Good For and Good About

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In her book *Natural Goodness*[1] Philippa Foot argues that statements of the form 'such-and-such is good' are 'void for uncertainty'. That is perhaps something of an exaggeration since context can often make clear in what way and for what reason the 'such-and-such' is thought to be good. But she is right, surely, to suggest that statements of the form mentioned above remain uncertain until we know what kind of goodness is in question.

Philippa Foot does not emphasize the expressions 'good for' and 'good about' but she does describe many of the things and states of affairs which are good for and about various animals, including the human animal.

Alasdair Macintyre, too, in *Dependent Rational Animals*[2] does not emphasize the expressions 'good for' and 'good about' but he produces a lot of empirical information concerning animal behaviour and has a lot to say about what is good for and good about the members of different species.

Although neither mentions the other in her/his book Philippa Foot and Alasdair Macintyre share a common project, namely, the defence of ethical objectivism against the views of mainstream 20th century analytic philosophers.

Members of the mainstream did not always agree with one another when it came to detail. However some shorthand is needed here so I will refer to anti-objectivists both as *subjectivists* and as *relativists*, indifferently.

Like Hamlet they held that there is nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so. They relied on certain supposed distinctions: 'is' versus 'ought', fact versus value, description versus evaluation. They believed that evaluation has a special relation to speakers. Some said the 'language of morals' always expresses an individual's emotions, others argued that it only announces the speaker's subjectively chosen principles of conduct, others again claimed that evaluative statements, in spite of their 'surface gram-

[1] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

[2] Alasdair Macintyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

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mar', are really commands directed by the speaker at himself or at people in general.

1. Examples

Ludwig Wittgenstein was categorical about the non-reality of good and bad. In *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*[3] he wrote 'there can be no ethical propositions'. Science describes the real world, the language of morality describes nothing at all.

A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic*[4] said the words 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' are like grunts and shouts, they do nothing more than express emotions. For this reason his theory, emotivism, was given the nickname 'The Boo-Hurrah Thesis'.

J. L. Mackie in *Inventing Right and Wrong*,[5] devised an 'error theory' of ethics. He said the supposition that rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, are features of the real world is simply an *error*. Good and bad are not discovered, he thought, but invented.

In his book *Being Good*[6] Slmon Blackburn, a notably relativistic thinker who describes himself, rather oddly, as a 'quasi-realist', asserts:

> 'No god wrote the laws of good and bad behaviour into the cosmos. Nature has no concern for good or bad, right or wrong'.

Insofar as subjectivists/relativists have any interest in empirical evidence they rely on anthropology which they believe shows that different human groups have radically different codes of conduct.

Bertrand Russell once said the discovery that different societies have different codes of conduct tends to *dissolve* the idea that morality is objective but cannot *prove* that the idea is wrong. This 'dissolving' is not the same thing as refuting; it is merely psychological whereas refutation is logical.

When astronomers disagree about astronomy their different *theories* say different things about *the same physical universe*. Otherwise there could be no disagreement—which is plainly not the case. Moral codes can be regarded as theories about practical matters, theories about how to behave well and how to live well.

Do different codes all refer to the same ethical realities, just as

[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (many editions), paragraph 6.42.

[4] A.J. Ayer, *Language Truth and Logic* (many editions), chapter 6.

[5] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

[6] Simon Blackburn, *Being Good* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 133.

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different scientific theories refer to the same physical realities? Surely that is possible. And as far as I know no-one has ever tried to show that it is not possible.

2. 'For' and 'About'

As noted above the objectivist conclusions drawn by Philippa Foot and Alasdair Macintyre rest in part on the significance of the expressions—'good *for*' and 'good *about*'.

What is good (or bad) *for* an individual animal and its species relates to the things and circumstances the animal and the species need (or lack) in order to stay alive and healthy.

What is good *about* an animal is whatever makes the individual creature a good specimen of its kind; what is bad *about* it is whatever constitutes a defect, illness, weakness or disability in that sort of animal.

Macintyre insists that certain states of affairs are obviously and objectively good or bad for certain creatures. (He is particularly interested in wolves, dolphins and human beings.) Hunting and eating fresh meat and living in a pack are good for individual wolves, good for the pack and good for the species. Clean seas and fish to eat and family life are good for a dolphin, good for its school or herd and good for the species.

It is clear that some things that are good for dolphins would be bad for wolves and vice versa. A dolphin cannot live for very long on dry land for example.

If there are any facts at all in the world then these are facts, paradigm facts.

Some of the things and states of affairs that are good *for* a creature are external, clean seas being an example. But others are internal. Philippa Foot reminds us that a capacity for self-defence is good for, necessary for, the survival of every animal and every kind of animal. Empirical observation shows which creatures have what ways of defending themselves against danger, damage, starvation; the deer has flight, the tortoise has a shell, the elephant has great size and a loud voice, lionesses are excellent hunters.

The internal features which are good for (or bad for) an animal include not only its physical construction but its behavioural patterns and individual traits. To be very easily startled is good for a deer but perhaps not so good for a leopard.

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Every healthy animal knows how to defend itself. But animals also defend each other. In most birds both parents will defend the

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nestlings if those are threatened (the cuckoo is a rather peculiar exception). Female wolves and foxes and bears protect and defend their cubs. Young dolphins are protected by their mothers who are assisted by helpful females thought by some zoologists to be the aunts of the young ones. When a baby elephant is born the whole herd stands around to protect it from predators until it can get to its feet and follow its parent.

In each case the behaviour of the adult animals is good for the infants and thereby good for the herd and for the species.

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It seems that some animals in the wild set out to protect creatures of a different species from their own. When a tiger in India goes hunting the whole jungle falls silent except for certain birds who utter brief calls at intervals of about a minute.[7] Men who live at the edges of the jungle believe the call of the bird helps the deer to locate the tiger; they say the bird is warning the deer. Is that a fact or a myth? The myth, if it is that, is not confined to India; a bird in the Russian tale of Peter and the Wolf plays a similar role. On the other hand, if a man can warn a dog and a dog can warn a man why could a bird not warn a deer?

It was noted above that something is good *about* an animal if it is part of what makes the individual a good specimen of its kind. In mammals conscientiousness in caring for the young is a good thing *about* a mother animal. If a lactating lioness were to mindlessly abandon her cubs that would be bad, it would be bad thing *about* that particular mother.

Such a possible case exemplifies the fact that lots of the internal states which are good or bad *for* a creature or for its young are also things which are good or bad *about* that creature. This in turn relates to one of Philippa Foot's many important points, namely, that description and evaluation are not essentially different linguistic activities. Can it really be sensible to suppose that while 'the possession of quick reflexes is good *for* Bambi' describes a fact 'the possession of quick reflexes is a good thing *about* Bambi' does not?

3. Philosophy and the Life Sciences

I am going to assume that even relativists will agree that the facts of natural history, including those having to do with the preservation, that is, with the good, of an animal, are facts indeed.

In spite of what we read in *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* the life sciences contain a lot of information about what is good and bad.

[7] I have witnessed this phenomenon more than once.

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In spite of Ayer's theory of emotivism the assertion 'clean seas are good for dolphins' says more than 'clean-seas-for-dolphins-HIP-HIP-HURRAY!'

In spite of Mackie's 'error theory' what is good for a living creature and its species are matters which are not invented but discovered. Ethology is a science, not a type of fiction. No-one *invented* the idea that it is good for a deer to be able to run fast. Mackie relied on what he hastily took to be the lessons of anthropology but ignored the other life sciences altogether.

In spite of Blackburn's beliefs it is certain that Nature does 'have a concern' for the kinds of good and bad discussed above. It would be crazy to say that what is good for a wolf or a dolphin is 'all in the mind' (whose mind?). It is not true that what is good for an animal —any animal—is merely a matter of 'our concerns'.[8] Blackburn unconsciously assumed that Nature is inanimate. Well, no-one will dispute the fact that nothing is either good or bad for dead matter, be it gold or mud.

Philippa Foot and Alasdair Macintyre agree with Aristotle that human beings are capable of rational thought. And like Aristotle again, and Charles Darwin too, they believe that human beings are a species of animal. However they do not regard the rationality of human beings as a reason to draw a theoretical cordon around that particular animal. Many of the qualities and states of affairs that are objectively good for and about dolphins and deer and lions (etc.) are also objectively good for and about human beings—protectiveness towards one's offspring for example.

Philippa Foot wrote, several years ago, that every human being needs the self-regarding virtues of courage and temperance since those have to do with self preservation. In *Natural Goodness* she argues that the self-regarding and other-regarding virtues must be thought of as alike, as on a par. Both are needed, both go towards making an individual a good specimen of the human race, both are rightly involved in deciding how to act and how to live.

The sub-title of Macintyre's book is 'Why human beings *need* the virtues' (my emphasis). His reason is that human beings, like dolphins, are dependent on each other and as thinking creatures must take that fact into account when deciding how to act and how to live. He mentions the dependence of infants on parents and other adults, the dependence of the sick on the healthy, the old on the younger, and the disabled on the more fit. He did not, but could have, mentioned, too, those people upon whom strong healthy folk rely for intellectual and other mental sustenance. Such sustenance can come

[8] Simon Blackburn, *Being Good*, 133.

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from the physically weak: from the famous disabled astronomer for instance, or from the crippled poet W. E. Henley, or from sickly short-lived Schubert.

Foot and Macintyre agree that in gregarious species an inability or refusal to co-operate is a serious weakness. A failure or refusal to accept the fact of human inter-dependence is a failure or refusal to accept reality. As such it is a danger to the individual, to his group and to the species.

4. Cordoning off the Human

Ethical relativists cannot deny that *which* things and states are good for or about an 'ordinary' animal is a question of fact; cannot deny that *which* things and states are good for or about the human animal at the physical level is also a question of fact: and cannot deny that the psychological traits that tend to preserve the individual are good for that individual whether it is a human animal or an 'ordinary' animal. Moreover they cannot deny that it is a fact that taking care of infants tends to preserve, i.e., is good for, the group and the species.

It is probable that at this point subjectivists will say: 'But you people are talking about *non-moral* evaluation. We were theorizing about moral evaluation.'

Putting up a fence between moral and non-moral evolution seems to me to beg all the questions at issue. Moreover when relativists cordon off part of the large totality comprising human and animal good and bad we are entitled to ask two questions, viz:

> First: How much of good and bad is left after the factual goods and bads of natural history have been excluded? How large is the class of the 'moral', the class of the special imaginary, non-existent, not-in-the-cosmos goods and bads?

It seems to me that the answer to that question is: The class of 'purely moral' evaluation turns out to be rather indigent.

> Second: What reasons were there for putting up the cordon or fence?

Perhaps the imagined reasons included the following: a perceived peculiarity of human beings *qua* part of the subject matter of philosophy; the well-known view that the point of morality is to guide action; the supposed rationality of human beings.

The idea of the moral cannot be made to rest on a perceived peculiarity of the human race without begging the questions raised by Philippa Foot and Alasdair Macintyre in connection with

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natural history. A philosopher who disconnects his idea of moral evaluation from all other evaluation resembles a draper who decides to treat yards, feet and inches as a good way of measuring every kind of cloth except one; cotton, say. He resembles a greengrocer who insists the kilogram is a reasonable measure for apples and pears and onions but not for potatoes.

Moral language is not the only action-guider. Reasons are action-guiders and so are instincts. Reasons which appeal to self-love can guide action and so too can reasons which appeal to the welfare of others.

That something is bad for you is a reason to avoid it and will usually persuade you to do so.

That something is bad for your children is a reason to avoid it and for most parents is a strongly action-guiding consideration.

That a certain medicine is bad for a patient is a reason, acted on by normal doctors, to avoid prescribing it.

These matters are not easy to separate. 'It would be good for you to relax occasionally because ...' can appeal to more than one kind of reason and appeals, simultaneously, to instinct.

Suppose that the main reason why subjectivists hived off propositions about the morally good and bad into a special category was that human beings can think in rational ways about how to act. Well, that was not a sound reason. It was a strange way to treat rationality because it suggests that reason itself is 'grounded in subjectivity'. In such case what then becomes of science?

Speaking of which, some peculiar ideas about science appear in the works of the relativists cited herein. The logical positivists, who regarded Wittgenstein as one of themselves, seemed to think that only physics is truly scientific even though their own empiricism clearly covers the life sciences and indeed gives a better account of those than it does of physics. Ayer and Mackie had no religion, as far as I know, but they did not think like Darwinians. They were indeed quite old-fashioned in that regard. Blackburn discusses evolutionary theory but takes no positive lessons from it. His only interest is in pointing out that when scientists try to do philosophy they can make a mess of it.[9]

The unconscious presuppositions of all three are consistent with the idea that the human race is special. It is consistent with the idea that God made that special race on the Sixth Day. Perhaps these 20th century ethical relativists are/were crypto-Creationists.

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[9] Simon Blackburn *Being Good*, chapter 4.

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