CHAPTER 5

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SHOULD WE PASS THE BUCK?

My topic is the relation between the right and the good. I introduce it by relating some aspects of the debate between various British intuitionists in the first half of the present century.

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In *Principia Ethica* (1903) G. E. Moore claimed that to be right is to be productive of the greatest good. He wrote “This use of “right”, as denoting what is good as a means, whether or not it be also good as an end, is indeed the use to which I shall confine the word” (p. 18). By the time he wrote his *Ethics* (1912, e.g. p. 6) he seems to have weakened his position, and offers conduciveness to the good not as a definition of ‘right’ but as an account of the one and only property that makes acts right. Even if it be the only right-making property, conduciveness to the good will not be identical with the rightness that it makes.

One might ask why Moore changed his view, and an obvious answer is that he came to see that the notorious Open Question Argument, by which he strove to establish that goodness is not identical with any good-making feature, can be used equally well to show the same thing of rightness. If it is an open question whether goodness is conduciveness to happiness, it is equally an open question whether rightness is conduciveness to goodness. And if, as Moore claimed in the first case, its being an open question shows that the answer to it is no, the same applies in the second case.

W D. Ross details all these matters with further references, and with his customary clarity, in the early pages of his *The Right and the Good* (1930, pp. 8-11). Though he argues that Moore’s second view is a vast improvement on his first, Ross’s own position is quite different. Rightness and goodness are utterly distinct; indeed, no one thing can be both right and good. Goodness, for Ross, is a property of motives and outcomes, and rightness is a property of acts. An act can be intrinsically right or wrong, but never intrinsically good or bad. Acts can be instrumentally good, or conducive to good; but Ross announces, surely correctly, that instrumental value is not a form of value at all. So it turns out that acts can have no value at all. Motives, by contrast, can be intrinsically good or bad but never right or wrong. On this picture the very idea that one might define the right in terms of

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the good is quite peculiar. Also peculiar is the idea that the only way that an action could get to be right is by having the best consequences.

H. W. B. Joseph’s response to this in his *Some Problems in Ethics* (1931) was that Ross’s position was absurd. ‘Why’, he asked, ‘ought I to do that, the doing which has no value (though my being moved to do it by the consciousness that I ought, has), and which being done causes nothing to be which has value? Is not duty in such a case irrational?’ (p. 26). Rightness, for Joseph, must be in some way dependent on goodness. He pursued this idea by claiming that the word ‘right’ is ambiguous. In one sense it means ‘obligatory’, and Joseph writes (p. 61) that ‘obligatoriness is not a character of actions. There is no ought-to-be-done-ness, or ought-to-be-forborne-ness. To say that an act is obligatory means that the doing it is obligatory on me.’ In the other sense, ‘rightness is a form of goodness, to the realising of which the actions belong; and it is the thought of goodness which moves us when we do an action from a sense of obligation’ (p. 104). In this way Joseph rejects Ross’s claim that rightness and goodness are utterly distinct.

In his second book *The Foundation of Ethics* (1939) Ross’s position becomes more complex. He has already argued that there are two uses of ‘good’, attributive and predicative. The attributive use is at issue when we speak of a good liar or a good knife. The predicative use is the one that is of importance for ethics, and it is found when we speak of a good man, or claim that virtue, knowledge and pleasure are good. Ross claims that when we say that the pleasure of others is good, we mean that it is a proper object of satisfaction. This is a ‘definition’ of this use of ‘good’. When we speak of a man, or of a motive, as being morally good, however, we mean something else, something that cannot be defined but only paraphrased (p. 283). The paraphrase is that the good, in this use of ‘good’, is a proper object of approval, worthy of approval or admiration.

Why is this not a definition? Because Ross is still sticking to his original view that goodness, in *this* sense, is an intrinsic property of objects, not a relation. If being good in this sense were being worthy of approval or admiration, it would be a relation. But it is not; this sort of goodness is the property that in approving or admiring we take the object approved or admired to have. For to approve is to think good, and ‘admiration is not a mere emotion; it is an emotion accompanied by the thought that that which is admired is good’ (pp. 278-9).

It is worth pausing to note what Ross means by a relation here. It is not what we would ordinarily mean, because we would ordinarily think that for a relation to obtain, there must be at least two relata and both must, in the relevant sense, exist. But in suggesting (even if only to reject the idea) that goodness might be a relation, Ross is clearly not thinking of relations in this way. For something can be worthy of approval even if no approval and no approver is forthcoming. Further, though Ross thinks that goodness in this sense is not a relation, that is not his reason for rejecting the claim that goodness is identical with being worthy of admiration and approval. Ross’s real point is that the goodness that we take the object to have cannot be identical with its being worthy of our so taking it, because it must be that in the object that makes our so taking it an appropriate or fitting response.

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1 It is just possible that Ross thinks of the relevant relation as ‘being worthy of our approval’, which would bring him back into line on this point.