

Good-makers and good-takers: Bernard Williams on Platonic (intrinsic) goodness

[on Bernard Williams, 'Plato's construction of intrinsic goodness', in *The Sense of the Past*, ed. M.F. Burnyeat (Princeton:2006) 118-137]

1. Glaucon's classification of goods

[Glaucon: 357b] 'Socrates,' he said, 'do you really want to convince us that it is in every way better to be just than unjust, or is it enough merely to seem to have convinced us?'

'I would prefer,' I said, 'really to convince you, if I had a choice.'

'In that case,' he said, 'you are not achieving your aim. Tell me this. Do you think there is a good of the kind we would choose to have because we value it for its own sake, and not for any desire for its results? Enjoyment, for example, and pleasures which are harmless and produce no consequences for the future beyond enjoyment for the person who possesses them.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I do think there is a good of this kind [c].'

'What about the sort we value both for itself and for its consequences? Things like thinking, seeing, being healthy. We value goods of this sort, I imagine, for both reasons.'

'Yes,' I said.

'And can you distinguish a third class or category of good,' he asked, 'a class which contains physical exercise, undergoing medical treatment when we are ill, practising medicine, and earning a living in general? These we would describe as unpleasant but beneficial [d]. We would not choose to have them for their own sakes, but only for the payment or other benefits which result from them.'

'Yes,' I said, 'there is this third class as well. What of it?'

'In which of these classes,' he asked, 'do you put justice?'

'IN my opinion,' I replied, 'it is in the finest class, which is to be valued by anyone who wants to be happy, both for itself and its consequences [358].'

'That's not what most people think,' he said. 'Most people would put it in the unpleasant class, which we should cultivate in return for payment and reputation, on account of public opinion, but which purely for itself is to be avoided like the plague.'

'I know that's what they think,' I said. 'Thrasymachus criticized it – and praised injustice – on these grounds some while back. But I'm a slow learner, apparently.'

[*Republic* 357-8 all *Republic* trans. Griffith]

2. Introduction to the good

'You can say that this thing which gives the things that are known their truth, and from which the knower draws his ability to know, is the form or character of the good [508e]. Because it is the cause of knowledge and truth, think of it by all means as something known. But you will be right to regard it as different from, and still more beautiful than, knowledge and truth, beautiful though both of these are [509]. Just as in our example it is correct to think of light and vision as sun-like, but incorrect to think that they *are* the sun, in the same way here it is correct to think of knowledge and truth as good-like, but incorrect to think that either of them *is* the good. The good is something to be prized even more highly.'

[*Republic* 508d-509a]

3. The long way round

'Maybe, Socrates, there is some truth in the saying that the good never comes easily.'

‘So it seems [d]. And I have to tell you, Glaucon, that in my view we are certainly not going to find a precise answer to our enquiry by the kind of methods we are using at the moment in our argument. There *is* a way of getting there, but it is longer and more time-consuming.’

[*Republic* 435c-d]

‘You may remember us distinguishing three elements of the soul, with a view to drawing conclusions about justice, self-discipline, courage and wisdom – about what each of these things was.’

‘If I didn’t remember *that*, I would deserve to miss the rest of this discussion.’

‘Can you remember what came just before that?’

‘No. What?’

‘What we said, I believe, was that we could either get the best possible view of them, but only after a long detour at the end of which they would be clearly revealed, or we could give an explanation on a level with the discussion so far [b]. You said that was good enough, and as a result what was said then fell short of complete accuracy, in my opinion, though whether it was good enough for your purposes is for you to say..... What is incomplete can never be the measure of anything, though for some people there are times when they are satisfied with that and feel they don’t have to look any further. It is not a feeling we want a guardian of our city and laws to have.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘In which case, my friend, our guardian must go round by the longer road.’ [*Republic* 504a-d]

4. The form of the good, and other forms.

‘For the things which are known, say not only that their being known comes from the good, but also that they get their existence and their being from it as well – though the good is not being, but something far surpassing being in rank and power.’ [*Republic* 509b]

‘The same applies to just and unjust, good and bad, and all the forms or characters of things. Each is itself one, but because they appear all over the place, through their association with various activities and bodies and with each other, each gives the appearance of being many.’

‘Correct,’ he said.

‘That, then, is how I distinguish those you were talking about just now – those who enjoy being spectators, those who take pleasure in any art or skill, people who are active – from the subjects of our present discussion, the people whom alone we could truly call philosophers [b].’

‘Explain.’

‘Well, I imagine that audiences and spectators can take pleasure in beautiful sounds and colours and shapes, and in everything which is created from these elements, but that their minds are incapable of seeing, and taking pleasure in, the nature of beauty itself.’

‘True.’

Whereas those who are capable of approaching beauty itself and seeing it just by itself, would be few in number, wouldn’t they?’ [*Republic* 476a-c]

‘I no longer understand or recognise those other sophisticated causes, and if someone tells me that a thing is beautiful because it has a bright colour or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons – for all these confuse me – but I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or the sharing in, or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for

I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful.’ [Phaedo 100d-e trans. Grube]

5. Korsgaard’s distinctions in goodness

The natural contrast to intrinsic goodness – the value a thing has "in itself" – is extrinsic goodness – the value a thing gets from some other source. The natural contrast to a thing that is valued instrumentally or as a means is a thing that is valued for its own sake or as an end. There are, therefore, two distinctions in goodness. One is the distinction between things valued for their own sakes and things valued for the sake of something else – between ends and means, or final and instrumental goods. The other is the distinction between things which have their value in themselves and things which derive their value from some other source: intrinsically good things versus extrinsically good things. Intrinsic and instrumental good should not be treated as correlatives, because they belong to two different distinctions.

[Christine Korsgaard, ‘Two distinctions in goodness’, *Philosophical Review* Vol. 92, No. 2 (Apr., 1983), pp. 169-195, p. 170]

6. Williams on constructing an intrinsic good

‘We give up the unrewarding idea of intrinsic goodness being self-explanatory. We say that something is intrinsically good if we need to value it as intrinsically good, and we can make sense of our doing so. The formula ‘we can make sense of our doing so’ is intended to secure a place in this discussion for something that is almost always a good idea in philosophy, explanation without reduction.....If we can make sense of these things [trust and trustworthiness] as intrinsic goods, we are not *pretending* that they are intrinsic goods. That would be something else: it would be to pretend that we needed them, or to pretend that we can make sense of them as intrinsic goods, and neither of these things need be so. If we can make sense of trustworthiness in such terms, then we shall have *constructed* an intrinsic good.’ [Williams, ‘Intrinsic goodness’, p. 136-7]

7. Crude Gyges

‘As he sat with the rest of them, he happened to twist the setting of the ring towards him, into the palm of his hand [360]. When he did this, he became invisible to those who were sitting with him, and they started talking about him as if he were gone. He was amazed, and twisted the ring again, turning the setting to the outside. As soon as he did so, he became visible. When he realized this, he started experimenting with the ring, to see if it did have this power. And he found out that this was how it was. When he turned the setting to the inside, he became invisible; when he turned it to the outside, he became visible. Once he had established this, he lost no time in arranging to be one of those making the report to the king [b]. When he got there, he seduced the king’s wife, plotted with her against the king, killed him and seized power.’ [Republic 359e-360b]

8. A prizegiving?

‘Shall we hire a herald, then?’ I asked. ‘Or shall I announce the result myself [c]? “The verdict of the son of Aristo is this: The best and the most just character is the happiest. This is the one who is the most kingly, the one who is king over himself. The worst and the most unjust if the unhappiest, and he is in fact the one with the most tyrannical nature, the one who is the greatest tyrant over himself and his city.”’ [Republic 580b-c]

‘Do you know *how much* more unpleasant the tyrant’s life is than the king’s?’
 ‘Not unless you tell me,’ he said.
 ‘....Numerically, then, the tyrant is three times three removes from true pleasure..’
 ‘So it seems.’
 ‘And as for the total length of this distance,’ I said, ‘it looks as if the image of the tyrant’s pleasure is a plane number.’
 ‘Just so’.
 ‘And by squaring and cubing it becomes clear how far removed the tyrant is.’
 ‘Clear enough,’ he said, ‘to anyone who can do the arithmetic.’
 Conversely, if you are talking about how far removed the king is from the tyrant, in terms of true pleasure, you will find, when you complete the multiplication, that his life is nine-and-twenty-and-seven-hundred fold [729fold] more pleasant, and that a tyrant is more wretched by the same amount.’ [Republic 587b, 587d]

9. Natures and second natures

‘Education and upbringing,’ I said. ‘If the guardians are well educated, and grow up into men of sound judgement, they will have no difficulty at all in seeing this for themselves, plus other things we are saying nothing about – such as taking wives, marriage and having children [424]. They will see the necessity of making everything as nearly as possible ‘shared among friends’, in the words of the proverb.’
 ‘Yes that would be best,’ he said.
 ‘Once it gets off to a good start,’ I said, ‘our regime will be a kind of virtuous circle. If you can keep a good system of upbringing and education, they produce naturally good specimens. These in their turn, if they receive a good education, develop into even better specimens than their predecessors [b]. Better in general, and better in particular for reproduction.’ [Republic 423e-424b]

10. The cave and the sun

‘If we’re thinking about the effect of education – or the lack of it – on our nature, there’s another comparison we can make [514]. Picture [‘see’] human beings living in some sort of underground cave dwelling, with an entrance which is long, as wide as the cave, and open to the light. Here they live, from earliest childhood, with their legs and necks in chains, so that they have to stay where they are, looking only ahead of them, prevented by the chains from turning their heads [b]....’ [Republic 514a-b]
 ‘That is the picture, then, my dear Glaucon [b]. And it fits what we were talking about earlier in its entirety. The region revealed to us by sight is the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside the dwelling is the power of the sun. If you identify the upward path and the view of things above with the ascent of the soul to the realm of understanding, then you will have caught my drift – my surmise – which is what you wanted to hear. Whether it is really true, perhaps only god knows. My own view, for what it is worth, is that in the realm of what can be known the thing seen last, and seen with great difficulty, is the form or character of the good. But when it is seen, the conclusion must be that it turns out to be the cause of all that is right and good for everything [c]. IN the realm of sight it gives birth to light and light’s sovereign, the sun, while in the realm of thought it is itself sovereign, producing truth and reason unassisted. I further believe that anyone who is going to act wisely either in private life or in public life must have had a sight of this.’ [Republic 517a-c]

11. Powers

‘Shall we say that capacities [‘powers’] are a class of things which make us capable of doing whatever we are doing, and make anything else capable of doing whatever *it* is capable of doing? For example, I would classify sight and hearing as capacities, if you understand what I mean by the category [c].’

‘Yes, I do understand,’ he said.

‘Then let me tell you what I think about them. A capacity has no colour or shape for me to see, nor any such property that I would normally refer to in other situations in order to distinguish one class of things from another in my own mind. The only element of a capacity I consider is what it is directed at and what its effect is [‘what it accomplishes’]. That is how I classify each capacity [d]. Any capacity which is directed at the same object and has the same effect I call the same capacity, and any capacity which is directed at a different object and has a different effect, I call a different capacity.’ [Republic 477b-d]

12. The yoke of the good

‘... the link [‘the yoke’] between the faculty of sight and the ability [‘power’] to be seen is something more valuable than the links between the other faculties and their objects [508]. Unless, of course, light has no value.’

‘Well, it certainly *does* have a value.’

‘Which of the heavenly gods, then, do you take to be the agent responsible for this? Whose is the light which best enables our faculty of sight to see, and the things which are seen to be seen?’

‘The one you or anyone else would take to be responsible,’ he said. ‘The one you’re asking about is obviously the sun.’ [Republic 507e-508a]

‘In the world of thought the good stands in just the same relation to thinking and the things which can be thought as the sun, in the world of sight, stands to seeing and the things which can be seen.’

‘What do you mean,’ he said. ‘Please explain that a bit further.’

‘You know that when the eyes stop being directed at objects whose colours are in daylight, and turn to those whose colours are lit by the lights of the night, they are dimmed, and become virtually blind, as if there were no clear sight in them.’

‘They certainly do’.

‘Whereas when they are directed at things whose colours have the light of the sun shining on them, they see distinctly [d]. The same eyes now manifestly do have sight in them.’

‘Of course.’

‘You can look at the soul in the same way. When it focuses where truth and that which is shine forth, then it understands and knows what it sees, and does appear to possess intelligence. But when it focuses on what is mingled with darkness, on what comes into being and is destroyed, then it resorts to opinion and is dimmed, as its opinions swing first one way and then another. Now, by contrast, it resembles something with no understanding.’ [Republic 508b-d: runs on into 2 above]

13. McDowell on secondary qualities and responsiveness

‘Secondary qualities are qualities not adequately conceived except in terms of certain subjective states, and thus subjective themselves in a sense that that characterisation defines. IN the natural contrast, a primary quality would be objective in the sense that what it is for something to have it can be adequately understood iotherwise than in terms of

dispositions or give rise to certain subjective states. Now this contrast between objective and subjective is not a contrast between veridical and illusory experience. But it is easily confused with a different contrast, in which to call a putative object of awareness 'objective' is to say that it is there to be experienced, as opposed to being a mere figment of the subjective state that purports to be an experience of it. If secondary qualities were subjective in the sense that naturally contrasts with this, naïve consciousness would indeed be wrong about them, and we would need something like Mackie's Lockean picture of the error it commits. What is acceptable, though, is only that secondary qualities are subjective in the first sense, and it would be simply false to suppose this gives any support to the idea that they are subjective in the second.'

[John McDowell, 'Values and secondary qualities' in McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* [Harvard: 1998] 131-150, p. 136]

14. Williams on forms

'The problems [sc. with the notion of something that is absolutely good or beautiful] do not come simply from the idea that the goodness or beauty of such a thing must be self-explanatory. A major problem is that the thing is meant to explain the goodness or beauty of everything else which is good or beautiful; hence that it cannot be any specific sort of good or beautiful thing; hence that there is nothing about it which explains its goodness or beauty; and hence, seemingly, that it is good or beautiful and nothing else at all. This is surely unintelligible.'

[Williams, 'Intrinsic goodness, p.129]

'Commentators discuss 'the Theory of Forms, but there is really no such things (which is why there is no question to be answered of whether or when Plato gave it up). It is more helpful to see Plato as having a general conception of a Form, in the sense of some such abstract, intellectual object; having also a set of philosophical questions; and as continually asking how such objects might contribute, in various ways, to answering those various questions.'

[Williams, 'Plato: the invention of philosophy' in *The Sense of the Past*, 148-186, p.170]

15. Thrasymachus on how not to argue

'How am I to persuade you?' he [Thrasymachus] asked. 'If you're not convinced by what I said now, what more can I do for you? Do you want me to sit here and cram the argument in with a spoon?'

[*Republic* 345b]

16. Transformative goods

'In sum, Cleinias,' he [Socrates] said, 'it seems likely that all the things we said in the beginning are good – our argument is not of this matter as far as they are concerned, how they are naturally good themselves by themselves, but it seems that things are like this: if ignorance leads them, they are greater evils than their opposites, insofar as they are better able to serve an evil master, but if understanding and wisdom lead them, they are greater goods; but in themselves they are worthless. It seems so, as you say, he said. What then follows from what we have said? Isn't it exactly that none of the other things is good nor bad, but these things alone: wisdom is good, ignorance is bad.'

[*Euthydemus* 281d-e my trans.]

Virtue does not come from money, but from virtue money and other things come to be good for human beings - yes, all other things, both in private and in public life.

[*Apology* 30b [trans Burnyeat]

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