desire for it. etc.) beginning the answer to the question. This leads to the answer that we want something because it is good because we can see that food and water and sleep and so on are good for man (and the other animals) apart from their wanting them.

Untying the objections against the conclusion of the induction. The good as known through the senses or reason moves us to want it. But the senses and reason can be ignorant of some good, or see the good in the bad but not what is bad in it (as a delicious poison), or be deceived by the likeness of the bad to the good (as when poisonous mushrooms are confused with the good ones.) The bad *as such*, then, is not wanted

The *third* part of the discourse on good tries to say more perfectly what is the good. This part starts from having seen that something is not good because it is wanted. Rather it is wanted because it is good or appears to be good

Since the good is the cause of wanting or desire, a more perfect definition of the good requires us to understand what kind of cause is the good.

There are four kinds of cause: matter, form, mover and end.

What kind of cause is the good of wanting?

Is wanting made out of the good?

Or are we shaped by what we love and want, as Goethe said?

If the good moves us to want it, is it a cause in the sense of the mover? Or is this to equivocate on the word *move*?

The end is that for the sake of which something is or is done. And that for the sake of which we act is always the good or the apparent good. The good then is a cause in the sense of end. This is also seen when we have considered that the end is always better than what is for the sake of the end. Hence, the good is chiefly the end.

WHAT IS BETTER? – ORDER OF THE DISCOURSE

We must first understand what is better than what *in general* before we can understand *in particular* what is better than what. Aristotle shows in the Proemium to the eight books of *Natural Hearing* (the so called *Physics*) that the general should be understood before the particular. Indeed how can we understand what is a prime number before we have understood what is a number? And can we understand what is a rhombus before we have understood what is a quadrilateral?

In general, we can see that the whole is better than the part and that the end is better than what is for the sake of it. Both of these statements can first be seen by induction. Perhaps the more basic of these two statements is the second for the part can be said to be for the sake of the whole.

That the end is better than what is for the sake of it can be seen, not only by induction, but also by a general reason. This is the famous reason stated briefly by Aristotle and Thomas thus: *that on account of which, more so*.

But we can state it more fully thus: *when the same belongs to two things, but to one of them because of the other, it belongs more to the cause*. Thus, if hot is said of the fire and the air around the fire, but the air around the fire is hot because of the fire, the fire is more hot than the air. And in logic we see that if the premisses of a syllogism and its conclusion are known, but the conclusion is known because of the premisses, the premisses are more known. Indeed, if they were not more known, we would not show the conclusion through them. Hence, if good or desirable is said of the end and that which is for the sake of the end. But the latter is desirable because the end is desirable. Then the end is more desirable than what is for the sake of it.

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