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PRACTICAL RATIONALITY FOR PLURALISTS ABOUT THE GOOD

ABSTRACT. I argue that if a normative theory of practical rationality is to represent an adequate and coherent response to a plurality of incommensurable goods, it cannot be a maximising theory. It will have to be a theory that recognises two responses to goods as morally licit – promotion and respect – and one as morally illicit – violation. This result has a number of interesting corollaries, some of which I indicate. Perhaps the most interesting is that it makes the existence of a plurality of incommensurable goods incompatible with consequentialism.

KEY WORDS: axiology, consequentialism, deontology, incommensurability, normative ethics, practical rationality

We are not arguing about just any old question. Our question is: How should life be lived?

(Socrates, in Plato, Republic 352d)

Human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. To assume that all values can be graded on a single scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the highest, seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide rule could, in principle, perform . . . the system builders . . . deprive men, in the name of some remote, or incoherent, ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings.

(Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958))

1.

I start with an intuitively almost irresistible assumption: There is not a single good but a plurality of different goods – an Objective List.1 Something qualifies for membership of the Objective List only if it is a final or basic good – something that can rationally be pursued, not merely as a means to some further end, but as an end in itself.2 (NB I say “can be

1Parfit’s term: Parfit (1984), Appendix C.
2The distinction that Christine Korsgaard draws between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ goods is a very different distinction, and will play no role in my argument here.

pursued”, not “is pursued”. It’s no news that basic goods are sometimes
treated instrumentally. Nor is such treatment always contrary to practical
rationality.)

The content of the Objective List is disputable. Different people’s lists
differ in interesting ways. They also show interesting overlaps:

Accomplishment, the components of human existence [i.e. life and health, liberty,
autonomy, “what makes life human”), understanding, enjoyment, deep personal rela-
tions.

(Griffin, 1985, p. 67)

Life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability, practical reasonableness, re-
ligion.

(Finnis, 1980, pp. 80–89)

Happiness, knowledge, purposeful activity, autonomy, solidarity, respect, and beauty.

(Railton, 1984, pp. 109–110)

Contingent substances that are living are superior in intrinsic value to those that are
not. . . Living substances that are capable of consciousness are superior in intrinsic
value to those that are not. . . Living substances that are rational are superior in in-
trinsic value to those that are not.

(Chisholm, 2001, p. 32)

For all their differences, these examples should give us some idea what it
might mean to say that there are different basic goods. Apparently that thesis
means that our practical reasons have more than one type of ground. Goods
are (basic, final) grounds of reasons; and (e.g.) friendship, health and know-
ledge are different types of ground for reasons.

But I hear complaints already. Let me try and deal briefly with two of
them.

Complaint #1: If the ontology of the goods is an ontology of types of
ground of reasons, then the ontology of the goods is mysterious.

Response: Alas, yes: the ontology of the goods isn’t yet adequately
understood. “What is a good?”, “What is it for a good to exist?”: we don’t
have decent answers to these questions. If I am right that goods are types
(of a certain type), then presumably goods are universals (of some type).
My own tentative suggestion would be that they are types of aspects (of
states of affairs, of actions, of events, of relations . . .). But that on its own
doesn’t get us far. And it is hard to see how to get further. It won’t do, for
instance, to say (as Aquinas, Grisez, Finnis and some others do) that the
goods are “aspects of human flourishing”, or “fulfilments of human ca-
pacities”. For (a) not all goods are this anthropocentric: the well-being of