

## ON ASCERTAINING WHAT IS INTRINSICALLY GOOD

KAI NIELSEN

The claim of the hedonist is that pleasure and pleasure *alone* is intrinsically good. That is all enjoyable or pleasant states of consciousness and *only* enjoyable or pleasant states of consciousness are worth wanting for themselves alone. Is this the state of affairs that we are or should be aiming at? Is this the end of all ethical endeavour and the point of living, *i.e.*, to maximize enjoyable or pleasant states of consciousness and to minimize suffering and pain? Is this the ultimate end of action? Is it in such activity that we would find the meaning of life?

To come to grips with such questions and indeed with hedonism we need at the very least to resolve the following logically prior question: How would we determine whether anything is intrinsically good? Recall that the identifying property of intrinsic value is "being prized for its own sake." Utilizing that conception is it not evident that pleasure and pleasure alone is intrinsically good? Is it not the case that pleasure and only pleasure is prized for its own sake or that if it is not the only thing which is actually so prized that it is the only thing which is reasonably so prized?<sup>1</sup> The claim is that only such states are prized for their own sake. But how do we decide when something is prized for its own sake? And is this an adequate test for intrinsic goodness, *i.e.*, for whether something is *worth* having or experiencing for its own sake or whether it is desirable in and of itself independently of its consequences?

If most people desired or wanted *only* pleasant or enjoyable states of consciousness for their own sake, this – it could be argued – would show that they regarded such states and only such states as intrinsically good. But to this it is natural to respond that we cannot determine what is good, even what is intrinsically good, by a public opinion poll. People can and do make errors. It is perfectly intelligible to remark "It is generally believed that x is good but whether x really is good is actually doubtful." Can this actually be so for *intrinsic* goods or evils? Surely it can be so for *extrinsic* goods, but isn't that a different matter? How can we possibly make a mistake or for that matter make a correct judgement – indeed a genuine judgement at all – when we "judge" something to be intrinsically good or bad? Yet does it not also remain true that if "x is generally believed to be intrinsically good," then "x is intrinsically good" is *not* an inference that we can safely make?

---

<sup>1</sup> Note the elucidatory talk about intrinsic good in Paul Taylor (ed.) *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Second Edition), (Belmont California: Dickenson Publishing Company Inc., 1972) pp. 441-445 and concerning hedonism pp. 445-449.

We are tempted to say that but we are equally tempted to ask whether there is or can be any *test* for something being intrinsically good other than the fact (if it is a fact) that people sincerely believe something to be intrinsically good (wanted in itself). But if this is so, then it may very well be the case that all “judgements” of intrinsic goodness are so essentially contested and so unavoidably *subjective* that there can be no moral knowledge at all.

The hedonist claims that only pleasure is intrinsically good and the pluralist claims that self-identity and some kinds of knowledge are intrinsically good as well. Is it that they are just clashing in their attitudes and that no amount of careful examination and reflection would resolve this? Sidgwick and Blake say that they are aware by an immediate intuitive insight that only pleasant states of consciousness are intrinsically good. Ross and Prichard have different intuitions. How can we tell, or can we tell, whose intuitions are right? Moreover, what is this very notion of intuition? How do we know what (if anything) is a genuine intuition as distinct from a non-genuine intuition?<sup>2</sup> And if we are able to ascertain this, why do we need (or do we) an appeal to intuition at all?

Because of these and similar difficulties, some have wished to challenge either the coherence or the utility of the very notion of intrinsic goodness. But surely the following characterization is at least coherent. To say that *x* is intrinsically good is to say that *ceteris paribus* the existence or occurrence of *x* is more desirable than the nonexistence of *x* because of *its own nature alone*, completely apart from any positive or negative desirability possessed by things to which *x* is conducive or the price that we have to pay to have or retain *x*. And, given this conception, it is claimed, we can determine whether something is intrinsically good by ascertaining if it is prized for its own sake or wanted in itself.<sup>3</sup> This is comparable to Mill’s claim that we ascertain (not derive) what is intrinsically good by finding out what people do actually desire.

However, if we take this quite plausible tack how do we answer the objection that sometimes what people prize is bad and is not worth having for its own sake and that sometimes people desire what is not worth having for its own sake and that something people desire what is indeed not desirable in and of itself? Is it just a mistake to say these things?

The central reply made by both Bentham and Mill is essentially *ad hominem*, though here it is on such a general scale and at such a last ditch point that there *may* be nothing wrong with its being *ad hominem*. They ask people to be psychologically realistic and non-evasive about themselves and their reflective practices. Considering the matter in this light, we are to ask what better test can there be of the intrinsic goodness or desirability of something

<sup>2</sup> I discuss this in my *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 288-295.

<sup>3</sup> Georg von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 100-3.

than the fact that it is desired by people on reflection.<sup>4</sup> Yet this move seems at least to lead to a kind of subjectivism, namely to the belief that to find out what is intrinsically good is to find out what people on reflection and when they know what they are doing *want*. If, on the one hand, it turns out that people want different and even conflicting things under such conditions, then we should in candour admit that they are all in an equally justified position to claim that these things are intrinsically good and that – where their judgements conflict – there is and can be no Archimedian point in virtue of which we can claim one person's judgement is correct and the other's is wrong. If, on the other hand, they just happen to agree this only shows that there is a *de facto* consensus.

Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick and Blake wanted to avoid subjectivism, but the point is can they?<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it lies at the heart of their claims and at the heart of the claims of their deontological opponents as well.

The University of Calgary

---

<sup>4</sup> E. W. Hall, *Categorical Analysis* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964), pp. 93-132.

<sup>5</sup> It could be and indeed has been argued that subjectivism lacks a coherent form. I have tried to argue that no such short way with subjectivism is justified in my "Varieties of Ethical Subjectivism", *Danish Year Book of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 (1970), pp. 73-87 and in my "Does Subjectivism Have a Coherent Form?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, (1974).