Caring Beings and the Immanence of Value:

An Inquiry into the Foundations of Interpersonal Morality

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Introduction

Few philosophical tasks can be accounted more important than the attempt to clarify the meaning of the word 'good.' Indeed, without such clarification it is impossible to distinguish the important from the unimportant, as all claims to importance must appeal to some criteria of value, and all criteria of value must appeal to some notion of good. To gain insight into the meaning of this word, then, is a precondition to the ability to make any value-claim whatsoever.

Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with the statement: "The good has been well-defined as that at which all things aim." This statement suggests that one might pursue the good simply by pursuing one's aims and desires. Such might suffice as a definition were it not that demands of interpersonal morality often require the sacrifice or deferral of one's own desires for the sake of others. Such considerations suggest that the meaning of good must be divorced from reference to strictly personal aims and desires. But from the moment we effect this divorce we begin swimming in ethical vapor. Perhaps the good, then, is what God desires, or what is 'orderly,' or what is 'rational,' or what is best for the society at large, etc. Or perhaps, given that all these answers have an air of arbitrariness about them, we must accept that the very word 'good' has merely conventional or functional meaning, and any search for its 'true' meaning is misguided.

All this confusion, I believe, stems from what I will call the *ethical paradox*; i.e., the paradox that ethical life, as conventionally understood, often demands the sacrifice, or compromise, of what seems one's *own* good for the sake of others. Apart from this paradox Aristotle's definition might be relatively unproblematic.

In the following I would like to do three things. First, I would like to defend a version of Aristotle's definition as providing true insight into the meaning of the term *good*. Second, I would like to show how interpersonal morality can indeed be derived from this understanding of the good. And finally I would like to briefly consider the implications of this for ethical theory.

I. Desire and the Good

The very idea of good involves the idea of an imperative, a *should*. To speak of a good that *should not* be realized is oxymoronic. This lends credence to Aristotle's definition of the good as "that at which all things aim." In Aristotelian metaphysics, of course, all things are believed to have aims; that is, the universe is envisioned as fundamentally teleological. In our mechanistically minded age, the notion that things in general have natural aims is largely disputed. It is easy to see how this fact itself must engender a certain amount of ethical confusion. If we define good as "that at which all things aim," then the transition from a teleological to a mechanistic conception of the universe cannot but lead to doubt as to the very meaning and relevance of the term good. Perhaps the very idea of good is simply a relic of an archaic metaphysic.

And yet such a suggestion is contradicted by common experience. All value distinctions must employ an implicit appeal to some notion of good; even if it is only 'the

good for me.' If one chooses to go right as opposed to left, eat this meal as opposed to that, advance one view as opposed to another, one expresses a preference, and preference itself implies some idea of good.

This strongly suggests that the idea of good is not tied to a particular metaphysical system, but has its basis, rather, in some more primitive human experience. And indeed, a bit of reflection suggests that Aristotle's metaphysically laden definition of good as “that at which *all* things aim” is but an extrapolation and generalization of a far more basic notion of good as 'that at which *I* aim'; i.e., that which satisfies my needs and desires.

A full genealogical treatment of the idea of good is beyond the scope of this paper. It might be helpful, however, to make a few preliminary observations. The claim that the word good has the primitive meaning of 'that which satisfies desire' gains *prima facia* support from the frequency with which we use it to mean just this. When I am hungry food is good. When I am thirsty drink is good, etc. Of course, this gives the idea of good a decidedly private and subjective signification. Whence, then, does it derive its *objective* sense? It is possible to see this as a function of the sociality of language itself. From the moment ‘good’ becomes a word it transcends the private sphere and acquires the universal scope native to language as such, despite the indeterminacy of that to which it now points. We now find this universalized idea institutionalized in cultural and religious forms, and formalized in abstract metaphysical systems. As such, it becomes instrumental in providing a conceptual foundation for societal value-formation; i.e., *ethics*.

Indeterminate though it be, this metaphysicalized idea of good has practical value for any society as a solution to the ethical paradox. To the extent that private good is seen as subsisting under transcendent good, the transcendent good can be raised as an ethical

standard over and against the private, demanding sacrifice in its name. Sanctions, of one sort or another, can now be imposed or merely threatened, to correlate the interests of the private with the interests of the transcendent, rendering conformity to the transcendent personally compelling.

Of course, this situation is highly subject to abuse. The very indeterminacy of the 'transcendent good' allows it to be invoked in support of any value-claim whatsoever. Hence one atrocity after another can be committed "in the name of God." Nor is it possible to render reasoned criticism against such abuse, for the indeterminacy and transcendency of the good shield it from critical scrutiny. This, in turn, leads to a reaction against metaphysical thinking itself.

And precisely to the extent that the good has been rendered metaphysical, its signification is obscured with the breakdown of metaphysical thinking. Thus we enter into a crisis of ethical definition. Nietzsche's famous 'Death of God' passage in *The Gay Science* remains among the most striking expressions of this crisis. Dostoevsky's famous line, "If God doesn't exist all is permissible" is a more concise statement of the same. Having grounded ethical principles in the transcendent for so long, skepticism concerning the transcendent yields ethical confusion. Where, now, is the ground of value to be located?

To answer this question, I believe, we must return to the primitive signification of good as the 'satisfaction of desire,' and carefully examine its implications.

The first thing I wish to do is replace the word 'desire' with a word less associated with sensual pursuits. Of course human beings have sensual desires, but we have many others

as well. The mother's desire for the well-being of her child is as much a real desire as the glutton's desire for his next meal. In order to convey this broader concept of desire I will use the word *caring*. Insofar as there is a matter about which one *cares*, that matter may be said to have a good and a bad associated with it. The word caring recommends itself for two reasons. First, in common language, anything about which we say we care is something with respect to which we have some desire or other. Second, I use the term with a nod to Heidegger, who employs the term Care to designate the concernful dynamic of human temporality, which he regards as basic to human existence itself, and which I find expressive of the value-laden character of human life.

It is with respect to the phenomenon of *caring*, then, that we find, primitively, something like a good and a bad, and good and bad may each be defined, respectively, as that toward which caring tends and that from which caring avers. It is apparent that this definition makes the good relative to a given instance of caring. But such relativism must be seen as radically distinct from the conventionalism often associated with it. Although the good is good only relative to some instance of caring, caring itself, at least at its most primitive, is not rooted in social convention. Even the smallest infant shows signs of desire, i.e., *caring*, prior to and independent of any societal influence. Caring is an ontological fact, not a conventional artifact. It is my view that the ontological reality of caring lies at the basis of the very concept of value.

Of course, we do not find free-floating instances of caring seeking their individual satisfaction disconnected from all else. Rather we find *caring beings* in which individual desires and impulses are related to one another in complex ways. And although requisites of exposition have made it necessary for us to focus, first, upon the individual instance of

caring or desire in order to reveal the meaning of the word good at its most primitive, we must now raise our sights to recognize that it is the satisfaction of the caring bein*g* as a *whole* to which the words good and bad must ultimately refer. Let us designate this overall state of satisfaction 'well-being' and define a 'caring being' as a being with an *impetus* to well-being. For any caring being its well-being is its good and its ill-being is its bad. We can further say that it is only with respect to caring beings, i.e., beings with an impetus to well-being, that the terms good and bad have relevance. Rocks, insofar as they are not caring beings, do not have a good or a bad relative to them.

It is important to get clear about the uniqueness of caring's relativity vis-à-vis other things we speak of as having relative value. Generally, when we say that something has relative value we mean that its value is relative to something other than itself. For instance, paper money is only valuable relative to a given society's willingness to honor it. Should this change, the value of the paper changes as well. The paper money, thus, has no intrinsic value.

But the situation is quite different with caring. Although a caring being's value is relative in a sense, it is relative to *itself*. A caring being is a value to itself. Thus, we cannot alter caring's value by altering something else in the world. Even if the entire universe were emptied of all but one caring being – still the value of that caring being would remain. For its value is *to itself* and hence *in itself*. Thus, we may speak of caring as having *intrinsic value* and even, in a sense, *absolute value*. Such value, we might say, to use the language of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, is “inalienable.” A caring being cannot be deprived of its value, for its value is inherent to the kind of being it is.

It can be shown, further, that all valuing must arise from the self-valuing of caring beings. At the start of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses the need for a *telos* of value to which any value-claim must ultimately be referred. For instance, a cup is valuable only because it serves to contain drink. Drink is valuable only because it serves to quench thirst, etc. But ultimately, any value claim must be referred to something that is valuable *in itself*, without reference to something else, otherwise the chain of reference would continue indefinitely with nothing ever cited from which value is originally conferred.

But what sort of thing could be valuable *in itself*? Kant famously cites 'rational nature' as an 'end in itself,' but it does not seem to me Kant ever states clearly what *makes* something an 'end in itself.' It is possible, however, to answer this question with clarity. Only that which is valuable *to* itself can be valuable *in* itself. This is clear from the following considerations: For anything to have value it must have value to someone who values it. A world devoid of anyone who values would also be a world devoid of anything *of* value. If we say that X is of value, then, it must be that X is valuable either to itself or to something else. Anything of value only to something else is obviously not of value *in itself*; it is merely a means to another end. Only that which is valuable *to itself* then, that which holds itself as valuable, can be valuable *in itself*. Hence, only that which is valuable *to itself* can be an 'end in itself,' a *telos* of value.

And this is just what we mean by *caring*. I have defined a caring being as a 'being with an impetus to well-being,' but this definition is just an attempt to express, in an accessible manner, the essential feature of self-valuing pertaining to every caring being. Every

caring being is a ground of value insofar as it values itself. To put it another way: To value oneself is the *necessary and sufficient* condition for being of intrinsic value.

Further, *only* caring can be a ground of value. Not only does caring ground value, but it should be clear that nothing *else* can ground value. Anything that does *not* value itself can only be valuable by reference to something else, and hence is not a ground of value. Thus the phenomenon of caring must be seen as the ground of *all* value, and the well-being of caring beings as that toward which all authentic valuing must tend.

It is the work of the virtue ethicist to examine the nature of, and the way to, human well-being. It is often supposed by virtue ethicists that once virtue is achieved interpersonal morality will follow as a natural consequence. The most celebrated expression of this is the Socratic dictum that 'to know the good is to do the good.' The idea here is that a certain regard for others is necessary for the well-being of the moral agent, and, since all caring beings seek well-being, the truly enlightened agent will always, therefore, behave morally. This may or may not be true, but I contend that regardless of its truth, it does not provide the proper rationale for interpersonal morality. The rationale for interpersonal morality cannot be predicated upon the self-interest of the agent. A simple example will suffice to show this.

There is a moral dilemma I was introduced to as a child that will serve us nicely here: Imagine that a device has been rigged up through which you can deliver a disabling injury to some being on Alpha-Centauri by pushing a button. Suppose, also, that if you push this button you will be given a significant sum of money. Suppose, further, that the

universe is so configured that nothing you do to this other being will ever impact upon you, either physically or 'spiritually.' Is it wrong to push the button?

The whole purpose of this example, of course, is to exclude from consideration any appeal to the self-interest of the agent. Common morality tells us that it is still wrong to push the button, but the virtue ethicist, restricted to the appeal to enlightened self-interest, cannot tell us why. Indeed, here we confront the ethical paradox we noted above: If we are right in locating the seat of value in the impetus to well-being, then in the name of what value can it be maintained that one should put aside any part of one's own well-being for the sake of others? Whence comes the imperative for interpersonal morality?

II. The Ethical Paradox

I want to be quick to clarify the above question. I do not now ask it in the genealogical but in the normative sense. We are not interested in how, developmentally or historically, the human being comes to acquire an interpersonal morality, but in identifying the value that underwrites the imperative to interpersonal morality.

At this point it would be appropriate to review some of the classic answers to this question in the history of philosophy. Limitations of space, of course, make it impossible for me to do so fully or even adequately, but it will be helpful to make a few comments nonetheless.

Kantian rationalism tackles the problem head-on in its insistence that interpersonal morality be divorced from any appeal to the agent's will to happiness, and be, rather, grounded in the agent's rational will. The problems with Kantian rationalism, in my view,

are twofold. First, rational consistency, taken in itself, is an arbitrary standard of value. Why should rational consistency be regarded as a more valuable standard for behavior than, say, impulsive spontaneity? Second, to the extent that Kant attempts to ground the value of rational consistency in the value of the unity of the self, or the autonomy of the will, he ultimately reduces that value to the well-being of the person whose autonomy or unity is at stake. Thus, in spite of Kant's attempt to divorce his morality from the value of the agent's well-being, he ultimately appeals to it.

The Humean strategy of identifying a benevolent impulse in human nature as the ground of interpersonal morality famously commits the naturalist fallacy. To the extent that morality is predicated upon sentiments of the agent, when those sentiments are lacking so is the imperative for moral rectitude. Further, the appeal to benevolent sentiment is, ultimately, an appeal to the well-being of the agent, whose benevolent sentiments are, presumably, satisfied/expressed through moral action.

Utilitarianism makes a leap from the happiness of the individual to the happiness of the 'greatest number,' but the justification for this leap is never clearly articulated. It is clear why the happiness of the individual is of value to the individual, but it is unclear why the individual should concern herself with the 'greatest number.' Any attempt to justify this principle on the grounds that the individual has a stake in the good of society at large, is ultimately an appeal to the individual's self-interest.

Traditional Judeo-Christian deontology ('Divine command theory'), in which the imperative to interpersonal morality is derived from the dictates of God, commits what may be called the 'Euthyphro fallacy.' Put simply, it begs the question as to what is good *about* God's dictates. What grants them their authority or legitimacy?

Ironically, the ethicist who, in my view, comes closest to identifying the true locus of value for interpersonal morality is one who never intended to do any such thing: Friedrich Nietzsche. It is only Nietzsche, as far as I know, who locates the demand to respect the value of the other in the impetus to well-being (the 'will to power') *of* the other. In his *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche posits that interpersonal morality arises from the self-affirmation (the 'will to power') of the weak, who advance moral principles in order to make themselves feel better about their weakness, as well as to gain some leverage over the strong. The question, of course, is how can an imperative issuing from the moral patient (in this case, the weak) translate into an imperative for the moral agent. Nietzsche famously answers that it cannot, and this answer is the basis of his 'immoralism.' I wish to advance a different answer.

But before doing so let us consider more carefully the legitimacy of the patient's demand to be treated with respect. The moral patient, we say, insofar as he or she is a caring being, makes an implicit demand to be treated with respect. Or to express it more precisely, the impetus to well-being that constitutes the patient's *caring* already entails such a demand. The demand is implicit in the nature of caring itself. Caring *is* already a demand for respect of that about which it cares. In other words, the impetus to well-being entails the demand that well-being be *advanced* and not thwarted; to say this is simply to expand upon what we mean by the term 'impetus.'

In order to evaluate whether or not such a demand is legitimate, i.e., deserving of respect, we would seem to need some criterion of legitimacy other than the impetus to well-being itself, by which to judge it. But here we encounter a problem. Any criterion of legitimacy must appeal to some value-claim. But, as we have already noted, any value-

claim must be grounded in the caring of some caring being. Hence, there can be no criterion of legitimacy, other than caring itself, by which caring's legitimacy can be judged, for caring is the *basis* of all value criteria. A simple thought experiment can make this even clearer: Imagine a universe in which there are no caring beings; i.e., no beings with an impetus to well-being. On what basis could we now say of anything in this universe that it is 'better' or 'worse' than anything else? Better or worse *for whom*? Without the good of some caring being to appeal to, it is impossible to distinguish one state of affairs from another with regard to value. This, again, indicates that the very notion of value is grounded in, and inseparable from, the reality of caring.

This being the case, how are we to *evaluate* caring itself? In other words, what criterion of value can we use with which to determine the value of a caring being? Insofar as caring is itself the source of all valuing, it cannot be evaluated by anything other than itself. So we must interrogate caring with respect to itself about its own value. And we find, when we do, that it is of the very nature of caring to insist upon itself; to, so to speak, *assert* its own value. Hence caring's value is absolute with respect to itself. This is what we mean when we say that a caring being is of *intrinsic* value. Its value is inherent in its own self-valuing. It is the ground of its own value.

But why should one caring being *respect* the intrinsic value of another? Or, to express this question in the terms we used above, how does the imperative for respect issuing from the caring of the moral *patient* translate into an imperative for the moral *agent*?

The answer to this question is simpler than it may seem. As we have said, caring has value in itself. Thus, it is a violation of something of value to violate caring. This violation has the status of a fact, invariable with respect to opinion. In other words, in

noting caring's intrinsic value we have already said why it is *bad* to violate it, to the extent that we mean by *bad* the destruction of that which has value. We now turn to the question of why it is *wrong* to violate it; i.e., why another caring being should avoid engendering such *bad*.

But in saying it is bad we have, in effect, already said why it is wrong; to the extent that we concede that it is wrong to intentionally and avoidably engender bad.

But what compels us to concede this?

To make this clear, we must ask the moral agent to reflect upon herself. Given that all value is grounded in the self-valuing of caring, there is no basis upon which one caring being could claim priority over another with respect to value; since there is no independent criterion of value by which the one could be assessed above the other. Each is a value to itself. The moral agent must recognize, then, that her demand to be treated with respect and the patient's demand to be treated with respect have precisely the same status. Recognizing this, she cannot deny the legitimacy of the patient's demand without, in principle, denying the legitimacy of her own. But she cannot deny the legitimacy of her own demand without implicitly acknowledging the right of anyone and everyone to *abuse her* in any way they like. And to allow such a thing would be in contravention to her very nature as a caring being; i.e., as a being with an impetus to well-being. Her very being demands respect whether she likes it or not. Given this, she is impelled by her own nature's demand for respect to acknowledge the legitimacy of all other caring beings' demands for respect as well – since they rest upon the same basis.

In other words, one discovers in one's own demand to be treated with respect the universal demand of *any* caring being to be treated with respect. One cannot deny the

latter without denying the former. And one cannot deny the former without standing in opposition to oneself. Thus one is impelled, by one's own nature, to acknowledge the universal right of all caring beings to be treated with respect.

Or, to express it in yet other words: in affirming that one's *own* caring deserves respect, an affirmation one is driven to by the very nature of one's caring, one implicitly affirms that caring *as such* deserves respect, and thus, that the caring of *others* deserves respect as well. One could only escape the logic of this by claiming that there is something about one's own caring that makes it more valuable than the caring of others. But given that all value-claims must themselves be *grounded* in caring, no such claim can ever be justified.

It is important to point out that the logic articulated above merely serves to point out an ontological truth that one might see, and many do see, without the aid of such logic. The truth is simply this: that caring beings are intrinsically deserving of respect by reason of their very caring.

This, then, leads directly to the principle of universal regard expressed in the Golden Rule and its variants: that one must recognize in the other the same intrinsic value one finds in oneself. This principle, thus, long associated with the transcendent value-claims of Judeo-Christian deontology, may be grounded just as surely, indeed more surely, in the immanence of value apparent to considered reflection.

With this we answer all moral relativisms and nihilisms. Given the intrinsic value of caring beings all is *not* permissible, whether God exists or not. [1]

III. Implications and Conclusion

What I have attempted to do above is provide what I would consider the necessary core for any ethical theory. I do not see it as replacing other classical theories so much as supplying their proper ground. Indeed, when this ground is clearly seen, the mutual compatibility of many theories that seemed incompatible becomes clear as well.

Kantian rationalism retains its significance both as an articulation of the principle of universalization without which interpersonal morality would be impossible, and as a strong statement concerning the *dignity*, i.e., intrinsic value, of the human being. I do not, for the most part, argue with Kant's results, but with how he arrives at them. Kant correctly intuits that the moral imperative cannot be predicated upon the self-interest of the moral agent, but then incorrectly infers from this that, therefore, it cannot be predicated upon *anyone's* self-interest. But, in fact, it is predicated on the self-interest of the moral *patient*. In casting about for something to base the moral imperative on, Kant lights upon the 'rational will,' having noticed, apparently, that reason is required for universalized thinking, and free will for moral responsibility, and that, therefore, a rational, autonomous, will is necessary for the application of moral principles. In this, again, I concur. Insofar as animals do not reason, and cannot universalize, they cannot be full-fledged moral agents. But Kant is wrong in supposing reason to be morality's basis rather than merely its *instrument*. Thus, he supposes that only rational beings are moral *patients*. But insofar as animals are still caring beings they count as moral patients as well, regardless of their having or not having a rational nature.[2] It is not *reason* that makes a being an 'end in itself,' but *caring*; i.e., the impetus to well-being.

Humean sentimentalism, and virtue ethics in general, still have an important role to play in directing us toward the human good. I believe it is true that human beings have natural benevolent sentiments that ought to be cultivated, both for their own sakes and the sake of others. But such sentiments do not ground the demands of interpersonal morality, they merely suggest that human nature, or some part of it, is in natural accord with these demands.

The utilitarian dictate to seek 'the greatest good for the greatest number' provides a valuable rule of thumb for adjudicating interpersonal conflicts. But this rule of thumb, again, is not the basis of morality, it is merely a means for protecting, as well as possible in a complex world, what truly lies at the basis: the intrinsic value of individual caring beings.

Finally, theism is by no means rendered ethically irrelevant by this theory. The possibility remains that the universe is so configured that the good of one person must be had at the expense of the good of others; a circumstance that would make interpersonal morality unfeasible. Such would be an essentially tragic universe in which we would have to deaden our moral impulses in order to pursue our own well-being. Nietzsche's metaphysic of power often seems to suggest just this, thereby justifying his immoralism. Theism posits that the reverse is the case; that reality is ultimately a coordinated whole with respect to value, such that the ultimate well-being of one person requires his/her concern and respect for the ultimate well-being of others. This is somewhat crudely expressed in theistic allusions to reward and punishment (heaven and hell), but more subtly expressed in the notion that compassion and love, and the interpersonal relationships made possible by them, are central to human well-being itself.

But compassion is truly realized only when the compassionate person is focused on the good of the other, rather than on the rewards that may be granted the compassionate. And so this theory provides an important corrective to theistic deontology, which often seems to conflate the value of compassion with the value of its reward, or, more troublesome still, with the purported value of blind obedience to divine dictate.

In sum, this paper is meant to express a very basic and simple truth: that it is wrong to hurt others, and that the *reason* it's wrong to hurt them, is because it hurts them. For some reason not entirely clear to me, this simple but very important truth has not been articulated very well in the history of philosophical ethics. My hope is that this paper will, in some small measure, help to correct this.

Notes

[1] It is possible, admittedly, to willfully deny one's own demand for respect and thereby, ostensibly, deny one's responsibility to respect others. In so doing, I would say, one defines oneself 'outside of the circle of moral concern.' There are many things in nature outside of the circle of moral concern – such as tornados and viruses – which are a potential menace but make no moral claim for themselves. One would now have classed oneself among these. The prudent response of society to such things is to destroy them. To the extent that we destroy what is harmful to caring beings and makes no moral claim for itself, we benefit those who *do* make a moral claim and harm nothing of moral significance. If we took the moral nihilist at her word, then, we would have full sanction to destroy her. The moment she protested she would, in effect, be demanding that she *not* be taken at her word.

Of course, I am not advocating that we destroy moral nihilists. My point is that, when push comes to shove, no one can sincerely deny his or her demand for respect, for it is implicit in caring itself. From this fact, moral responsibility follows, whether one is willing to acknowledge it or not.

[2] Does this mean that animals are to be regarded as having the same worth as human beings? What about insects (who also manifest caring to some degree)? These questions lead us into some difficult metaphysical territory. The general rule is: every caring being must be respected *in its caring*. Where there is no well-formed *self*, however, there is no

self demanding respect. Of course, in the higher animals we may conclude that there is indeed a self demanding respect, and then we would be morally obliged to show it. As for the lower animals, we do not owe them the same kind of regard we owe to human beings because they do not have the same quality of caring as human beings. Still, they can experience pain and suffering, and we certainly have a moral responsibility not to unduly cause it.