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LEVEL: 8

[Chapter 1]

The Sense of the Good

[URL: SenseOfTheGood]

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I Introduction to “good” [lower-case]

According to Jean Piaget, humans’ intelligence in all its glory and complexity flowers from the simple seed of the infant’s reflexes.¹ I look at “goods” in much the same way:² as the

¹Reflexes: to cry; to close one’s hand on an object touching the palm; to turn one’s head toward something brushing one’s cheek; to suck on something placed in one’s mouth. These simple behaviors become more complex: differentiated within themselves, like grasping a breast differently from a bottle, and integrated with each other, like grasping a bottle and sucking on it at the same time. This cognitive edifice grows in response to nothing more than ordinary

fundamental building blocks of human interaction.³ Our sense of what is good becomes much more complex as we develop, of course. Infants don't see "social justice" as a good – they have no conception of it yet –, but the roots of social justice are there nevertheless in the simple fact that they cry when they need something.⁴ So to begin with I'm just going to talk in simple terms about goods.

As I use the term in this work, goods [lower case] are things or states I want, and/or act to obtain, and/or welcome if they arrive. My use of "good" requires a broad and flexible understanding of it, because our sense of what is good shifts as we develop, moving from the infant's obvious goods of food, warmth, etc. to the complex, inhibited balancing and meshing of those and later desires. The following subsections unpack these statements a bit. Subsection A notes that the term "good" is used in multiple ways, some of which refer to elements of my

interactions with the world. The original reflexive nature of responses becomes the willed nature of the complex patterns of behavior we call intelligence.

²Indeed, I'm not sure there is any fundamental difference between my formulation and Piaget's. Without pursuing the thought, I'll just say that they strike me as simply two different ways of conceptualizing the same thing. Despite this isomorphism between the two, seeing things in terms of "goods" helps me understand cognition in a way that applies more easily to the issues I'll be concentrating on: authenticity, morality, and social justice.

³Wrong Way: It may seem that I'm heading toward a classical liberal view of humanity as solely acquisitive and otherwise indifferent to each other. I'm not. Make up your mind later, after I discuss personas, empathy, and (in this essay) the indefinite nature of "goods".

⁴In the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey", there is a wonderful, key scene early in the movie where an ape-man recognizes that he can use the thighbone of some animal as a tool. Imagining all its uses, he ecstatically hurls it into the air ... and the turning thighbone becomes a turning space station. Hundreds of thousands of years have passed between the two, but the connection between them is clear. Once the *concept* of a tool came into existence, the difference between the thighbone and the space station is merely one of degree. Thus it is with the idea of a good.

concept of “good” and others of which are distinct from my concept. Subsection B deals briefly with the relationship between the meaning of “good” and that of “need”.

A. Other meanings of “good” [lower-case]

In ordinary language we use “good” in many ways, some of which are appropriate for the meaning I want to give it here, others of which refer to meanings that are not part of mine. I therefore will list a variety of ways in which “good” is used, setting them against the meaning of “good” I want to use in this work.⁵

- Things that directly satisfy a need or desire, e.g., as water satisfies thirst. If I am thirsty, then I want water, I may act to obtain it if it is not immediately available, and I welcome it when I obtain it.
- Things that bring aesthetic pleasure, as when I say that Duluth water is good. I am not praising its satisfaction of my physical thirst – any relatively uncontaminated water does that – but rather the particular pleasure I get from drinking it as opposed to, say, the heavily chlorinated tap water in Champaign, Illinois. And of course the aesthetic pleasure can also arise from something satisfying no physical need, as when I say that something is a good painting.
- Things that are useful for obtaining something else that is good, even though they may not be good in themselves. For example, I might not find a shovel to be good as a physical object standing alone, but I could nevertheless find it to be good – useful – for obtaining something more directly good when I see it as a means for planting crops.

⁵Aki Halme was especially helpful in extending the list of meanings here.

- Most things are not useful in any simple sense but rather have multiple, even opposing ways in which they can be evaluated. For example, consider the several different characteristics of a sweet roll. First, it may directly satisfy my hunger. In that sense it is “a good”. Second, it may taste good, which is an aesthetic judgment I make about the pleasure of eating it. In that sense too it is “good”. Third, it may not be useful in attaining a desired state of affairs, i.e., being healthy. In that sense it is (not) “good for” some larger purpose; without making any moral judgments about my desire for this sweet roll (and a thousand more!),⁶ I can still recognize that pursuing *this* good over here – the thousand sweet rolls – will have consequences for other things I value, e.g., having my clothes fit. So sweet rolls have several and even conflicting senses of good: the physical satisfaction and aesthetic good of the sweet roll, on the positive side, and its effect on my staying healthy, on the negative side.
- To indicate that something is of high quality, meaning in whatever respect one desires such quality (e.g., a good shovel, not my old dull one with the loose handle).
- Self-assumed virtues or accomplishments to which one aspires (e.g., to be a good father). “Self-assumed” emphasizes that while a virtue might be pressed on me by my society, the important issue is whether I have accepted it as my own.⁷ It can also mean my own

⁶For example, I am only discussing “desire for sweet rolls” here, not “gluttony”, which attaches a moral judgment to the specific desire.

⁷Is there a relationship between virtue and morality here? For example, does being a good chess player imply a moral duty toward others not to cheat? In my view of virtue, being a good player means only being able to win chess games within a certain set of constraints, one of which (for me) is not cheating. But I could also choose to define good chess playing for myself as winning by hook or by crook. The duty is to myself, not to my opponent; however I define “being a good chess player”, I feel good about achieving that status. The moral duties I have

standards of virtue applied to others, as in, “It is good of you to come.”

- People or creatures performing as I desire (as in, “Good dog!” or “Good boy!”)
- All of the above uses of the term fit within my sense of the good. One use that does not fit is when one uses good to make a moral evaluation. I say more about this in the next section.⁸

B. “Goods” or “needs”?

My conception of the good is related to that of “need”, whether one views needs in terms of either Kelley’s or Maslow’s theories.⁹ Moreover, it is formally possible to create a one-to-one correspondence between the good and needs: for every need, its satisfaction (or means of satisfaction) is a good; for every good, there is an underlying need corresponding to the feeling one experiences in its absence. Despite this formal possibility, I will use the language of “the Good” rather than “needs”, partly because it retains an openness I value (even though Kelley’s and Maslow’s need theories provide powerful descriptions of what are surely important aspects of the good) and partly because the language of needs is too peremptory for my purposes: it tends

toward my opponent are a different question.

⁸If there are meanings I have overlooked, please let me know of them.

⁹This work is too well-known to require more than cursory citation. See Kelley (19xx) for a major statement of his theory. I have been particularly influenced by David McClelland’s application of Kelley’s theory to the need for Achievement (n Ach) and other needs. (See, for example, McClelland in Atkinson *et al.* 19xx.) I am glad to be able to acknowledge here my indebtedness to these innovative, well-crafted works.

For a major statement of Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” theory, see Maslow (19xx). I have been particularly influenced by Aronoff’s (19xx, 19xx, 19xx) application of Maslow’s theory to social structure.

to imply that the need is absolute, whereas the language of the Good allows more tradeoffs among separate goods.¹⁰ That's my perception, anyway, and while you and I may not share it, at least you know what I mean to accomplish by choosing the language of the Good.

II The Good [upper-case] as an Abstraction; Its Self-regardingness and Moral Neutrality

This section is specifically concerned with distinguishing the sense of good from interpersonal morality. It does so by emphasizing that the sense of the good is self-regarding; it does not involve other people's senses of the good and thus does not bear on interpersonal morality. This is the first of maybe three key sections in this work. To understand the rest of my ideas you need to understand clearly what I mean by "the Good", particularly that it is defined separately by each individual and is morally neutral.

A. "Goods"; "a Good"; "one of my Goods"

A "Good" denotes any one of the goods mentioned above, and, to extend this fully, anything welcome to me. It denotes the quality of Goodness without specifying the specific good. It is thus a broader concept than a "good". A "good" is certainly a "Good", but something can be a Good without being consumable or usable or even physical in nature. For example, Rawls (1971:§xx) uses the term in this larger sense when he argues that justice is a good for everyone. Justice is not a physical object; one can't consume it or use it; and yet one can value it positively.

¹⁰I'm not saying that needs theories reject such tradeoffs. But note that Maslow's concept of a hierarchy of needs, each "prepotent" to all higher needs, does not allow for tradeoffs.

B. “My sense of the Good”; “my Good”

When I wish to refer to the universe of my Goods, I call them collectively, “my sense of the Good” or “my Good” or “the Good”.¹¹ Corresponding phrases would be, “your sense of the Good”, “her Good”, etc. This collection of Goods might not be reconciled, i.e., one could want both to eat sweet rolls and to become slender. But one’s sense of the Good is prior to one’s figuring out how to live a life satisfying all one’s Goods, which is what I term the problem of authenticity, dealt with in the next essay. Here, I simply want to establish a term for the collectivity of Goods without regard to the feasibility of satisfying them.

C. The Good is self-regarding

Examining the list of meanings of “good” given previously, not that one’s Goods are defined by what one experiences positively, what one welcomes, what one wants to possess, preserve, advance, or pursue, and that which one finds beautiful and/or meaningful. A Good is thus entirely self-regarding – located in the world and often assuming the participation or agreement of others, but still centrally defined by one’s *own* experience of well-being, satisfaction, pleasure, desire, meaning, usefulness, beauty.¹² The same is true of one’s sense of the Good. As

¹¹The last formulation doesn’t make clear that “the Good” is person-specific. I will risk using it unless I find that it creates misunderstandings.

¹²The same is true in the opposite sense of one’s experience of dislike, displeasure, repulsion, ugliness, etc. (One’s sense of the Unwelcome, we might call this.) Note that the sense of Unwelcomeness, like the sense of the Good, is an *active* feeling, not mere indifference.

By saying “pleasure”, “desire” and “the experience” (of meaning & beauty), the description of the Good starts right off sounding like utilitarianism, emotivism, or even hedonism. However, these are *moral* theories, about how we ought to take each other into account in view of our existing sense(s) of the Good. All I’m doing here is laying out the nature of the Good; nothing has been said so far about how this is related to the Right, and as it will turn out, the

a collectivity of self-regarding Goods, it too is self-regarding.

It follows that others cannot force you to see as good that which you see thus. If you enjoy eating brains, for example, and I am nauseated at the thought, it is not possible for me to force you to loathe them also. Even if I were to get God to thunder that She will strike you dead if you eat them, even if I were to arrange for your priest, parents, and ten best friends to demand that you change this disgusting habit, even if I presenting overwhelming scientific evidence that brains will infect you with BSE, the most I can accomplish is to alter your ability to satisfy that Good; I haven't changed the fact that you still like brains. You might choose to avoid them for fear of BSE, or you might eat them only in secret, but you still like them; they are still part of your Good.

Note that I'm talking only about forcing someone to change their Good. I am not saying that Goods are fixed or even that they are invulnerable to others' persuasion. All I'm saying is that altering someone's Good requires wooing instead of abduction.

As far as I can tell, the only way anyone can alter anyone's sense of the Good is, curiously, to help them to experience that Good more deeply and richly, becoming aware of either its different components or its integral relationship with other things.¹³ By different components I mean coming to understand the experience more precisely as a mixture of experiences both Good and Unwelcome. For example, I might invite you to pay close attention to your experience of eating brains, with the result that you discover that (say) you like their taste *and* don't like their

present work conceives of the Right differently than those three theories.

¹³Brad Blanton (personal communication): "When you experience your experience, your experience disappears."

texture, or perhaps that an unpleasant bitterness underlies the yummy flavor. Previously, both experiences were present – good taste *and* awful texture, or good taste *and* underlying bitterness –, but you had not paid enough attention to them separately, only noting an overall, fuzzy sense of Goodness. Once the experience is differentiated, once you know more precisely the nature of your Good, you have more ways to get what you really want and more ways to find creative ways to satisfy your and others’.

By “its integral relationship with other things”, I mean pointing out the *necessary* concomitants and consequences of your sense of the Good. For example, I will argue later that good ends cannot be achieved by bad means, that the bad means will not produce only the Good you seek (and may not produce even that) but will also produce bad results. You may still choose to use those means, of course, but your sense of the Good has been changed, in that the means can no longer be seen as a Good equivalent to the Good one intends.

Note that it is possible to change the *salience* of Goods, either positively (advertising) or negatively (condemnation, repression). It is also possible, as E. E. Schattschneider (1960) notes, to change the *terrain* in which a Good is pursued, either to ease its pursuit (e.g., government grants) or to place obstacles (criminal laws).¹⁴

D. The Good is morally neutral: the Good vs. the Right / Ethics vs. Morality

We will discuss this more fully in the next chapter, but to prevent confusion in this chapter, let me note here that it may or may not be moral (“Right”) for me to pursue things I

¹⁴Xx get the whole quote & page number: “...mobilization of bias” (Schattschneider 1960:xx).

consider Good. Morality / the Right has to do with people's expectations of and agreements among themselves; the Good exists independently of agreements and limitations. The Good is the subject of the field of ethics; the Right is the subject of the field of morality.¹⁵

I want to be clear that I am not arguing that people care only for themselves. Indeed, a major point of this book is that people cannot help caring for one another, that it is the apparent lack of caring that needs explanation. I am distinguishing the Good and the Right simply to allow me in this chapter to talk about authenticity and its complexities without having to deal simultaneously (in my exposition of the ways of relating perspective, not in the reality of action in the world) with the separate, additional complexities of moral considerations. Anything I say in this chapter about one's Good remains true even if the Good is my desire that you achieve your Good. I am not trapping myself in a "philosophy of the Subject". It seems obvious to me that we are carriers of our senses of the Good as individuals, but this observation does not imply that we care only for ourselves.

There is nothing particularly new in this last statement. Classical liberalism has long acknowledged that I can take any damn-fool thing I want as a Good. Care about myself, care about you – I can choose what I see as Good. What *is* new about this will not become apparent until Chapter 2, where I argue that one cannot help but include, as part of one's sense of the Good, the desire for the other to achieve h/her Good, even if h/her achieving it conflicts with things Good for oneself alone. So while the Good-Right distinction lets me temporarily bracket

¹⁵This is a definition, not a prescription; my purpose here is only to clarify my usage of the term in view of its varied usage elsewhere. Habermas (19xx:xx) has remarked, for example, that his "discourse ethics" should have been termed "discourse morality" but that the original name has passed beyond his ability to change it.

issues of the Right, the latter will be considered in Chapters 2 ff.

E. Origins of the Good

Where does one's sense of the Good come from? Is there some root Good (even if only for oneself alone) from which all else follows? Can one know, and if so how can one know, what the Good is for oneself and others?

I claim that these questions cannot be definitively answered and to that extent are not meaningful. They seem meaningful, because we see people holding onto derivative Goods that don't satisfy them, but therapeutic discourse is [indicated?], not paternalism. Mention something about Freud's comment about the meaning of dreams disappearing down as if in a navel. From a pragmatic perspective, there is no way to prove that there is a root Good.

III The Good is Individual and Specific

The ways of relating perspective sees the Good as individual and specific. Because the sense of meaning is individual, each person has her own sense of the Good. Each person has h/her sense of what is authentically h/her; each person finds things meaningful that other people may not. If there is an underlying, universal Good, its existence can be proven only through actual practice, which comes to the same thing: looking for the universal in the individual and specific.

We will not only assume the individuality of the Good; we will also specifically reject two common views of the Good as single and universal. The first of these views is the utilitarian, where the concrete differences between senses of the Good disappear, subsumed within the undifferentiated concept of utility. The utilitarian approach has several obvious problems. First,

the utilitarian principle itself is ungrounded; it expresses one way of considering the issues involved in a decision, but it is not self-grounding; it is unclear why we ought – morally ought – to consider them this way. In addition, the concept of utility seems hard to measure objectively; without such objective measurement, utilitarianism is hard to distinguish from a retrospective rationalization and justification of a decision made on other grounds.

A second view of a single Good is that all particular senses of the Good are merely imperfect approximations of some true, universal sense. I will not pursue this path either, because the assumption is unprovable, and even if we knew (or could meaningfully assume) it were true, it has no bite when it comes to making real decisions. It has use only when someone tries to beat others into submission and compliance by using the unprovable claim that s/he knows the universal Good.

IV To What Extent, and in What Ways, Is One's Sense of the Good Malleable?

People's sense of the Good is malleable; it can change and is always potentially changeable.¹⁶

¹⁶I associate the classical liberal tradition with this view of the Good as sacred – at least in the sense of our being unable to meaningfully debate it. This is unfair in one way, since classical liberalism, far from prohibiting ethical discourse, seeks to protect it from the pressure of the State. And Mill (18xx/19xx) famously points out that it must be protected from the pressure of popular opinion as well. Nevertheless, classical liberalism places no positive value on such discourse. There is no mention of fostering it, for example. Classical liberalism protects freedom of speech, but it establishes no corresponding obligation to listen. This is the point of Marcuse's (1965) critique; he saw that certain points of view were repressed not by government action nor even by popular pressure but simply by being ignored. This allows the classical liberal to have his cake and eat it too, claiming to be tolerant of diverse opinions while not having to deal with them.

1: Change over time

I may prefer listening to the Rolling Stones at one age and to Vivaldi at another.

Or I may simply feel like hearing Vivaldi today and the Stones tomorrow.

2: Change through understanding

I may see the connection between, say, the loathed exercise and my weight decreasing, so that exercise suddenly becomes a good for me.

V The Good Is One's Autonomous Choice

One might assume from this multiplicity and malleability that the ways of relating perspective assigns a reduced authority to a person's sense of the Good – that is, leaves it a bit unprotected from other people's insistence that you share their sense of the Good (e.g., that you convert from Islam to Methodism). But it would be incorrect to assume this. Even though people's senses of the Good are malleable, it is a malleability arising from their internal choice. The use of external force to change someone's sense of the Good is self-contradictory, since it violates the very authenticity from which the idea of the Good takes its meaning. Force may produce the semblance or pretense of change, but it cannot produce a true change.¹⁷ “What's authentic is what *I* tell you is authentic” is the self-contradictory attitude. Something can be one's authentic Good only if one has the simultaneous right to reject it.¹⁸

¹⁷“A man convinced against his will / is of the same opinion still.” Alas, much modern political life seems devoted to brainwashing of one sort or another.

¹⁸[Cite Habermas's essay in Gutmann, ed. Xx] Some Islamic countries apparently accept this only half-way, permitting non-Moslems to practice their faiths but forbidding Moslems from

[Xx Fold the following material into the next section(s). A paragraph outline will help organize this.] It is true that the ways of relating perspective allows one's Good to be challenged in a couple of fundamental ways. First, the perspective does not support any sense that one's Good is beyond challenge. While it is always we who make the final decision about what we consider Good, we can never be certain that further reflection won't alter it. So others' challenges to our sense of the Good are always a propos, regardless of one's final decision. We can't escape having our Goods questioned.

Second, the perspective gives no guarantee that one's sense of the Good will prevail in the norms we agree to.¹⁹ Consider, for example, the moral concept of rights, meaning Goods which must prevail unless other, equally important rights must be balanced. The ways of relating perspective never sees rights as absolute moral imperatives but rather sees them only as social constructions representing our current guess as to how we are best to relate to each other. This relationship is primary in the ways of relating perspective; rights exists only insofar as they serve it.²⁰

falling away once they have accepted the True Faith.

¹⁹Some important exceptions are given in the later essay on a second moment of moral judgment; I term them the "second-order conditions".

²⁰Sometimes we may find it useful to pretend that certain rights are absolute, e.g., those embodied in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights, because taking them as always up for negotiation creates slippery-slope problems. For example, I've always believed that the 1978 march of a neo-Nazi group through Skokie violated basic principles of how we are to relate to each other, implying that the group should be denied a permit to march. (I might be wrong about this, certainly, but my intention here is not to justify my belief but just to give an example.) On the other hand, even if I'm correct about the violation involved here, denial of this group's right to march opens the door to the denial of other speech when its only problem is that a lot of people don't like what's said. This could potentially be an outcome far worse than the specific march.

It seems to me that the negotiability of "rights" is a simple fact. Empirically, "rights" exist

VI “There’s No Disputing Taste”

When I talk about “having my own sense of the Good”, there is a slight implication that this sense is fixed, unchangeable, even sacred. In particular, there’s the implication that we can’t challenge each other’s sense of the Good. For example, some people believe that it’s abusive for anyone to argue that, for example, homosexuality is a sin (or, its modern parallel, a mental disease).

Classical liberalism is predicated on such a belief, or so it seems to me, since the social contract is presented as arising out of specified (and universal) Goods – life, liberty, and property, to take one formulation – and political discourse is presented in terms of compromise, not conversion, reconciliation or change.

- “There’s no disputing taste.”
- This attitude is paralleled by the attitude that “I want what I want, and I don’t have to listen to anyone else.” In other words, the attitude is that “my beliefs are sacred.”
- “Treating people with respect” is taken (often, I believe) to mean that we should not challenge others’ deeply held beliefs.

What I feel is what I feel, regardless of what I ought to feel, regardless of your wishes I feel otherwise, regardless of whether you share my sense of the Good. It is true that my desires

when people in fact decide (collectively) that they want to protect something. Normatively, “rights” are subordinate to the relational principle. Like it or not, all “rights” are negotiable. And yet by emphasizing that negotiability, I am running the risk of creating the problems recognized above. I mention all this here just to acknowledge the existence of this difficulty, but because it involves problems of the larger society, I cannot really address it until Chapter 5. [Xx Make sure I do in fact deal with it there.]

can be repressed: made so dangerous to reveal that I choose silence (like gays firmly locking themselves in the closet), or even made subconscious (like homophobes vehemently denying their same-sex desires). However, such repression does not change but rather affirms that these things are still Goods to me.

We have the sense of some things as sacred, in that their value cannot be questioned. But their value derives from us; it doesn't exist independent of our view. (That would be the tail wagging the dog.) Maybe a better way to put it: sacredness is expressed through us; pragmatically, it's our experience of sacredness that grounds our understanding of the sacred. If there is or can be some universally acknowledged, sacred Good, that's how it reveals itself. Or anyway, that's the only criterion we have.

I call this the "sacred" view of the Good, sacred in the sense of untouchable, unchallengeable. But note that classical liberalism arose in part out of disputes over people's religious Goods. Liberalism became possible when people were able to differentiate the Right and the Good, recognize the impossibility of negotiating the latter, and find a way to negotiate behavior rather than beliefs.

VII Nevertheless, We Can Meaningfully Engage Each Other about Taste

Against all of these (or to clarify all of these):

- Respect doesn't mean agreement or even public neutrality. Indeed, public neutrality is disrespectful insofar as it derives from an attitude something

like, “There’s no reasoning with those people.”²¹

- We need to differentiate forced conversion from a conversation about senses of the Good – what I will shortly be calling “therapeutic discourse”.²² It is fear of the former (plus an inability to differentiate) that causes the resistance to listening.²³
- We *can* clarify or change our sense of the Good when we see its consequences – for us, and/or for others.

Despite what I just said, there is a sense of disputation in which we can indeed dispute taste. That sense is one in which you simply share our sense of the Good with me, with the persuasive force lying in the “unforced force of the better argument” – Habermas’s classic expression –, even though the “argument” referred to is merely the claim, “Steve, I think you would find this a good sense of the Good.” Or, lest that formulation sound too circular, here is another one: “Steve, I invite you to try my sense of the Good on for size.” Such an invitation can

²¹Of course, all too often the negation of this statement is taken to be, “I can force these people into accepting my obviously and logically correct position”, which is also disrespectful. The true negation is, “They and I occupy the same moral universe and are capable of reaching a mutual understanding – or at least can relate to each other as if we could.”

²²Forced conversion does happen to us, especially as children. I’m not speaking here of the ordinary socialization process, where children learn and readily adopt the ways of their parents and society. I’m speaking, rather, of situations in which such learning and adoption is not done readily, and the children’s reservations are dismissed and their compliance coerced. I will take up this issue again in [xx whatever I write on the natural method of childraising].

²³The determination to convert someone, even if against their will, has the same root as the determination not to listen to someone: the view that “there is only one Good, and I know it.” Holding that view, I am entitled to force someone to share it; I don’t need to respect their own view of the Good except insofar as knowing it will aid my converting them. Holding that view, I need not listen to anyone who presents a different view, since my views are already perfect.

be fleshed out by sharing your sense of your Good's coherence and by elaborating the nature of its pleasures to you, and you can point out problems you see in my sense of the Good²⁴ and help me think them through. An invitation, not a demand: no pushing, no haranguing, no emotional, physical or legal pressure to threaten my autonomy and therefore elicit my resistance. Such tactics come from confusing the Good – what *I* want – with the Right – what *you ought to* want. Even though you may have the most loving intentions toward me in suggesting your sense of the Good, even though you believe my sense of the Good is doing me harm, I retain my autonomy.²⁵

It may be useful to think about this in terms of admiring a painting.²⁶ I can't make you like a painting, but you may come to like it if I explain what I see in it: the nature of the brush strokes, the choice of colors, the emphasis and deemphasis of certain figures, the associations it has for me (and mayhap also you), and so on. (I don't actually know about any of these things, but I can pretend I do here.) You may come to appreciate the painting as well, perhaps because you now see what I see, perhaps only because you've now paid enough attention to it to construct your own admiration. Or, of course, you might still not like it, or might like it even less. I can only hold up for you what I see; beyond that point, it's all your experience.

²⁴Note carefully that I do not say, "point out problems in my sense of the Good", because that assumes that you (or anyone) can know what is Good for me (or anyone else). All you (or I) can say is what you (or I) experience.

²⁵This assumes that I capable of forming a sense of the Good, and it is unclear how precisely that is to be measured. I don't think my perspective will yield the same results as others', however. For example, I will argue later that this perspective sees animals as capable of forming a sense of the Good. I am not going to pursue this here.

²⁶See Michael Parsons (1987) on the development of aesthetic reasoning. He uses examples of paintings, which is why I do so.

VIII Engagement Can Change Either Party

If you hold up your sense of the Good as an alternative to mine, it might happen that you find your own sense of the Good changed.²⁷ This is a peril, but it is also the *sine qua non* of human (as opposed to strategic) communication. If you do not open yourself to me in the same way that I open myself to you, then we are not meeting as equals. I cannot trust what you say, because I cannot assume that you will understand me well enough to threaten your own sense of the Good. If I am to let you affect my sense of the Good deeply, then I must have confidence that you will take me for who I am, not distorting your knowledge of me and the conversations based on it because it threatens you.²⁸

IX The Münchhausen Trilemma and Our Inability to Prove That Something Is Good

The so-called “Münchhausen Trilemma” (Habermas 19xx:xx) is a demonstration that it is impossible to prove by formal logic – i.e., deductively, conclusively – that something is Good.

²⁷I believe Nietzsche (1886/1966:Epigram 146) meant something similar in his famous epigram, “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.”

²⁸I am reminded of the scene near the end of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (LeGuin 1976:247-249) where Genly Ai finally opens himself enough to be able to see Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, his companion in flight, for who he could not previously admit s/he was: someone not male but rather both male and female. He could not admit it for homophobia, or for his attachment to gender separation or gender roles, or ... whatever: the point is that our own fear of being changed makes us unable to relate fully to the other (or the Other, if you will). I will return to this in [a later essay](#).

The argument is quite brief. One justifies something as being Good by an argument based on certain premises. These premises require their own justification, and so on. There are only three possibilities for this chain of justification: it is either (i) circular, or (ii) infinitely long, or (iii) broken off at some set of premises that are not themselves justified. (See Figure 1.) None of these cases provide the necessary justification. The third case offers the most hope, because we

can at least hope that we can find premises that are believed by all, in which case the demand for justification does not arise except for a Scholastic concern for whether the claim is then “really” justified.

Figure 1 The “Münchhausen Trilemma”	
The three inadequate forms of deductive justification of Z:	
(a) Circular	$Z \leftarrow Y \leftarrow X \leftarrow \dots \leftarrow Z$
(b) Infinite regression	$Z \leftarrow Y \leftarrow X \leftarrow W \leftarrow V \leftarrow \dots$
(c) Arbitrary termination of the sequence	$Z \leftarrow Y \leftarrow \underline{\mathbf{X!}}$
Source: See Albert (1985), Habermas (1983/1990)	

The third form of the trilemma is easily mistaken for true justification, since people tend to believe that the premises they accept are so obviously true that no one could possibly disagree. To the extent that others do disagree, they are dismissed as crazy, or ignorant, or stupid, or unreasonable, or neurotically trouble-making, or ivory-tower intellectuals, and so on. But of course such tactics are, seen dispassionately, only justification by force.

The logic above is clear, but I want to refer briefly to the emotions attached to it. Even if we recognize and agree with the above logic, it is extraordinarily difficult to acknowledge that one’s perspective is not the gold-plated truth. Certainly this is hard for me, and in my experience

it's equally hard for others. However, I think this is a cultural artifact rather than an inherent human characteristic.²⁹ In the society I'm familiar with, at least, making one's view prevail over all others is tied to lots of Goods: wealth, promotion, respect, safety, sometimes even basic survival. And in such circumstances, the acknowledgment of one's fallibility becomes simply a signal for others to trample one underfoot in the struggle for dominance. As I see it, U.S. society is moving toward intensified struggle, not decreased struggle. As the society provides less and less of a safety net,³⁰ the greater the stakes riding on domination and the more Hobbesian the struggles become. In such circumstances we have to ask who this way of relating really benefits – but I will not pursue this question until much later in this work.

X Conflict between Goods

There is nothing about the Good that says I can't want many different things at once. As I write this, for example, I want to continue writing, I want a drink of water, I want the sirens outside to stop, I want to see *The House of Mirth*, and so on. I want these all now. It does not matter that, for example, I can't figure out a way to reconcile them, e.g., I can't write this and see *The House*

²⁹See my discussion [here](#) regarding the logical difficulties involved in asserting what human beings are “really” like.

³⁰I am speaking here not only of welfare-type programs but also of the fragmentation of society and the fading of the belief that we care for one another. I say so even in view of today's patriotic fervor, which is emblematic less of solidarity than of exclusion. As I say elsewhere, true agreement can be said to exist only when there is a simultaneous right to disagree. The pronouncements of President-designate Bush and Attorney-General Ashcroft are profoundly disrespectful not just of the arguments of their critics but also of the critics personally. In the end, exclusion only defines a people negatively. It does not solve the problem of how they *are* to relate to each other, but rather is the first step in a *reductio ad absurdum* that leaves us all isolated individuals unable to handle disagreements.

of *Mirth* at the same time. The fact remains that I still want both. These multiple Goods need not be rationally ordered or, indeed, have logical structure. For the most part, we will just let this multiplicity lie, assuming that we “want it all” – that we simply want what we want when we want it.³¹ Even unreconciled to each other, these Goods remain things I want.

Notice that I term the Goods “unreconciled”, not “opposite” to each other. I contend that it is impossible to hold truly opposing Goods; one cannot truly want both X and not-X.³²

Consider the “monkey trap” story.³³ To trap a monkey, drill a hole in a coconut just big enough for a monkey to get its hand into, then place some, say, walnuts in it. Fasten the coconut securely to something heavy. A monkey finds the nuts inside the coconut and grabs one, but cannot then pull its hand back out of the hole. You can capture the monkey as it frantically tries to get its arm out of the coconut while still holding the nuts. Isn’t this a case where two Goods – getting the nuts and escaping the humans – are opposite? After all, the monkey can’t keep hold of the nuts without being captured, and it can’t avoid capture without letting go of the nuts.

I claim that it makes more sense to regard the two Goods as unreconciled than as

³¹As we shall see later, the ways of relating perspective views the choice among Goods as an individual matter; each of us can work out an algebra for ourselves – or use no algebra at all. We will eventually need some means of comparing Goods across individuals, and I have no worked-out means of doing so. I am comfortable with the belief that some rough comparison of, say, primary goods a la Rawls can be worked out and will be sufficient for my purpose. However, the ways of relating perspective is pretty tolerant of arbitrariness (or rather, recognizes the inescapability of arbitrary solutions to conflicts), so this lack of a precise means of comparison does not now worry me.

³²Except for the Red Queen, of course, who “believed xx impossible things before breakfast” (Carroll 19xx:xx).

³³I originally encountered the story long ago in Pirsig (1974) but had forgotten the source. My thanks to Aki Halme for reminding me of this story and where it came from. I assume it is a real practice, but of course its reality is not the point.

opposite. Let's take the two assertions that most directly describe the situation:

1. "The monkey sees walnuts as Good"; and
2. "The monkey sees freedom as Good".

If the two Goods are logically, inherently, absolutely opposite, then we could also say, equivalently,

- ~1. "The monkey sees freedom as bad"; and
- ~2. "The monkey sees walnuts as bad".

However, ~1 and ~2 aren't as plausible as 1 and 2. Something has been lost. Comparing these two sets of statements, we see that the problems with the second set arise in their false generality. Certainly the monkey doesn't see walnuts as unwelcome in general but only in this situation, and the same for freedom. Surely it characterizes the situation better to say only that the monkey can't find a way to achieve both Goods *in the current circumstances*. After all, ways do exist (or can be imagined) that achieve both Goods. The monkey could go to a gym, build up its shoulder and arm muscles, and then smash the coconut apart with a big rock and escape with the nuts. Or the monkey could go to the store, buy some glue, put some on the end of its finger, and haul out the nuts that way – or use a glue-laden stick to do this, much as chimpanzees fish for termites. Maybe it could buy a saw at the store and saw the coconut apart. Granted, these alternatives are not employed by the average monkey. But my point is that the Goods are not logically, inherently, absolutely opposite but only unreconciled. Their apparent opposition comes from the circumstances, not from the Goods themselves. It may be that there really isn't any way monkeys can achieve both Goods, but we cannot know that in advance. The facts that (a) no monkey has ever succeeded in keeping both the nuts and its freedom and (b) we can't think of any way a monkey could actually do so – these do not prove that no such way exists. I wouldn't bet on the

monkey succeeding, but I can't prove that it can't.

“OK, OK, Chilton – you can make up wild solutions, and I don't want to get into a debate about whether they are realistic. What about the example of Buridan's ass, said to have starved to death when, placed equidistant between two bales of hay, it could not decide which to eat from? Regardless of the story's realism, aren't the two bales of hay opposed Goods, at least immediately, because the ass *can't* reach them both?” I grant that this story does make the opposition clearer. Unfortunately, it still serves to demonstrate my contention. I could imagine, for example, that Buridan's ass could inhale so powerfully that both bales of hay are drawn to it. Perhaps, standing there paralyzed by the conflict, the ass comes to realize that its deepest interest is not in eating both bales simultaneously but rather in keeping an eye on one bale while watching the other to make sure its fellow asses don't eat it; it was only paralyzed because it thought it had to forego protecting one bale if it went to the other. Or I could advance other resolutions involving the ass's exerting telekinetic control over the bales, or Buridan rushing to the rescue, and so on. (I'm shameless when it comes to making up magical resolutions.) Still, despite my shamelessness in making up magical resolutions, doesn't it remain true that in the end we have to confront the issue of what is realistically possible? Don't we live in a world without telekinesis, a world where Buridan is off taking a bath somewhere? Well, yes, but here we find the core of the issue: *the map is not the territory*. Our understanding of the world – even of the physical world itself, let alone of our slippery social world and our mysterious emotional world – is always contingent. Any attempt to set up a situation in which Goods are inherently opposed has to bracket the possibility that resolutions might exist. Sure, such resolutions may appear unlikely, and we can bracket them all we like, but with our contingent understanding we cannot – *cannot* –

exclude the possibility one might exist.

Of course regardless of this theoretical point, it seems obvious that few situations can be resolved in practice through miraculous solutions making all parties happy. We criticize movies having a *deus ex machina* resolution of all problems, and my silly solutions above certainly have that flavor. However, the ways of relating perspective is not founded on magical solutions. More common resolutions are those based on empathy and on clarification of the Good, which I discuss at greater length elsewhere. Suffice it here to say that empathy solves many problems, because when we take the other's Good as our own, what was a conflict between Goods changes form to a choice of Goods.³⁴ Clarification of each other's senses of the Good also solves many problems, because when we distinguish what we are actually seeking – our actual Good – from what the constraints of the situation lead us to believe we are seeking, then we can indeed frequently find creative solutions that satisfy our most important Goods, even though we may have to neglect some less important ones. I will defer further discussion and examples to [this chapter's essay on Therapeutic Discourse](#).

I dwell on this question – opposed vs. unreconciled – because of its implications for where we locate our problems and thus how we relate to each other. If I see my Good(s) as opposite instead of unreconciled to yours, I do not look for creative ways to satisfy both; instead, I simply look for ways to satisfy my Good(s) and deny you yours. I assume that *you*, not the situation, are why I can't get what I want. My aim then becomes defeating you, not solving the actual problem

³⁴This assumption of altruism and empathy may appear unrealistic. I hold that this sense of unrealism comes not from our inherent nature as self-centered, selfish creatures but rather from our culture's pressure to be self-centered and selfish. See, for example, the essay, [Some Problems of Circular Reasoning in Social Science](#), particularly the section on human nature.

of how to obtain both our Goods. As Fisher et al. (1991) put it, “The people aren’t the problem; the problem is the problem.” If I confuse the map with the territory, as in the above examples, I am creating conflict, or at least making it look inherent, when the reality may be otherwise. Perhaps to get my Good met I will in the end wind up denying others their Good, but that’s a reason for our mutual sorrow, not hostility.

XI Are Goods Hierarchical?

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XII The Internal Experience of Goodness, Beauty, Virtue, etc.

[In this section I talk about how what I say applies to all internal experiences.]