Aristotle’s Theory of the Good and Its Causal Basis

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1. Goodness and Causality

A fundamental distinction in modern moral theory is that between intrinsic and instrumental goodness. Things that are intrinsically good are in some way good in themselves; instrumental goods, by contrast, are, as such, good only in virtue of their role in promoting other good things (ultimately, intrinsically good things). This distinction is arguably dependent on a generally Humean theory of causality.\(^1\) Instrumental goods are good only because they stand in a causal relation to intrinsic goods; because Humean causal relations are purely external, that is, involve no essential connection between cause and effect, the instrumental good’s standing in such a causal relation to an intrinsic good goes no way to showing that it is good in itself.

Many moral philosophers have found the intrinsic / instrumental distinction inadequate to capture our views about the different ways things can be good. One of the reasons for this is that, if one takes the distinction as exhaustive, one is very likely to end up maintaining that the only things intrinsically good are certain mental states or experiences, usually pleasant ones, while all other good things are merely instrumental in bringing those states about. Some philosophers who shy away from such a conclusion have therefore distinguished additional types of goodness. Thus philosophers following G.E.Moore have distinguished the “contributive value” possessed by something that forms part of an intrinsically valuable “organic unity,” while C.I.Lewis holds that objects of an intrinsically valuable experience (e.g., the painting one views) may have “inherent value.” These additions to the intrinsic / instrumental division have not found general acceptance among moral philosophers, however. This is due, I suspect, to the obscurity in such theories concerning the relationship between the things with these other

\(^1\) That the Humean assumptions imbedded in this distinction render problematic its use in interpreting ancient theories of the good has been pointed out by N.White, “The Classification of Goods in Plato’s Republic”, Journal of the History of Philosophy 22 (1984) 393-421.

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kinds of goodness and the items of intrinsic goodness from which they
derive their value. This derivation would seem to depend on some sort of
causal relationship between the non-intrinsically good thing and the in-
trinsically good thing; but in the context of a Humean causal theory, there is
no room for the non-instrumental causality here called for, which must
therefore remain unsatisfyingly mysterious.

The above suggests that any viable revision of or addition to the basic
dichotomy of goods will require a revision of or addition to the theory of
causation. C. Korsgaard has powerfully argued for a Kantian revision of the
standard dichotomy; it gains its power, I suggest, from its implicit depend-
ence on a Kantian notion of the causality of reason. Korsgaard insists that
the intrinsic / instrumental dichotomy represents a conflation of two dis-
tinctions: that between intrinsic and extrinsic goods, and that between final
goods (ends) and instrumental means to those ends. Separating these two
distinctions allows Korsgaard to consider the possibility of extrinsic goods
— goods that derive their worth from some other goods external to them —
that are nonetheless valued as ends. She makes sense of this possibility by
means of the Kantian distinction between conditional and unconditional
goods. An unconditioned good is good under any and all conditions, good
solely in and of itself; it therefore satisfies the standard definition of an
intrinsic good. A conditioned good, by contrast, is good only under certain
conditions. Instrumental goods count as conditioned goods, since they are
good only if they satisfy the condition that they help bring about some end.
On the Kantian theory, however, the ends that are the immediate conditions
of the worth of instrumental goods are not unconditionally good either, but
are themselves merely conditioned goods. The ends that give value to in-
strumental goods are, ultimately, the satisfaction of our needs and desires.
But the only unconditional good for Kant is the good will; the satisfaction
of our inclinations is good only when it satisfies the condition of being
pursued with a good will, that is, in accordance with the Categorical Imper-
active. This condition is quite different from the condition that merely in-
strumental goods must meet. Instrumental goods must be linked by physical
causal laws to certain ends; these ends must be pursued with a good will,

3 "Kant's notion of unconditional value therefore corresponds to the notion of intrinsic
goodness as nonrelational..." (Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions" 178).
4 Korsgaard points out that, for Kant, the goodness of even instrumental goods depends
on a certain sort of rationality: "[I]t is not because of the ontological property of being
productive of an intrinsically good end that means are good but rather because of the law
of practical reason that whoever wills the end, so far as reason has decisive influence on
his action, wills also the indispensably necessary means to it that lie in his power"