Prima facie good

'Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium'

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These opening lines of Schiller's "Ode to Joy" were immortalised as the text of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Choral Symphony. The majesty of the music can easily overwhelm the words, but we do well to focus on Schiller's meaning: 'Joy, beautiful spark of the Gods, daughter from Elysium.' The image is of joyful moments in this life as sparks of light in an otherwise dark world that provide fleeting glimpses of some higher wisdom or higher good. The suggestion of the poet is that through such experiences as joy we get our first intimations of the good; such experiences are windows through which value first enters into our human world.

Such a romantic image may seem of little significance to the philosopher who wishes to think about and to analyse notions of value. Yet I think it is of utmost importance. Schiller's image points to a notion that is central to value theory, though little discussed by philosophers, the notion of prima facie good — good in the first instance, other things being equal. (Throughout, the term 'prima facie' is italicised only for emphasis.) Properly understood, this notion can throw light on some of the most vexing problems of value theory, about the objectivity of value, the relation of fact to value, the meaning of 'good', the naturalistic fallacy, and other topics. In this essay, I discuss this notion of prima facie good, show why it is important for value theory, and how it can throw light on many of these philosophical problems.

The notion of prima facie good I have in mind is not the same as W.D. Ross' familiar notion of a prima facie duty.¹ The notion of prima facie good is about value in general, not moral or ethical value. It has conceptual roots that are different from those of the notion of prima facie duty and is not subject to the usual objections about prima facie duties that are usually associated with Ross' ethical intuitionism. Yet it is analogous to Ross' notion of prima facie duty in some enlightening ways and these will be considered.

To begin the discussion of prima facie good, I am going to turn to a figure
far removed from Ross. Schiller was not the first thinker to point to experiences like joy as indicative of our understanding of the good in general. One such thinker before him was Spinoza — a decidedly unromantic figure who was nevertheless admired by many of the Romantics. Spinoza's comments about good and evil in his *Ethics* point to a notion of prima facie good and provide a fruitful starting point for anyone wishing to understand the importance of this notion for value theory. Thus, I begin in Section I with a brief account of Spinoza's views about good and evil before turning in Section II to an account of prima facie good, and in Sections III and those following, to problems about the meaning of 'good', the fact-value distinction, and other topics.

I

In his commentary on proposition 39 of Part 3 of the *Ethics* Spinoza says that the good is 'every species of joy' (*laetitia*), particularly joy that results from the fruition of desire (*cupiditas*) and 'evil' means 'sorrow' or 'sadness' (*tristitia*) that comes from thwarted desire. 'Joy' he defines as the emotion 'wherein the mind passes to greater perfection.' (3, prop. 11, Scholium) It is the experience we have of the activity of self assertion or self maintenance which is the expression of the essence of any actual thing; and sorrow is its opposite.

Although this account of good and evil is only a preliminary one for Spinoza — the initial, inadequate conception of the plain man — it accords nicely with his well known doctrine that the perfection of anything, the object of its striving (*conatus*), is the persistence in its own special mode of being. (3, prop. 7) The experience of joy is the mental correlate (or idea) of an increase in the power of self expression and self maintenance of the body (3, definition 3); it is the felt increase in this power. Given Spinoza's account of the mental and physical, the mental experience of joy and the increase in bodily power are in fact two 'aspects' of the same phenomenon, and each signifies a movement toward self perfection. (3, prop. 11) Hence, joy (*laetitia*) is the experience 'wherein the mind passes to greater perfection.'

In these remarks I have translated Spinoza's 'laetitia' as 'joy' and 'tristitia' as 'sorrow' or 'sadness', as do many translators and commentators, including White, Laird and Curley. Others, like Hampshire and Shirley prefer the terms 'pleasure' and 'pain' respectively. Jonathan Bennett uses 'pleasure' and 'unpleasure'. While 'pleasure' and 'pain' have the advantage of being commonly used in ethical discussions, 'joy' and 'sorrow' are actually nearer to the Latin originals. But the broader truth is that none of these terms is