NYU | LAW

New York University School of Law

September 4th, from 4-7 pm
Lester Pollock Room, FH, 9th Floor

Colloquium in Legal, Political, and Social Philosophy

Conducted by

Liam Murphy and Samuel Scheffler

Speaker: **Chris Korsgaard, Harvard University**
Paper:**Natural History of the Good Selections**

Colloquium Website: http://www.law.nyu.edu/node/22315

To the NYU Colloquium in Legal, Political, and Social Philosophy:

I am writing a book to be entitled "The Natural History of the Good." What I am sending you is some selections from the manuscript. These include a portion of the Introduction, and some selections from Part 1, in which I argue for what I call the "ontological priority" of being good-for-someone. That means that everything that is good must be good-for-someone, and that if anything is good, that must be explained in terms of its being good-for-someone. What you are getting is selections from Chapters 5 to 7. A line of asterisks indicates that I have removed something.

In Chapter 5, I argue for the ontological priority of the idea of goodness-for-someone over the ideas of being good-of-a-kind and over being, as I call it, just-plain-good, where that means (roughly) having the property that is ascribed to things that are thought of as being intrinsically good or valued for their own sakes. In Chapters 6 and 7, I discuss two controversial conclusions that follow from the ontological priority of goodness-for-someone. One is that there are no impersonal goods, and the other is that aggregation does not make any sense.

These are proceeded by a discussion of the views of the good found in G. E. Moore, Peter Geach and Philippa Foot, and John Rawls, which you are not getting, but will sometimes find mentioned. They will be followed by a discussion of what is good, what kinds of things have a good, and the human good; then by a discussion of the metaphysics of the good, and finally by a discussion of the problems associated with what I call "valence" (the positive nature of the good and the negative nature of the bad) as well as some problems associated with the bad itself.

Thank you in advance for your attention.

Chris Korsgaard

From the Introduction:

This is a book about the natural history of the good. Ideally, a natural history of the good should begin with the origin of life, because according to the view I advocate in this book, the good came into existence with life. Since the good is the most fundamental form of value, that means that all value came into existence with life. But for most readers of this book, it will be convenient if I start instead by reconstructing a debate about the nature of the good that we can trace through the philosophy of the twentieth century, primarily in the work of G. E. Moore, Peter Geach and Philippa Foot, and John Rawls. This will put us in a position to see that the concept of something's being *good-for-someone* is in one sense prior to the idea of something's being, as I will call it, *just-plain-good*, or as a philosopher might put it, being good *simpliciter*. The sense in which good-for-someone is the prior notion is this: everything that is good is good-for-someone, and if anything is good, that must be explained in terms of its being good-for-someone.

Because this kind of priority concerns the kind of thing that is good, I am going to call it *ontological priority*. The fact that good-for-someone is ontologically prior to just-plain-good shows us something that it is essential to understand about the good. Goodness is a relation, not a property; or as I might more carefully put it, something is good only by virtue of standing in a certain kind of relation to someone. If something does not stand in that relation to anyone, it is not good.

As I will also argue, the concept of being *just-plain-good* has a different kind of priority, at least when used as I believe it should be. I think that it is from the point of view of agents that we judge things to be, quite simply, good or bad. We judge things to be good when we see them as suitable to serve as the ends of action, when we think that we should bring them about, or that we would if we could. We judge them to be bad when we think they should be changed, or eliminated, or avoided. I am going to call that *normative priority*. It is a kind of priority, because we do not see that things that stand in what I am calling the "good-for-someone" relation as having normative force until we view them from the perspective of agency. I will explain this in more detail in 5.4 and 6.3.

These two ideas are different, but they are inextricable elements in our concept of the good. The idea of being good-for-someone tells us that the sorts of things we judge to be just-plain-good are things that stand in a certain relation to "someone"—by which I mean, at least primarily, to some human being or animal. But it is only from the point of view given by agency that we judge the things that stand in that relation to someone to be, in the normative sense, *good:* that is, to be things that we ought to bring about if we can. So the normativity is conferred upon what is good-for-someone from the point of view of agency. All of that is essential to our complex conception of the good—it has to be swallowed together, in a single spoonful, so to speak. That is the view I defend in this book.

****

Chapter Five: The Priority of Goodness-for-Someone

5.1 Ontological Priority

We've now seen three ways in which we talk about things being good. We say some things are just-plain-good, some are good-of-their-kind, and some are good-for-someone. We also sometimes say something is good-for-something, but that is usually either coincident with good-of-its-kind (scissors are good-for cutting fabric) or analogous to good-for-someone (cleaning the filter is good for your air conditioner). I will discuss the second of those two cases later on, when I discuss the question what kinds of things have a good (Part 2).

As we will soon see, Moore essentially wanted to throw out the concept of good-for-someone as unintelligible. Geach, on the other hand, thinks just-plain-good is always elliptical for good-of-its-kind, if it means anything at all. Geach says:

> Even when 'good' or 'bad' stands by itself as a predicate…some substantive has to be understood; there is no such thing as being just good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so-and-so.[1]

I do not myself think we should throw any of these conceptions of goodness out, but I believe that the concept that stands behind all of these judgments of

[1] Geach p. 34. ***

goodness is the concept of being good-for-someone. I mean what stands behind them ontologically: that what makes things just-plain-good or good-of-their-kind is that they are good-for-someone. All of these judgments can and should be explained in terms of good-for-someone.

5.2 A Rawlsian Account of Why Good-for-Someone is Prior to Good-of-its-Kind

To show you what I have in mind, let's start with the easy case: the relation between being good-for-someone and being good-of-its-kind. Rawls shows us one way that this might go. Generally speaking, according to Rawls, a machine or instrument, implement or appliance, is good-of-its-kind when it has the properties that it is rational for person to want in that kind of thing. So far the relationship might seem to go either way: from being good-of-its-kind to being rational to want, or from having the properties it is rational to want to being good-of-its-kind.

******

5.3 A Better Account of Why Good-for-Someone is Prior to Good-of-its-Kind

But I think we can do better. Suppose we say that the function of a hammer is to pound in nails, so that a good hammer is one that does that well. It is good at pounding in nails. Or suppose we say, with Rawls, that the hammer has the properties it is rational to want in a hammer if you want a hammer for the usual reasons, either way. The properties that enable the hammer to hammer well are its virtues, for

instance, that it has a heavy flat surface so placed that you can pound with it. Well and good, but there is a more illuminating thing to say here, which is that the function of a hammer is to enable *a person* to pound in nails, so that a good hammer is one that enables *a person* to do that well. The hammer is not just a thing that is good at hammering—it is something that makes *you* good at hammering. When we are thinking about what makes a tool or instrument good, it is helpful to regard these things as prosthetic devices, since that will enable us to explain good-making attributes, or virtues, that might otherwise seem mysterious. For instance a hammer must be heavy enough to enable a person to pound in nails with it, but it must also be light enough to enable him to do so with some dexterity. The "light enough" part of that does not exactly make the hammer better at pounding in nails, but it makes the person better at pounding with the hammer. Roughly speaking, the "heavy enough" part will be relative to the size of the nail and the hardness of the surface into which we are hammering it, while the "light enough" part will be relative to the size and strength of the person doing the hammering. On the prosthetic view, tools and instruments are good for the person who uses them because they make the person more effective—they enable him to do what he is trying to do.

In fact, I think we can do better still. To see why, let's consider the parallel point about the virtues of people when they occupy roles. Those are also good-of-its-kind judgments. A good actor is convincing and natural, a good teacher is clear and

interesting, a good mechanic has a thorough understanding of the machines he repairs. It is usually obvious enough that someone in a role is good for someone. A good actor is good for the audience, a good teacher is good for the students, a good mechanic is good for the people who use the machines he repairs, and so on. But the view I am advancing requires something a little more than that, something harder to establish. You might think that those who perform well in these roles are good for other people because they are, as it were independently, good at what they do: good at the activity in question. On the other hand, you might think that their being good at what they do is *constituted* by their being, in specific ways, good for others. I am not sure whether this is essential to my view, but I think that if we can get that second conclusion, we can produce a stronger version of the view I wish to defend.

To see what I mean, go back to the hammer. As I just said, some of its virtues seem relative to the activity of hammering, like having a heavy flat surface so placed that it can drive a nail, while others are more plainly relative to the properties of the person doing the hammering, like being light enough to be wielded with precision. In the same way, you might think some of the virtues of a teacher are more obviously related to the activity of teaching, like having a good understanding of the material, while others are more obviously related to the way a teacher needs to relate to the students, like understanding how people's minds work and how people learn materials of this kind. In the case of the second virtue in each of those pairs, we would explain

the virtue as a form of goodness-for-someone. It would not just happen to be good for others because it is good in some other way; it would be good because it is good-for-someone. We get the strongest version of my account if all of a thing's virtues give the thing a kind of goodness-for-someone. So for instance we might remind ourselves that the reason why having a heavy flat surface so placed as to drive a nail is a virtue in a hammer is because the hammer is made to be used by a creature with extended arms attached to hands. The hammer is not really, *in itself*, good-at pounding in nails at all, apart from the way it is good for such a creature, because it does not work at all for say, a fish. It only works for a certain kind of creature, one with arms and hands, so its goodness is altogether a kind of goodness-for-someone.

In the case of the teacher, we would remind ourselves that understanding the material is not really a different virtue from being able to explain it to others; it is really just a matter of being able to explain it to yourself. That is why we think it is a sign that you really understand the material that you are able to explain it to someone else. The conclusion in this case is radical and vaguely Kantian, for it suggests that even understanding is relative to the kind of mind you have. Understanding is a form of goodness-for-creatures-with-minds-of-a-certain-kind. You could understand something perfectly and still have trouble explaining it to someone—say an alien—whose mind worked quite differently from yours. So to say that you understand it is not just to say that you can explain it to yourself, but that you can explain it to a mind

like yours. Your understanding is good-for-someone with that kind of mind. Or perhaps we can do even better. We say that you *really* understand the material if you can explain the material to anyone who has any kind of mind. Then your understanding is good-for-a-minded-creature, taking into account whatever it is that all minds have in common.

5.4 The Truth about Being Just-Plain-Good

Now I want to talk about the relation between being just-plain-good and being good-for-someone. But first I need to say something about my own view of just-plain-goodness. Because I claim that anything that is just-plain-good must be good-for-someone, you might suppose that I think just-plain-good is always elliptical for good-for-someone, the way Geach thinks just-plain-good is always elliptical for good-of-its-kind (5.1), and so that we could just do without the idea. But I do not think that; I think there is still an important use for the idea of something's being just-plain-good.

Elsewhere I have defended (or anyway, advanced) the idea that practically normative concepts exist to indicate the solution to practical problems that we face. The idea is inspired by the way John Rawls uses the concept/conception distinction in *A Theory of Justice*. There Rawls, following H. L. A. Hart, adopted a helpful device for thinking about why having different views of justice is a form of disagreement. He suggested that we can distinguish the *concept* of justice from *conceptions* of justice. As he says:

> … it seems natural to think of the concept of justice as distinct from the various conceptions of justice and as being specified by the role which these different sets of principles, these different conceptions, have in common.[2]

Rawls specifies the common role of principles of justice as that of assigning basic rights and duties and determining the proper distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation. The concept of justice refers, in a general way, to whatever principles play that role. Conceptions of justice are specific principles proposed to play that role. How should we distribute the benefits and burdens of social cooperation? "In a way that produces the maximum aggregate good," says the consequentialist. "To the maximum benefit of the least advantaged members of society, insofar as that is consistent with the freedom of everyone," says Rawls, basing the answer on the two principles of justice that he defends in *A Theory of Justice*. It is a disagreement because the two theories give different answers to the same question.

We may see this distinction as the basis for a theory of normative concepts. A normative concept refers to a practical problem that we face, or rather, it refers in a schematic way to whatever solves that problem. A normative conception is a principle proposed for solving the problem. The normativity of the principle *for you* arises from

[2] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*,1.1, p. 5.

the fact that you recognize the problem as your own, and the solution indicated by that principle as correct. Notice that if we accept this view of normative concepts, we are rejecting the theory that all concepts are descriptive, and exist to pick out distinctive features (objects or properties) of reality. Some of our concepts—according to this view, at least the normative ones—exist to describe practical problems that we face—or rather, again, to indicate in an unspecific way the solutions to those problems.

In Rawls, the problem named by the concept of justice is the problem of how to distribute the benefits and burdens of social cooperation, faced by those charged with setting up and regulating the political and economic institutions of society (i.e., voters). In the same way, I think we should regard the concepts of the right and the good as concepts that we have because we face certain practical problems. The concept of the good exists because we need to solve the problem of what ends we should try to realize or promote. The concept of the right exists because we need to solve the problem of what actions we should try to do. These two problems must be solved, and solved together, whenever we perform an action.

On this way of conceiving things, we still have a use for the concept of the good, that is, of the just-plain-good. When we say that something is just-plain-good, we mean that we have decided that it is worth going for, worth realizing or promoting or protecting, at least so long as we can do that by way of some action which is right. This

last qualification is why, as I said above, the good and the right in an action must be arrived at together, because what is good is partly dependent on what is right, a point we will be coming back to later on (6.3). What we choose, in my view, is to do a certain action for a certain end—all of that together, as a package. This is consistent with the idea that everything that is good is good-for-someone, but it does not imply that we should promote every end that is good-for-someone. A steely heart and a steady aim are good-for-someone who aspires to make his living as an assassin, but we need not therefore train him to develop those attributes. Ordinarily, we do have reasons, namely moral reasons, for promoting the good of other people, and I believe also for promoting the good of other animals, but being moral reasons, they do not allow us to promote the good of some creatures at the expense of that of others.[3]

So on my view, we use the concept of just-plain-good when we are convinced, on reflection that an end is worth realizing or pursuing or promoting. And although on my view every end that is good must be good-for-someone, not every end that is good-for-someone is to be promoted and so is just-plain-good.

Up until now I have been urging that goodness-for-someone has ontological priority over just-plain-goodness, because nothing can be just-plain-good unless it is

[3] But see *Fellow Creatures*, 12.1. There I discuss the difficulties of realizing the joint good of all animals, given the predator/prey relation. Think of the gamekeeper who has to teach orphaned cheetahs to hunt, and does it by staking out a goat where they can reach it. These cases call into question the achievability of the good.

good-for-someone. But now we can see that in a different sense, this kind of goodness, final goodness, has a kind of priority too, which I am calling "normative priority." That's because it is only from the point of view of creatures who see some things as worth aiming at, and so as finally good, that goodness-for-someone appears as a form of *goodness* at all. As I said in the introduction to this book, these two ideas are different, but inextricable, in our thinking about the good.

5.5 A Rawlsian Account of Why Good-for-Someone is Prior to Just-Plain-Good

Although I've now explained what my own view about the relation between the two ideas is, I now want to back up a step and talk in more general way about the relationship between being just-plain-good and being good-for-someone.

Again, Rawls shows us one way in which we might explain just-plain-good in terms of good-for-someone. We call things just-plain-good when they are rational for people to want as part of their rational plans of life. If what I argued earlier is correct, on Rawls's view we think ends are good if they are desired or desirable for their own sakes, and fit into people's rational plans. The human goods, in particular, are those that are part of most people's plans of life, and are usually desired as ends. When we explain why they are good, or why they are part of most people's rational plans, we do not just say, with Moore, that it is because they have the property of goodness or intrinsic goodness. We say it is because it is rational for people to want them, in light

of what we take their rational plan of life to be. And that gives us a sense in which those ends are good *for* those people. Realizing these ends is part of implementing their rational plans.

Here, however, we must make a slight qualification. Although I have not mentioned it before, Rawls distinguishes a "full theory" from a "thin theory" of the good. What I have explained so far is the thin theory. The full theory adds that a person's conception of the good must be one that she can pursue without violating the principles of justice. This reflects the way in which, as I said above when describing my own views, the right and good must be chosen together; what is good depends in part on the right. That, however, does not affect the important conclusion here, which is that things valued as ends are good-for-people, when they are good at all, because they are rational for people to choose as part of their rational plans.

But perhaps there is still a question. Before, when we talked about the relationship between a thing (or a person-in-a-role) being good-of-its-kind and it's being good for someone, we saw that we might have a residual worry that things are good for people only *because* they are good of their kind. I suggested we could make a stronger case for the ontological priority of goodness-for-someone if we could explain all of a thing's virtues, or of a person's virtues as the occupant of a role, as

being forms of goodness-for-someone. Here again we run into a similar issue.[4] On the Rawlsian account, the things that we judge to be just plain good are good-for-people because they are part of their rational plans, but also because they are desired for their own sake. But why are they desired for their own sakes? Might that be after all, because they are just-plain-good? I mean in Moore's sense, that they have the property of goodness?

5.6 Moore on the Priority of Just-Plain-Good to Good-for-Someone

The general question here is whether we can explain one of these ideas in terms of the other, and if so, which way it should go. Must we explain why something is good- for-people, considered as an end, by appeal to the fact that it is just-plain-good, or can we explain why it is just-plain-good in terms of it's being good-for-people, or for the person for whom it is good? It is important to see that what is at stake here is a question of explanatory order. Are things good and bad *because* they are good and bad *for* people or animals, or are they good and bad for people and animals *because* they are good and bad in themselves? I believe that if we take the concept of just-plain-good to be the primary notion, we cannot construct a plausible concept of what it means for something to be good-for-someone. It has to go the other way.

[4] All of these qualifications are here because I cannot decide whether these considerations are necessary for my view or just make it stronger.

G. E. Moore, in *Principia Ethica*, put forth an astonishing view about good-for in the sense of good-for-someone: he rejected the idea that there is any such thing as goodness-for-someone. Moore associated the idea of goodness-for-someone with what is often called rational egoism, with the idea that someone might claim, "it is only rational for me to seek the things that are good-for-me." Moore claimed that kind of claim makes no sense because goodness is not relative to a person in that way. Someone might be tall relative to me and short relative to you, but something cannot be good relative to me and bad relative to you.[5] It's like saying the moon is made of rock relative to me but of green cheese relative to you. Moore thinks there are objective facts about what is good and they are the same for everybody. Still, at this point in *Principia*, Moore mentions two things we might mean by saying that something is good for me, things which he thinks are consistent with the non-relativity of just-plain-goodness as he understands it.

Moore said that good-for-some person can only mean one of these two things:

1. that it is a good thing and that she has it

or

[5] Moore occasionally expresses this objection by saying that it is only the thing, not its goodness, that can be mine (for example, PE 3.59, p. 98;PE 5.102, p. 170). This, however, makes the view he means to oppose sound more ridiculous than it needs to sound. Tallness is a relation, but if you are tall in relation to me that does not imply that that there is some piece of tallness that belongs to you.

2. that it is a good state of affairs *that* she has it. [6]

5.7 Why Moore is Wrong about the Priority of Just-Plain-Good

I think that both of these views are hopeless. Start with the view that what it is for something to be good-for-someone is for it to be good in itself (just-plain-good) and for him to have it. A small problem with Moore's holding this view is that officially, as we have seen (2.4), Moore thought that only states of affairs are good. Nobody *has* a state of affairs. A state of affairs is not the sort of thing that you can "have." But I want to leave that aside, because I think that many people who the view that some things have intrinsic value do hold the view that what is good-for-you is to have something that is just-plain-good. And I have pointed out, Moore himself does not always stick to the view that goodness is a property only of states of affairs.

But what does it mean to say you "have" a good thing? In many ordinary contexts, when we say someone "has" something, we mean that he is its legal owner (he *has* a house in town; he *has* 100 shares of stock) or that it is under his control (the Patriots *have* the ball; John *has* the car right now; her ex-husband *has* the children this weekend). But neither of these ideas seems to be what we have in mind when we say that something is good-for-someone: that it is good in itself and that he owns or

[6] PE 3.59, p. 98.

controls it. You do not own or control a pleasant experience, a true friendship, or a successful professional life, say, although (presumably) these things are good-for-you.

Now that in itself does not show that the view is wrong. Owning something or being in of it control is the condition we are in when we stand in a certain relation to something that exists independently of us. You own a piece of real estate or have control of the car. We call that relation "having." But "having" is also a word we use describe other conditions we may be in. We can say, for instance, that pleasant experiences, or true friendships, are the kinds of things people "have" or "don't have." It is certainly reasonable to say that things like "having a pleasant experience" or "having a true friendship" are good conditions to be in, and that it is good-for-you when you are the one who is in them. But unlike the things we can own or control, friendship and pleasure are not objects that can exist independently of the people or animals who "have" them. Pleasant experiences and true friendships are not out there hanging around waiting to be claimed like pieces of real estate. I believe that what we mean when we say that "having a pleasant experience" or "having a true friendship" are good conditions to be in is not that pleasure and friendship are independently-existing objects with the monadic property of being good-in-themselves, but rather that they are things that have the relational property of being good-for-any-individual-of-a-certain-kind. In that case, good-for-someone is the notion we are talking about all the way down.

To see this why this is plausible, you need only consider more humble uses of good-for. **** When we say that a carrot is good for some particular rabbit, we do not mean that a carrot is an intrinsically good thing and it is therefore good for the rabbit when she has a carrot. On that showing, it would also be good for a cat to have a carrot, but it is not. What we mean rather is that carrots are in general good for rabbits, because it answers to something in the nutritional needs of rabbits, and a carrot is therefore good-for this particular rabbit. In the same way we might say that friendship is a good thing for people, because it answers to something in the nature of people, and that therefore it is a good thing for you when you have friends—when you are in that condition. But in that case, it is still a case of good-for-someone—carrots and friendships are good for beings of a particular kind. Friends are not good for a solitary animal like a tortoise, but if friendship were intrinsically valuable, then on Moore's account, friends would be good for tortoises. Or at least they would be good for tortoises, if only tortoises could make friends.[7] Of course Moore might reply that a tortoise is incapable of making friends with anyone. But I think that is just a way of

[7] It is more difficult than one might think to find examples of truly non-social animals. I chose the tortoise because tortoises usually live alone, and unlike mammals, or at least female mammals, they don't spend time even with their offspring, *** But there is a famous true story about a male tortoise in captivity (Mzee) who was befriended by an orphan baby hippopotamus (Owen). The orphaned hippo, who needed an adult companion, seems to have initiated the relationship. But apparently they eat, swim, and sleep together. So apparently even reptiles can make friends. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Owen_and_Mzee, accessed 7/31/2025.

admitting that friendship does not answer to anything in the nature of a tortoise. Friendship is good, when it is, *because* it is good-for people (and other intelligent social animals). It is are not intrinsically good thing that some people happen to have.

Now consider the other possibility Moore offers us: that to say that something is good-for-you means that it is a good state of affairs that you have it. The problem here is that this looks even more obviously as if it has to be explained in terms of good-for-someone. Why is it a good state of affairs that I should have friends? Well, because it is good-for-me to have them. If you empathize with me, love me, or regard me with a moral eye, this is just what you are going to say.[8]

Now, admittedly, this is an answer that Moore would have to reject, because officially Moore doesn't think there are *any* reasons why states of affairs are good (2.5). We just know by intuition that they are, when they are. But that leaves Moore with nothing to say about why it should be a good state of affairs that I should have something, or about when it is and when it is not.

Of course I realize that saying that something is good-for-me because it is good for people does not sound like very much of a reason. I take that to be a way of saying that it answers to something in my nature, and we will see that that does mean something, later on (Part 2).

[8] See Part 2 on empathy.

******

5.10 Aristotle on Ontological Priority

Here's another way to make the point. I have been arguing that to say that something is your good cannot be to say that there is some good thing—that is, something that is good independently of its relation to you—to which you stand in a special relation, a relation at which we gesture by saying that you are the one who "has" that good.

I can imagine someone thinking that he can show that this *form* of argument *must* be wrong. Take the following comparison: Aristotle argued that a dead hand is not really a hand at all, because what defines a hand, like what defines any part of an organism, is that way that it functions. A dead hand cannot grip, or gesture, or write, or do any of the marvelous things that hands can do, so it is not really a hand. If Aristotle is right about that, then every real hand must be someone's hand.[9] Yet, surely, we can still say that what makes something *your* hand is that you are the one who *has* it? But, no, actually we cannot, for there is still the problem of what the right

[9] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.10 1035b23-25: 'for it is not a finger in *any* state that is the finger of a living thing, but a dead finger is a finger only homonymously.' *Politics* 1.2 1253a20-25: 'if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except homonymously, as we might speak of a stone hand; for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that.' *On the Soul* 2.1 412b20-22: 'when seeing is removed, the eye is no longer an eye, except in name – no more than the eye of a statue or a painted figure.' The translations are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

kind of "having" consists in. We can imagine all kinds of macabre ways in which you could "have" a hand that would not make it *yours* in the sense we want here. Only when we hit on the right relation—the right kind of "having"— would the hand really be, by Aristotle's criterion, a hand at all.[10] A hand must be located at the end of an arm and attached to a nervous system in order to function as an hand. That is the kind of "having" that makes the hand a hand. What this shows is that the existence of the condition of "having-a-hand" is ontologically prior to the existence of the hand itself. So the important point here is not merely that everything that is good must be someone's good: it is that everything that is good must be related to someone in a particular way before it can really *be* something good at all. That shows that the condition of "having-a-good" is ontologically prior to the existence of the good itself. That is why I claim that someone's being in a condition of having a good, or something's standing in the relation that makes it good for someone, is ontologically prior to the good.

[10] "For it is not a hand in any state that is a part of man, but the hand which can fulfill its work, which therefore must be alive; if it is not alive, it is not a part." Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.10, 1036b30-32.

Chapter Six: The Problem of Impersonal Values

In this chapter and the next, I am going to examine two apparently troublesome consequences of the idea that good-for-someone is ontologically prior to just-plain-good.

Here's the first problem. I have argued that everything is that is good or bad must be good or bad for someone. But many philosophers believe that things can be good or bad without being good or bad *for* anyone in particular. They think, for example, that the world is a better place if it is full of happy people and animals than if it has no inhabitants at all, or only miserable ones. Or they think that it is better if wealth is distributed more equally than if some people are very rich and some very poor. If things like these are true, you might suppose, then there must be what are sometimes called "impersonal" values. Some things are good or bad, or better or worse, even though they are not good or bad, or better or worse, for anyone in particular.

What I have just said may seem puzzling. Isn't it better if the world is full of happy people and animals, because it is better *for* those people and animals? If we are comparing two worlds containing the *same* inhabitants, in one of which those inhabitants are miserable and in one of which those same inhabitants are happy, the second world is clearly better for *them*. But suppose we are not comparing two worlds with the same inhabitants, but two with different inhabitants. If you are miserable,

would it better *for you* if you were replaced, as you would be if there was a different world, by someone who is happy? Or if we judge a world with no inhabitants to be better than a world with only miserable ones, are we saying that the inhabitants of the miserable world would be better off if they did not exist at all? How could their situation be better or worse, if they did not exist at all?

Again, you may wonder whether it is not better if wealth is distributed equally, because it is better for the people who would otherwise be poor. Of course it is better for the people who would otherwise be poor if wealth were distributed more equally. But by the same token, it would be worse for the people who would otherwise be rich.[11] So again, if everything that is good must be good-for-someone, and if the two states of affairs we are comparing involve would benefit or harm different people, as two different distributions do, it looks as if we have no way of saying that one of them is better than the other. I think many philosophers would say that unless we treat the concept of just-plain-good as having ontological priority, there can be no impersonal value, and so no way we can explain how one of these conditions could be better than the other.

[11] This may be false, of course: it may be (and most likely is) better for each and every one of us to live in a world where wealth is more equally distributed. But in that case equal distributions would be better for individuals, and the example would not, after all, pose a challenge to the idea that things must be good or bad for someone if they are good or bad at all.

The second consequence is one I have already briefly looked at, in 2.8. If good-for-someone is the ontologically prior concept, so that everything that is good must be good-for-someone, then good things cannot be aggregated across the boundaries between different people (or animals) in the way that most forms of consequentialism require. To put it more intelligibly, if goodness is a relation rather than a property, goods cannot be aggregated in that way. Aggregation across the boundaries between different people cuts the relation between the person and the supposedly good thing—the thing that really is good only when it is properly related to the individual. It detaches the supposedly good thing from the individual, and attaches it to other supposedly good things instead. But the relation between the person and the supposedly good thing is what makes the supposedly good thing *really* good. An aggregated "good" is not good for anyone in particular, anyway not necessarily, so it is not good after all. That in itself will seem like a problem to some, and it also may make it look as if there is *no* reason for us to try to benefit more than one person, even if we are in a position to do that.

Both of these consequences seem counterintuitive, perhaps even wildly counterintuitive. How could a world full of happy people and animals not be a better place than one in which everybody was miserable? As for aggregation: How could it not be better to, say, save five people rather than one? And isn't it, as Aristotle says at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "finer and more godlike to attain [the

good] for a nation or a city-state" than to attain it "merely for one man"?[12] In the two chapters that follow, I will try to respond to these worries. I will also consider some reasons we might have trying to benefit more than one person even if goods cannot be aggregated.

6.2 The Incomparability of Worlds with Different Populations

Consider the condition of two worlds that have entirely different populations. In World One, which I will call the Population Controlled World, the size of the population is well-suited to the available resources. Everyone has enough to eat, drink, breathe, and so on. Everyone who wants or needs to be employed is employed. The nations in the Population Controlled World are constitutional democracies (or maybe there is just one nation). When no one needs to dominate anyone else for the sake of self-preservation or self-protection, people are prepared to act on the fact that this is the only legitimate form of government. Indeed, in this condition, people are more likely to like and respect each other. You get the idea. In World Two, which I will call the Recognizable World, the population has been allowed to grow unrestricted until the needs of the population exceed the available resources, and people have to fight one another for survival. At least for the poor, financial resources are used up in the

[12] NE 1.2 1094b10-11.

effort to get enough food and clean water, and even then they do not cover the need. Since there are not enough jobs to go around, many people are poor. Different groups of people, ethnic, racial, or religious, suspect and despise each other, and tyrannies flourish as a result. The struggle for wealth makes even people who are well-off unscrupulous, with all the usual results: cheap tacky products, polluted soils and waterways, extravagant rents, and low taxes for the rich, with the predictable consequences of a neglected infrastructure and very little safety net for the poor. Because of the increasing use of fossil fuels and factory farms (supposedly) needed to support the growing population, the climate is in free-fall. Life in the Recognizable World is increasingly nasty, brutish, and, especially in places with inferior or expensive health care, short.

Is the Population Controlled World a better place than the Recognizable World? If the populations of these two imagined worlds are completely different, there is no one, no individual, for whom one of them is better than the other. So if everything that is good must be good-for-someone, and it follows that everything that is better must be better-for-someone, then it looks as we have no grounds for saying that one of these two worlds is better than the other.

6.3 The Comparability of Final Goods

People who believe in impersonal values want to say that one of the two worlds is *just plain better*, even if there is no identifiable person or animal for whom it is better. I don't think that is exactly right, in the end, but it will help to stick with it for now.

Earlier I argued that we do have a use for "just-plain-good." (5.4). We use it when we want to identify something as a legitimate end of action. I think that matters here, and I think it also matters that when we decide on the ends of action, we are bound not only by the requirement that we should bring about some end that is good, and in some cases the best one we can, but also by the standards of the right. This means that when we ask whether a world full of happy people and animals is just-plain-better than a world full of miserable ones, we are asking which of these two worlds we should make an end of action: which one we should try to realize or create. That question puts us, in effect, in the position of a creator of worlds. Or rather, since we cannot actually create worlds, I should say that asking which of these two worlds is just-plain-better is a way of asking which of the two worlds we would create if we could.

Recall that earlier (5.4) I suggested that normative concepts stand for the solutions to problems, to practical problems that agents face. The problems raised by the concepts of the good and the right are inseparable problems. We ordinarily act for the sake of the good, but we cannot count an end as good if it cannot be achieved by

some action that is right. What that means is that when we ask which of the two worlds we should create, we are also asking which one it would be right to create. And that in turn means that any duties that are incumbent on someone who is in the business of creating a world come into the question. I realize it may seem a little impertinent to lay down duties for the creator, but here goes. In my own view, it is the duty of a Creator who is going to create sentient beings to create as good a world as that Creator can create for *whatever sentient beings* he or she brings into existence. The proper beneficiary of world-creation is picked out, so to speak, by the duties incumbent in the act of creation itself. The beneficiary of world-creation is not a genetically identifiable individual (it will be clear shortly why I put it this way), but "whoever gets created." And that is, after all, who the world full of happy people and animals is better for—it is better for "whoever gets created" than the world in which everyone is miserable is. The better world is more worthy of choice. But it is not more worthy of choice because it is better: rather, it is better *because* it is more worthy of choice, that is, because it is the one required by the standards of the right.

Notice that in one way I am not denying the original problem. If we just compare the two worlds, thinking of them as two imaginary worlds, and ask which one is better, the answer is neither. Or rather, it is that we cannot compare them. We can only compare them as two possible ends of action. Of course there are different ways of imagining the contrast as two possible ends of action. I imagined that someone was

going to create one of these two worlds, as it were from scratch. We could also imagine that we were literally thinking of replacing a world in which everyone is miserable with one in which everyone is happy. If we are going to do that from the point of view of the creator—say, annihilate the Recognizable World and put the Population Controlled World with a different population in its place—that will not be better for anyone and it will be worse for many individuals, who will die sooner than they would have otherwise.[13] The fact that we would replace it with some other world whose inhabitants were happier is neither here nor there.[14]

Or perhaps instead we imagine making the transition the way mere human beings actually have to manage such things, by a gradual change in policies. Then there would be transition costs for actual individuals. Some people would lose their jobs, and if they are older would never find work again (think coal miners); others would be better off. Transition costs are complicated and cannot be ignored. That is the sort of case that utilitarians want to handle with aggregation, so I will leave that for the next chapter.

[13] See the discussion of gentrification in *Fellow Creatures*, 10.4.4, p. 186, and 11.7.1, pp. 208-209.

[14] This conclusion may depend on the conclusion of 7.8, in which I argue that one individual may not be substituted for another.

6.4 The Non-Identity Problem

I said just now that the beneficiary of the duty of (an omnipotent) creator to create the best possible world is not a genetically identifiable individual. The beneficiary is whoever gets created, because that is who the duty is owed to. Those who believe in the so-called "non-identity problem" believe that we can only have duties to genetically identifiable individuals. We cannot have duties to individuals identified by their roles in interaction. One of the more startling consequences of this is the famous claim that we cannot have duties to protect future individuals from the damage due to climate change. This is supposedly because anything we do to retard climate change is likely to change the array of genetically-identifiable individuals who are born. Suppose, to take a vivid example, we decide to curtail the use of electricity by getting up and going to bed with the rising and setting of the sun. Since if couples spend different hours in bed than they would if we continue to live by the clock, this will lead to a different array of genetically identified people being born. The change does no good to the genetically identified people who would have been born if we had not made the change, since they will not exist at all if we make it. And the change does no good to the genetically identified people who will exist if we make it, since they would not have been born otherwise and so would not have been in a worse position.

A similar problem supposedly haunts the case of the young woman who decides to abort an unplanned child, because she will be in a position to give a better

life to "her child" if she waits until later. Those who think there is a non-identity problem complain that she cannot give a better life to the child she aborts, who will not exist if she has the abortion, and she will be not giving a better life to any children she has later, since they will not have a better life than they would have otherwise.[15] They would probably not have had any life otherwise.

All of these conclusions assume that our duties are owed to people considered as genetically identifiable individuals, never to people identified as the occupants of roles in interaction. Parents have no duties that are owed to their children whoever they might be, the creator has no duties that are owed to his creatures whoever they might be, and we have no duties that are owed to the future inhabitants of our planet whoever they might be. Yet in all of these cases, the duty is based on the nature of the relationship, and when you specify who the one who has the duty has the relationship with, it is natural to identify them in terms of that relationship.

I do not share the assumption that a duty is never owed to someone *qua* being one to whom you stand in a certain kind of relationship. In fact it seems perverse. So I think it makes sense to say that that what makes the Population Controlled World better for someone is that it is better for whoever gets created.

*****

[15] I'm assuming, for the purpose of the example, that existence begins with birth.

You can describe this solution to the problem by saying that we do not need to accept the idea of impersonal values in order to explain why, say, a world full of happy people and animals is better than one full of miserable people and animals even when the genetic identities of these people and animals are different. The values are personal because the world is better or worse for whoever lives there. Or you can describe it by saying that we can accept the idea of impersonal values if we call the values "impersonal" when the people for whom they are good or bad are not identified genetically. I think the first of those options is more natural, but that is just a matter of how we decide to use the words. We only need to remember that when we are talking about whether some state of affairs is "just-plain-good" or "just-plain-better," we are talking about its status as a possible end of action. *****

Sometimes we say that something should or should not happen. When we do that, we cannot be assigning duties or reasons to the world. The world is not a rational agent and it has no duties or reasons. There is no such thing as "what should happen." There is only what we should or should not do. Sometimes, in ordinary conversation about "what should happen" someone says, "well, if it were up to me, that's what I would do." I think that person is *literally* getting it right.

Chapter Seven: The Trouble with Aggregation

7.1 The impossibility of Aggregating Relations

Let me start by reminding you how the argument against aggregation goes. If things were ontologically just-plain-good, then they could be aggregated—they could be added up across the boundaries between people. To put it another way, if goodness is a *property* of each good thing, we can add up all the things that have that property to get a larger collection of things that has that property. A bouquet of red flowers is a red bouquet. But the problem is not, as Peter Geach thought, that "good" is always attributive rather than predicative. It is that goodness is a relation, not a property. The goodness of things that are ontologically good-for-someone or other cannot be added up. What is good for one person added to what is good for another is not necessarily good for anyone. If everything that is good must be good-for-someone, then the result of adding two things that are good for two different people is not (necessarily) good. It *can* be good, if the two people are connected in some other way that is relevant to the goodness of the good thing. Something that is good for a marriage, for example, is usually good for both parties to the marriage. But they are connected by the marriage, in which they both presumably have a stake, not by mere aggregation.

This is clearest when we remember that aggregation sometimes involves subtraction as well as addition. Suppose that Adam and Bella each have 6 units of the

good. To make it simple, let's pretend the good is pleasure. Obviously, we cannot just distribute pleasure; we can only distribute something that gives people pleasure. I'll call this thing "chocolate." Suppose that if we take away some of the chocolate that is making Adam happy, and give it to Bella, we will make Adam a little bit less happy, leaving him with only 5 units of happiness, but we will make Bella a lot happier, bringing her up to 9 units of happiness. Bella *really* loves chocolate, so she gets more happiness from it than Adam does. According to the friends of aggregation, we should transfer the chocolate to Bella, because the total amount of happiness will be greater (it will be 14 units rather than 12), even though Adam will be less happy than he was before we intervened (he will have 5 units rather than 6). According to the enemies of aggregation, we should not do this, at least not for that reason, because what is good for Adam plus what is good for Bella is not good for anyone in particular. The result is better for Bella but worse for Adam, and that is all there is to say. There's no such person as Adam+Bella, for whom this distribution of the chocolate is better. *****

7.2 Benefitting One Person

Since there is no breach of the boundaries between persons when we are thinking about one person, it looks as if you can "do more good" for an individual by some actions than by others. I do more good to you by saving your life than by giving you a piece of chocolate, say. This seems right. But we should not be too quick to

conclude that it makes no difference how the *things* that are good for some individual are distributed across time, any more than we should think that it makes no difference how they are distributed across a group of people. We should not conclude, for instance, that a life with all the good things crowded into the person's youth is just as good as one in which they are distributed across time, just because the quantity appears to be the same. That might be because the quantity is not really the same after all, because the temporal placement makes a difference to how much the good thing benefits the individual in question. Or it might because quantity of good things in your life is just not the only thing that matters to how good your life is for you. Consider, if you can bear to, whether the truth of "Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" depends on something about the quantity of good love adds to your life.

There is, I believe, a standing temptation to translate all judgments to the effect that one condition is "better" than another into judgments about the *quantity* of good involved. Quantities have such a nice hard objectivity about them, don't they? ******** In the meantime, Individual good is not my subject in this chapter, so this is just a warning that the idea of an "aggregation" of goods may not capture any more about what is good for an individual for any more than does about what is good for a group. The difference is just that at least in the case where good things accrue to one individual,

the idea of aggregating their goodness to get something better makes sense. I will discuss what the good is for an individual human being in Part 2.

But now I want to talk about ways of doing good for more than one person.

7.3 The Common Good

Aristotle, as I mentioned in 6.1, thought it finer and more godlike to achieve the good for a whole society than it is to achieve it just for one person. But how can we do that, if we cannot aggregate the goods of its members? I think one answer is clear. Earlier, I mentioned that something might be good for both parties to a marriage, when it is good for the marriage. This is also the sense in which, often, we can achieve the good for a whole society. When we try to achieve the good for a whole society, we try to achieve *the common good*, something that is good, not for all of the citizens taken in the aggregate, but for each citizen taken separately.

We can find this idea illustrated in John Rawls's theory of justice. A word of warning is in order here: the relation between the right and the good is complicated in this theory. Rawls imagines that the principles of justice are chosen by people in an "original position." As we will see, Rawls imagines the principles of justice are chosen, and chosen because they are good for the citizens who will live under them. Rawls invites us to think this is the way that principles of justice should be chosen, because the result embodies an ideal of the common good. But when we, the actual members

of society, conform to the principles of justice, we do so because we think it is right to conform to them, not because we think it is good for us, and it is right to conform to them because they have been chosen in the way they should be chosen. It will be easier to explain all this when we see how it works.

Rawls envisions the principles of justice as chosen in what he calls the original position. As Rawls makes clearer in *Political Liberalism*, the principles are principles of justice for a liberal society, where that is one in which each person is free to pursue his or her own "conception of the good," that is, her own conception of what is worth doing and having in a human life. A non-liberal society, by contrast, would be one in which the citizens are regarded as engaged in realizing and promoting some shared conception of the good. The people in the original position operate under certain epistemological and motivational restrictions. They are under a "veil of ignorance" about the content of their own conception of the good, meaning that they do not know what it is. So, in making the choice of principles, they cannot favor their own conception of the good or others that share its important elements. They could not, for instance, favor conceptions of the good that are based on their own particular religion. Apart from general knowledge, they know only that they have a conception of the good, which they wish to promote. They are motivated to cooperate to produce as large a share as they can reasonably hope to get of the "primary goods" (income and wealth, power and opportunity, freedom) that they will need in order to promote

their own conceptions of the good. They are willing members of society because they are willing to cooperate with others in a fair social and economic system in order to produce these primary goods.

The point of these restrictions is to ensure that every person in the original position chooses principles on behalf of the citizen of a liberal society considered simply as such: that is, on behalf of someone who is recognizes that it is rational to be a cooperating member of a fair society so that he can promote and realize his own conception of the good, whatever it might be. The principles that are good for such people therefore represent the common good of the citizens: they are good-for the common element, the pure citizen so to speak, in each of us. Again, it is important to be clear that that Rawls is not arguing that that is why we should conform to them: we should conform to them because we believe it is right to conform to principles that would be chosen in that way. *****

If these arguments work, the application of the principles of justice do not merely produce a situation that is good for the citizens considered as such. They produce the best possible situation for the citizens as such. Each citizen will be free and have equal opportunities; they will otherwise have as large a share of primary goods as possible, or perhaps, even better, what we can see is an equal share of goods once the special burdens of particular occupations have been compensated. The

principles of justice produce a society which is good for the citizen of a liberal society considered just as such.

It does not follow that either living in a just society or being a just person is necessarily actually good for every citizen in such a society, for no one is a just a citizen and nothing more. For that reason, Rawls argues separately that being a just person and living in a just society are among the human goods, the things that are valued for their own sakes and form a part of the rational plan of life for almost every person (4.1). But although no one is a pure citizen and nothing else, everyone is a pure citizen and something else, just as no one is a spouse and nothing else, but everyone who is married is a spouse. In this way, Rawls's principles of justice are founded on a conception of the common good. A just society is good for each of us, considered as citizens, not for all of us considered as an aggregate. It is good, as I said earlier, for the citizen in each of us.

Perhaps it will be thought to be a disadvantage for the Rawlsian state as compared to the consequentialist state that the Rawlsian state is only guaranteed to be good for us as citizens. The consequentialist state takes into account everything that is good from the point of view of its citizens, not just their good *qua* citizens.[16] In Rawls' state, it could turn out, for some reason, that when the state is viewed from

[16] I say "good from the point of view of" because if what I have argued is correct, consequentialists cannot, strictly speaking, talk about "good for."

your perspective as a whole person, it is not good for you. But of course since consequentialism involves aggregation, there is no guarantee that what turns out to be "best" when we aggregate everyone's pleasures or satisfied desires is going to maximize your personal share of pleasures or satisfied desires. So the two views just involve different forms of possible disadvantage.

The point of this long section has simply been to show how one way to promote what is good for more than one person is to promote the common good.[17]

******

7.5 When Should We Benefit more than One Person?

I have suggested that when dealing with what is good for a group of people, we sometimes seek the common good. That is what I think we are usually doing, or certainly should be doing, when we think about what is good for the citizens in a political state.[18] Now I want to think in a general way about the kind of situation in

[17] It might also be possible to apply an idea like this to the individual: that what is good for the individual benefits the "person" who persists through and so is common to all of a person's life stages, rather than merely aggregating the goods that accrue to different stages.

[18] I feel like saying that even if aggregation made sense, it would not be an appropriate way to make enduring political policy, because the state has an ever-changing population, whose aggregate "good" would be ever-changing. Seeking the common good makes better sense since it is good for new as well as contemporary citizens. But of course I can only say this with some admitted circularity, because I am assuming political policy should be good-for-each-of-the-citizens, including the new citizens who are

which you might possibly benefit more than one person, whether doing that is really a way of "doing more good," and whether that is ever something we have a reason to do. *****

Thinking about the case of Adam and Bella, it may look as if we can we "do more good" without adding one person's good to another's by choosing a course of action that benefits additional people or animals, *so long as no one is harmed* by that course of action. Then we have aggregation without subtraction, so to speak. So perhaps then we can say that giving a benefit to both Adam and Bella is "doing more good" than just giving one to Bella, at least so long as no one is harmed in the process. Of course, that way of putting it leaves open the further question whether we do even more good by doing something even better for one of these people, again so long as no one is harmed.

******

7.7 Benefitting One Person More than Another

Before answering that question [whether we should benefit more than one person], it will be helpful to return to the question of doing different amounts of good to different people. In 7.2, I said that you do more good to an individual by saving her

always coming along. If you think aggregation doesn't make sense, because what it actually gives you is a big blob of "good" that is not good-for anyone, then of course it is not an appropriate basis for political policy.

life than by giving her a piece of chocolate. Saving her life is, at least ordinarily, better-for her. I do not think that I have said anything against the idea that I ordinarily do a better thing for Adam by saving his life than I do for Bella by giving her a piece of chocolate. My argument concerns the possibility of aggregating good-fors, not the possibility of comparing their magnitudes. **** But supposing that the same things are good for everyone concerned, and that they are as good as such things usually are for creatures of the kind we are giving them to, then it looks as if you might well have a reason to, say, save the life of one person rather than to give a piece of chocolate to another.

I think you do have a reason to do this. That judgment only requires comparison, not aggregation. But I do not think that the reason you should prefer saving the life is, directly, because it does more good. Rather, it is because, given that a greater good is involved, the person whose life needs saving has a greater claim on your beneficence than the person who would enjoy a piece of chocolate. Life matters more to people (and other animals) than treats. This becomes clear when you realize that you should save the one person whose life needs saving, if you can do that without great risk or cost to yourself, even if you would otherwise be in a position to give pieces of chocolate to thousands of people. Even when we can compare the quantities of good we do to a number of different people, we cannot throw those quantities into a

calculation and aggregate them, without adding what is good for one person to what is good for another.

The fact that you cannot add one person's good to another's does not mean that no matter what the situation is, you have can have no reason to save each of two or more people. Suppose it is your duty to save someone's life if you can do so without undue cost or harm to yourself or anyone else. If you stand in this relation to two or more people, but you only act on it in one case, well, then, you have neglected it in other cases. You could easily have saved someone whom you did not save. That's a bad thing, but the only way the number of people who need saving is relevant is that if too many people need saving, that is like to increase the cost *to you* of saving all those people yourself, and reduce the magnitude of your duty. Your duty is not a duty to realize to realize as much good as possible. Your duty is a duty owed to other human beings, and in my view also to the other animals, individually, taken one at a time.

And Importantly, what I just conceded does not show that you have a general duty to save more rather than fewer people, if your options involve saving different people. This is what matters about saying that the duty is owed to others taken one at a time, to each of them individually, not to all of them. Let me try to explain why.

7.8 Taurek and Kant: Aggregation vs. The Value of the Individual

The argument I just gave relied at one point on intuition—I invited you to "realize" that you should not let someone die even to give chocolates to thousands of people. That person has a greater claim on your beneficence than each of the people who would like to have a chocolate. To come to a better understanding of what's going on here, let's think about the classic case of aggregation. Suppose you can save one person by taking one course of action, or five by taking another, where the one is not one of the five, but a separate person. But you cannot do both: you must choose. In this case, we have a different number of people, but the magnitude of the benefit to each is the same. Should you save more people, in order to do more good?

In his famous paper, "Should the Numbers Count?," John Taurek considers exactly the sort of situation I have just described. Taurek does not think that the fact that one course of action will save more people is a reason for choosing it. Instead, he suggests, we might express the value in which we hold each of these people by flipping a coin, in order to choose which option we will take. He explains it this way:

> In this way I give each of the six persons a fifty-fifty chance of surviving. Where such an option is open to me it would seem to best express my equal concern and respect for each person.[19]

[19] Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count," p. 303.

As he continues:

> …those who would have me count the relative numbers of people involved as something in itself of significance, would have me attach importance to human beings and what happens to them in merely the way I would to objects that I valued…
>
> But when I am moved to rescue human beings from harm in situations of the kind described, I cannot bring myself to think of them in just this way. I empathize with them.[20] My concern for what happens to them is grounded chiefly in the realization that each of them is, as I would be in his place, terribly concerned about what happens to him. It is not my way to think of them as each having a certain objective value, determined however we determine the objective value of things, and then to make some estimate of the combined value of the five as against the one. If it were not for the fact that these objects were creatures much like me, for whom what happens to them is of great importance, I doubt that I would take much interest in their preservation.

Taurek thinks that empathy should lead us to think of each of these lives in the way that the person whose life it is does, as something that is inestimable importance to

[20] This is my own footnote, not Taurek's. In Part 2 I will argue that empathy is the source of our grasp of the good. I believe that strengthens this argument.

him. Elsewhere in the paper, Taurek makes it clear that part of what drives him to this conclusion is that he is thinking of these lives not as things that are just-plain-good, but things that are *good-for*-the-people whose lives they are. He imagines a scenario in which you can save one person called "David" or five other people instead, and you urge David to accept death so that the five other people might live, given that five deaths are worse than one. And then he says:

> "Don't you think that David might demur? Isn't he likely to ask: "Worse for whom?" And it seems natural and relevant that he should continue to put his case in some such way as this: "It is a far worse thing for me that I should die than that they should. I allow that for each of them it would be a worse thing were they all to die while I continue to live than it would be if I were to die and they continue to live."[21]

Taurek is right. Rawls, when he says that utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons, is also right.[22] There is a crucial moral point at work here. To recognize that everything that is good must be good-for-someone is also to recognize that individuals are the *source* of the value of everything that is good. If everything that is good is good for some individual, then every person, every animal, every individual, has his or her own good, which cannot just be thrown into a

[21] Taurek, p. 299.

[22] *A Theory of Justice*, 2nd ed. 1.5, p. 24 check

calculation with the good of others, without evincing a profound disrespect for that individual.

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts that what it means to have dignity is to have a value that is "incomparable."[23] Kant contrasts having an incomparable value with having a price. What has a price can be replaced with something else as its equivalent. What has dignity or incomparable value cannot.[24] If you decide to save three lives rather than one, in a case where the one is not one of the three, and just for that reason, you are in effect deciding that any one of those three lives is equivalent in value to the value of the life of the one. So you are assigning the people whose lives these are a price, not a dignity. Even regarding people's lives as having *equal* value is treating them as having a price, for it means that you can comfortably exchange one life for another. You are not treating each life as something that is of incomparable value to the person or animal whose life it is. But that is how we value our own lives, and how empathy demands that we should value the lives of others.[25]

---

[23] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:436

[24] Groundwork 4:434-435.

[25] For a treatment of this thought see my "The Incomparable Value of the Individual," forthcoming in *Kant: A Normative Turn*. The reader may have noticed that I am assigning the same kind of value to the person who leads the life as to the life itself. This is because I believe that we show the value that we set on a person (or a creature) by valuing his or her life, by valuing the things that are good for him or her because they are good for him or her.

It may help to recognize that on Kant's conception, all duties are directed. You may well owe it to each of these people to save her life if you can, although in this case, you cannot save all of them. But there is no one to whom you owe it to save as many lives as possible, unless perhaps you are a lifeguard or something of the sort, and that is taken to be part of the job description. And there is no one to whom you owe it to do as many duties as possible. Morality in general, including beneficence, is a relation between individuals who value each other as individuals.

Aggregation is wrong for a conceptual reason: good is a relation, not a property. That would be an important point against consequentialist theories even if it were only a conceptual point. But it is not, for aggregation is based a profound moral error. Aggregation one of the deepest and most basic forms of disrespect for the value of the individual, the treating of one individual's life, one individual's good, as if it were merely the equivalent of other lives and other people's goods.[26] Every individual is uniquely, incomparably valuable. The full realization of that fact is what morality is all about.

[26] The fact that there can be conceptual errors that are also moral errors is one of the reasons there is such a thing as moral philosophy.