

## A NOTE ON PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

One must first know the end and matter of practical philosophy.

We sometimes say briefly that the end of practical philosophy is to do (just as the end of looking philosophy is to understand). But more precisely and correctly, we can say that the end of practical philosophy is to do what is good or better for oneself, or to do what is good or better for one's family, or to do what is good or better for one's city or nation. For the end of practical philosophy is not to do just anything, whether good or bad for ourselves, or for our family, or for our city or nation. Rather the end is to do what is good, or even better, for ourselves, or for our family. or for our city or nation.

Practical philosophy is about the things that are by choice and by custom. Although custom may be the result of repeated choices of the same, custom is also a beginning and cause of choice. Moreover, we are introduced to many customs by our society and country that we have not chosen.

If the end of practical philosophy is to do what is good or better for ourselves, or for our family, or for our city or nation, then we must first understand what is good and what is better. And perhaps we must understand what is good and what is better in general before we can understand what is good or better in particular. (In his Proemium to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle teaches us the first definition of good and touches upon what is better in general.)

And since better is defined by good, we must begin with a general understanding of good.

Now if Socrates asked the slave-boy of Meno or an American boy what is good, he would probably get a number of examples of what the boy considers good. Candy is good, ice cream is good, pizza is good, baseball is good, vacation is good, health is good and so on. And if Socrates was then to react to these examples as we find him doing in the *Dialogues* or *Conversations*, he would point out the difference between giving examples of a thing and defining

it. What do all these examples have in common that makes the boy call them all *good*.

The boy might have a hard time saying what this is. Not every good is sweet like the candy and ice cream. Not every good is eatable like the pizza, the candy and the ice cream.

But since the boy wants all these things, he might see that the good in every case is something wanted. This might suggest a first definition of good. The good is what is wanted. As Socrates points out in the *Meno*, we all want good things for ourselves. Even the bad want good things for themselves. The man who robs the bank wants a good thing for himself for it is good to have money. This seems to be the first definition of good. The good is what all want.

But in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates teaches to ask a very necessary kind of question about this definition. Is something good because we want it, or do we want it because it is good? This is a question of before and after in the sense of cause and effect. Is wanting the cause of something being good or an effect of its being good? Does our wanting something make it good for us or does the goodness of the thing arouse in us a desire for it?

There seems to be some difficulty in saying either.

If we say that something is good because we want it, we are going against, or contradicting, an experience that we have all had. Everyone has the experience of having wanted something that afterwards they came to know was bad for them. The host says, "Do you want another drink?" and you say "Yes". But after consuming it, you realize that it was one too many and bad for you. The kid wanted to drive his new car very fast down the winding road. But after rapping it around a tree and injuring himself, he realizes that what he wanted to do was not good for himself or for his new car.

But if we say that something is wanted because it is good, there seems to be some evidence that people do not always want what is good for them. If the good is the cause of wanting, why is it not always wanted?

Moreover, if contrary causes have contrary effects and the good is the cause of wanting, then the bad should be the cause of aversion, the contrary of wanting. But as we saw before, people often want what is bad for them.

Perhaps one should try to give a preliminary answer to the question by an argument of the kind more known to us. Induction is more proportioned to us animals than syllogism. But any preliminary answer to the question, coming down on one of the two sides of the above dilemma, must eventually take into account the objection(s) to that side and answer them reasonably.

Induction is an argument from many particulars to one general statement. Let us examine some particular goods and the desires for them and see what seems to be true in each of them.

And let us look at the most fundamental goods and the desires for them in man and many of which are shared in some way by the other animals. Let us make a table of these fundamental goods and the desires for them. (Only some of these desires, as we will see, have a name for them).

Food is one such good and the desire for it has a name, hunger.

Water is another such good and the desire for it has also a name, thirst.

Sleep is another such good, but the desire for sleep does not seem to have a familiar name.

Air (or something in the air) is another good and there is a desire to breathe.

Health is another good and all want to be healthy.

Pleasure is another good which all want.

People also want money which is good for many things.

People also want houses and clothing which are good to have in many ways.

It is good to know many things and people want this knowledge.

Now if we begin to examine each of these goods in particular, we can see a reason why they are good apart from our desire for them.

Food is good and indeed necessary for man and the other animals. Without food they would wither and die. Hence, nature has not given hunger to man and the other animals to make food good for them. But because food is good and necessary for them, nature has implanted a desire for it so that man and the other animals will pursue what is good for them. And we see that, generally speaking, hunger is greater when we more need food. And when you were sick as a child and temporarily lost your appetite, your mother might well have said to you “Try to eat a little to maintain your strength”, seeing that the food is good for you even though you may temporarily due to sickness have lost you appetite or desire for it.

The same is true of water. We can that this is good and necessary for man and the other animals (and even the plants) apart from their thirst for it. So again, nature did not give us thirst to make water good for us. But because it is good and necessary, nature has given man and the other animals a desire for it so they will pursue what is good and indeed necessary for their life. Hence, usually we are more thirsty when we are more in need of water. And sometimes a coach or military instructor will encourage his men to drink more even though they do not have the inclination to do so because it is not the desire to drink water that makes it good for us.

Likewise, sleep can be seen to be good for man and the other animals apart from their desire to sleep when they are tired. If a man was deprived of sleep (as when the communists were trying to brainwash them), they would go out of their mind. And mother told you to go to bed when you were young, even though you did not want to, because she saw that it was good for you to get a good night’s sleep before going to school. So animals have a desire to sleep, not to make sleep good for them, but so they will pursue what is good for them.

Man and many other animals must breathe in order to live so it is not the desire to breathe that makes breathing good for man and these other animals.

And health is better than sickness (or rather sickness is not good at all), not because we want to be healthy rather than to be sick. But because health is the good condition of our body, we and the other animals naturally desire it.

Likewise, is pleasure good and pain bad because we want the former and want to avoid the latter? Any one who has experienced pleasure and pain knows

that one is desired and not the other because of what they are. Hence, we see all animals seeking pleasure and trying to avoid pain.

And is money useful in our society because we want it? Or do we not rather want it because it is useful for so many things. Our wanting money is *not* what makes it useful for us, but its usefulness is why we want it.

And men have wanted houses and shelter because they are good. The house does not protect us from the weather and give us privacy and a place for our possessions and a safe place to sleep and eat because we want a house. But because it is useful for these and many other things, we want a house.

And is a car useful for getting to many places because we want it or do we want it because of its usefulness?

And is knowledge good and useful because we want it or do we not want it because it is good and useful?

Inductively, then, we can see that something is not good because we want it. Rather we want it because it is good.

Now the truth of this conclusion of our induction will be confirmed and shown by many other considerations, but this induction is perhaps the place for us to begin to see the truth.

However, as we said before the induction, it is necessary to answer the objections against the position we have reached before we can begin to be sure of our conclusion. Let us restate those objections.

If something is wanted because it is good for us, why do we not always want what is good for us?

And if contrary causes have contrary effects, why do we sometimes want what is bad for us? If the good is the cause of desire, then the contrary of good (which is the bad) should be the cause, not of desire, but of its contrary which is a turning away from.

As Shakespeare teaches us, reason is the ability for large discourse, looking before and after. And we have been using reason for a discourse about good that is very large. And in this discourse, we have looked before and after for the crowning sense of before and after in the sense in which the cause is said to be before its effect. In asking whether desire is the cause or the effect of the good, we are looking before and after in that sense.

And now to answer the objections to the conclusion to which our discourse has led, we must again look before and after. Is there something after the good, but before our desire for it? For example, is there something after the beauty of Juliet and before Romeo's wanting that beauty? If Romeo had not gone to the fatal house of her father and seen how beautiful she was, he would not have wanted her. The good must be known by either our senses or our reason before we want it. If we do not know what is good for us, we will not want it. The good as known moves our desire. The good when sensed or understood moves us to want it. This helps to explain why we do not always want what is good for us.

Moreover, the senses or reason may know something in the object that is good and not see what is bad in it. The man who wants to drink a delicious poison is moved not by its being poison (which escapes his knowledge), but by its good taste. Hence, the bad as such is not moving us to want it.

Further, both the senses and reason can be deceived by likeness. Men have wanted to eat poisonous mushrooms because they look like those that are good. And in this case, the bad as such does not arouse desire for it. Rather it is the good that it resembles which is the first cause of wanting.

Thus when we say that the good is the cause of wanting, we mean the good *as such* (and as known). The bad *as such* is not wanted. If the bad is in some way wanted it is because of the good in it which is seen (when the bad in it is not seen) or because it is like the good (and the senses or reason cannot distinguish them).

The mistake from mixing up the through itself (or the as such) and the through happening (or by happening) is made even by the wise, as the father of logic teaches us. The bad *as such* is not wanted. The bad is not wanted through

itself; that is, through being bad. Rather it is desired because of the good that happens to be in it or because it resembles the good which is desired as such.

It should not surprise us that the good is first defined by its effect. We usually know effects before their causes. Every time we ask why, we know the effect but not its cause. The reason for this is that our knowledge begins with our senses and they know effects more than their causes.

We can now turn to the general question of what is better.

And we can first eliminate a false answer from the truth we have seen about the good. If something is not good because we want it, then it is not better or more good because we want it more. This if-then statement is like the following: if something is not sweet because it is white, then something is not sweeter because it is whiter. And vice-versa. If something is sweeter because it is whiter, then it is sweet because it is white. And since the consequent is false, the antecedent must be false. Likewise, if something is better because it is wanted more, then it is good because it is wanted. But the consequence is false; therefore the antecedent is false.

What is better in general? We could say somewhat abstractly that the perfect is better than the imperfect. But since the word *perfect* is equivocal by reason, it would be better to recall that the central meanings of *perfect* are tied to whole and end. The whole is perfect or complete while the part is imperfect or incomplete. And that is perfect which has achieved its end or arrived at its end or purpose.

And of these two meanings of perfect, perhaps the end is more basic. For we could say that the part is for the sake of the whole and therefore, the whole is the end of the part.

We should not be led astray here by the equivocation of the word *end*. We do not mean here the limit of a thing's time or existence beyond which it is no longer. Rather we mean by end here *that for the sake of which* something is or is done.

The end is always better than that which is for the sake of it (when both are good). This can be seen first by induction and then by syllogism.

Health is better than taking medicine. Having money is better than making money. Knowing is better than studying. Having a house is better than building a house.

But we can also reason out that the end is better than what is for the sake of it from something more universal. 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 of the air because of the fire, it (hot) belongs more to the fire than the air. And if wet is said of the water and the cloth, but of the cloth because of the water, the water is wetter. And if sweet belong to sugar and my coffee, but to my coffee because of the sugar, the sugar is sweeter.

This famous beginning is applied in logic. If the premises of a syllogism and the conclusion of it are both known, but the conclusion is known because of the premises, the premises are more known than the conclusion. And if the premises were not more known than the conclusion, we would not use them to know the conclusion.

Hence, if good or desirable can be said of the end and that which is desired for the sake of it, but is said of the latter because of the former, the end is more desirable (or more good). If good is said of health and of medicine, but of medicine because health is good (medicine is good because health is good and it leads to health), then health is better.

If the good is first defined by its effect (the good is what all want or desire), the good is a cause and a more perfect definition of the good will be as a cause. But what kind of cause is the good? In natural philosophy, we learn the four kinds of cause: matter (that from which something comes to be, existing within it), form (the definition of what was to be), mover (whence first there is a beginning of motion) and end (that for the sake of which). We have just seen that the good is chiefly the end and this teaches us that the good is a cause in the sense of an end. Hence, Thomas, in the *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate et Bonitate*, brings out that the good is *perfectivum alterius per modum finis*.



Moreover, since the good is what all desire and men aim at what is desired by them, it is clear that the good will be a cause in the sense of what is aimed at, or *that for the sake of which* something is or is done.

When we see later that the end of a thing and what it is are necessarily connected, we can see that the good is in things and not a denomination from our desire for it. Moreover, in the second book of *Natural Hearing* (the so-called *Physics*), we learn that nature acts for an end. So there are ends and consequently goods which are by nature and not by our desire for them.

In the *Apology*, Socrates recounts that he has been examining his fellow Athenians especially about their thinking and acting as if the goods of the body and outside goods are better than the goods of the soul. Socrates thinks that the goods of the soul are much better than the goods of the body and exterior goods. This is a disagreement about all the goods of man since all the goods of man are either the goods of the soul (the goods that involve reason, such as the moral virtues and the virtues of reason itself), the goods of the body (such as health, beauty and strength) and the outside goods such as food, clothing, house etc.). Aristotle also considers this disagreement between the philosopher and most men in the seventh book of the *Politics*.

One cannot say that the goods of the body and exterior goods are better for the Athenians or men in general because they want them more; and the goods of the soul are better for Socrates because he wants them more. For we have already shown that something is not good because we want it. And therefore something is not better, or more good, because we want it more. Hence, we must give a reason for saying that one of these kinds of goods is better than another. And this reason will involve our general understanding of what is better: the end is always better than what is for the sake of it.

It can be shown by induction that outside goods are for the sake of inside goods. Shoes are for the sake of the feet and not –vice-versa. Clothes are for the sake of the body (if the reverse were true, you would be a manikin as in the department stores), glasses and paintings are for the sake of the eyes seeing, and books are for the sake of the mind. If some good of the soul as the art of cooking, or the art carpentry, is for the sake of something outside of us, nevertheless that outside thing is further ordered to the inside as food and the chair are ordered to the good of the body.

If then the outside goods are for the sake of the inside, and the end (or that for the sake of which) is always better, clearly the inside goods (of the body and soul) are better than the outside goods. We therefore by reason must place the outside goods in third place when we order in goodness all the goods of man.

If we know from natural philosophy that the body is for the sake of the soul, just as in general matter is for the sake of form, we can syllogize again that the soul is better than the body and, hence, the goods of the soul better than the goods of the body.

Or after we reason out the end of man in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we can see that the goods of the soul are closer to or more involved in the end of man than the goods of the body. And we can then syllogize from this and the basic statement about what is better in general (the end is always better than what is for the sake of it) that the goods of the soul are better than the goods of the body.

One could ask why most men think the lesser goods are better or love the lesser goods more. This could be explained in part, at least, by what comes between the good and desire: namely, some kind of knowledge or mistake. The outside goods and the goods of the body are much more known to us for they are sensible while the goods of the soul are not sensible.

But if we maintain that the Athenians are right, it would be difficult to explain Socrates thinking otherwise.

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