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The Status of Altruism

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I

1. In *The Possibility of Altruism*, Nagel argues that an awareness of the benefit or harm an action will cause to another can in itself, without our having to assume the agent to possess any specific desires he might conceivably not possess, move an agent to perform or desist from that action. Hence his claim to have demonstrated the possibility of altruism, the possibility of acting simply out of regard for the welfare of another. I want to suggest that it is possible to argue for something a little stronger: not, perhaps, the necessity of altruism but at any rate something more than its bare possibility. It may be that something stronger follows from Nagel's own arguments, but that is not a possibility I shall explore. I want to focus upon the more specific question of our response to the *distress* of others. I shall argue that it is a necessary truth that to perceive another's distress as distress is to perceive it as *prima facie* a bad thing, as other things being equal something to be avoided or prevented. This does not mean that to perceive another's distress is necessarily to be moved to prevent it. What it does mean is that where someone is not moved to prevent distress, where they are unmoved or are moved in some other way—amused, excited, pleased or whatever, we must either deny that they are genuinely aware of the other's distress or find, in the special character of their view of that person in particular or the world in general, an explanation of why they should take what is *prima facie* an evil to be amusing, exciting, gratifying, or whatever.

2. What it amounts to in practice to see distress as '*prima facie* a bad thing' is a question about the nature of practical rationality. For a utilitarian the answer is simple: to be *prima facie* a bad thing is to count for so many units of negative utility in any calculation of the pros and cons of a course of action. For a utilitarian, an individual's distress will always count as an evil, though this is consistent with

its occurrence being tolerated if that will on balance lead to greater good. But whether or not we regard utilitarianism as a correct account of how such considerations ought to be weighed, it is clearly inadequate as an account of how they weigh with us in practice. It is not simply that we fail to count everyone's happiness as of equal importance; sometimes we regard the distress of a particular individual as actually a good thing. The distress of an enemy, for example, may be welcomed quite apart from any benefit that may accrue to us indirectly as a result of his distress. Slightly more innocently, we may take pleasure in the discomfiture of the wicked or even of the merely pompous. One individual's distress is not here being seen as a loss outweighed by compensating benefits, nor is it simply being overlooked. However, such examples can be seen as consistent with the claim that distress is perceived as *prima facie* evil if we are prepared to think in terms of the possibility of its sign being changed, as it were, from minus to plus by the particular circumstances of the case. Distress that is deserved or that occurs to an enemy, we will have to say, counts as a good, and counts as good precisely *because* it is in general an evil.

To allow the possibility of such changes of 'sign' is to complicate our conception of practical reason but not impossibly so and not in an obviously implausible way. The alternative is to invoke the possibility of distress being valued in different ways—in fact in any way at all—depending not on the agent's perceptions of the circumstances of the case but simply on the 'desires' he happens to possess. That would be to abandon the attempt to understand our responses in terms of any conception of practical rationality, to abandon the attempt to understand them as responses that are somehow appropriate to our situation as we see it. The argument that follows is an argument for persisting with the attempt to understand our responses to life's circumstances in terms of some conception of practical rationality, but I will not attempt to argue for any particular conception of practical rationality. It is enough to note that to say that distress is a *prima facie* an evil is not to say that it is something we either always do wish or even always ought to wish to avoid. It is, rather, to say something about the starting point of any reasoning that takes the fact of someone's distress into account in deciding what should be done; and thus on the assumption that we are rational beings, it is to identify the starting point for any account of how the perception of distress influences what we actually do.

3. The present thesis has two sorts of opponents. Firstly there are those who deny, following Hume perhaps, that mere awareness of a fact is ever in itself a reason for action or capable of moving us to action. In each case, it will be said, what has to be added to knowledge (or belief) is a desire, and it is always a contingent matter what desires a man happens to possess. Thus one could be aware of someone's distress and just not happen to possess any relevant desire, in which case that knowledge would have no motivational implications at all, not even *prima facie* ones. In a sense, of course, a defender of the present thesis is going to have to agree that what people do depends on what they happen to want and that different people can want different things, even when they are in some sense aware of the same facts. He will want to insist, however, that differences in what people want arise from differences in their overall perception of the facts. To identify a difference in desires and leave it at that is to explain nothing. It is still, of course, a contingent matter how an individual perceives a situation, and different individuals can perceive the same situation differently, but to describe the difference as one of perceptions is to allow that the question of truth and falsehood arises, that we can speak of perception and misperception, of more adequate and less adequate perceptions. It is to allow room for talk of an action as appropriate not merely to the agent's state of mind but to the situation he faces, to the facts.

The second sort of opponent of the present thesis is the man who is prepared to accept that there are *certain* facts, knowledge of which is in itself sufficient reason and motivation for action, but who insists that these intrinsically motivating facts are confined to facts about harm or benefit to the agent himself. It might, indeed, be suggested that the only intrinsically motivating knowledge is knowledge of present pleasure or pain, but that must surely be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum*, either of the view that *any* knowledge is intrinsically motivating or—better—of the attempt to place over narrow restrictions on what will qualify as intrinsically motivating. Nagel's strategy is to first get us to agree that knowledge of the future benefit likely to result to the agent from a certain course of action can in itself provide a reason for doing it. Having shown that there is no need in this case to invoke a contingent desire for our own future well-being, a desire we might conceivably fail to possess, he argues that the case of being moved to action by a knowledge of harm or benefit to others is essentially similar: there is no need to

invoke a contingent concern for the well-being of others, a concern that a man might happen not to possess.

Nagel's argument operates at the level of what counts as a reason for acting. I want to concentrate on the question of what actually moves us to action, though it will be part of my strategy too to consider first the case of prudential motivation and then to carry the argument over to the case of altruistic motivation. The thesis to be defended concerns the character and implications for action of a perception of distress taken, as it were, *on its own*, in the absence of the specific influence of other aspects of the agent's view of the situation. We cannot sensibly enquire into the implications of an awareness of distress in the absence of *any* other perceptions on the part of the agent, but we can perhaps get some conception of its implications 'other things being equal' if we ask ourselves what form the most primitive awareness of distress would take, and in particular what its most primitive manifestation in behaviour would consist in.

II

4. First, though, some general reflections on the connection between perception and action. Perception is the acquisition of information about the environment. As language-using beings, we have other less direct ways of acquiring such information, so we must distinguish perception as that more primitive, more direct form of acquisition of information that we share, in varying degrees, with animals without language. Action we may define as movement controlled in the light of information about the environment in which it takes place. Action is thus impossible in the absence of perception, but equally perception is unintelligible apart from its role in guiding action. An agent manifests its capacity for acquiring information about its environment in the range of discriminations it is capable of making in acting in that environment. To ask what information it is capable of acquiring is to ask about the character of the discriminations it is capable of making.

If an agent is to be capable of acting in an environment, his perceptions of that environment must include a perception of potential obstacles to his movement and of potential routes he might take through it. It must also include a perception of that which is to be sought and that which is to be avoided, what we might call a perception of good and evil. A little more concretely, an

agent's perception of his environment can be expected to include a perception of food and other things it must seek out if its needs are to be met and also a perception of some at least of the dangers it faces and is capable of avoiding.

5. Consider the case of the perception of danger. To be able to describe an animal as capable of perceiving danger we must be able to see it as capable of discriminating in its behaviour between things that are dangerous to it and things that are not. This means (i) that a certain response is identifiable as a response *to* danger (e.g. flight) and (ii) that this response is made often enough to things that are in fact dangerous and not too often to things that are not dangerous. Without a response that is identifiable as peculiarly appropriate to danger, we do not have grounds for regarding that as the description under which the agent perceives the item in question. (Similarly, if an animal does not respond to obstacles in its path by avoiding them, we cannot suppose it to perceive anything *as an obstacle*.) And unless this response were generally made to what are in fact appropriate items, we could not regard it as a manifestation of a capacity for *recognizing* danger; we could not then attribute to the animal a capacity for perceiving danger and therefore could not speak of the animal as even mistakenly supposing there to be danger present. Where there is no capacity for perception, there is no misperception either.

We could, of course, attempt to describe an animal's response to danger without any talk of perception of danger. We could attempt to describe a zebra's response to lions that get too close as a flight reaction triggered by certain perceptual stimuli, i.e. by a perception of certain more specific features of the environment that can be specified without using the term 'danger'. The relation between these perceptual stimuli and the reaction of flight will of course be a contingent one, though if natural selection has done its work it will generally result in the zebra taking flight when danger approaches. There can be no objection to the attempt to describe matters in these terms, but to leave it at that would be to miss something very important. Describing the zebra's perceptions of its environment is not simply a matter of saying what stimuli (visual, olfactory, etc.) it is sensitive too. It is a matter of saying what the zebra takes its situation to be, what it takes to be the case, and that is something that must be judged, in the first instance at least, from the way in which the animal is inclined to respond to that situation. What the

zebra perceives is not just a certain smell or pattern of light and shade, it perceives the lion that gets too close as a danger to it. In omitting to mention this dimension of its experience we will be overlooking a crucial aspect of its cognitive abilities, without which its capacity for distinguishing smells and colours would have little point. It is capable of recognizing when something is dangerous to it: capable of recognizing when a lion has got close enough to be a danger, capable of distinguishing a hungry lion intent on finding a meal from one that presents no threat, etc., etc. To refuse to recognize the zebra's response to potential threats as a manifestation of a capacity for recognizing danger would be tantamount to refusing to ever regard behaviour as evidence of a cognitive capacity.

Let us now ask whether it is necessary, or would indeed make sense, to attribute to our zebra a contingent desire to avoid danger, a desire it might conceivably not possess. A zebra that did not possess this desire would presumably be a one that was not inclined to take flight on perceiving danger; but what reason would there then be for supposing it perceived danger, that what it perceived it perceived *as dangerous*? Of course, if we imagine our zebra to be attempting to protect its young by driving off a source of danger, we can make perfectly good sense of this supposition; but we will then be assuming that were it not for these special circumstances the animal would react to the danger by itself taking flight. If an animal had no inclination to react in *any* way appropriately to danger we could not attribute to it a perception of danger. The idea that the tendency to react appropriately to danger results, in general, from the possession of a contingent desire to avoid danger is simply incoherent. Danger is of its nature something to be avoided, and a perception that was not a perception of an item as something to be avoided, other things being equal, would not be a perception of it as dangerous.

6. It might seem that the case of danger is a very special case. It is not, of course, the only category employed in experience which has direct implications for action. Nonetheless, it might seem that it is crucial to the possibility of establishing a connection between knowledge and action that the facts in question have a bearing on the agent's own interests. To show that knowledge of the distress of others has direct implications for action we will need to show that this is not so. Our argument concerning a perception of danger took

the form of asking what would *count as* the perception of danger, what kind of practical discriminations made in action would count as a manifestation of an awareness of danger. We must now ask the same question about an awareness of distress. We shall put our question as one about an awareness of distress in *others*. It might seem that in doing so we pre-judge the issue. An awareness of distress in general will surely include an awareness of distress in our *own* case, and it might seem that this is where we must look if we are to find any direct implications for action. Distress may well be something to be avoided when it happens to us, just as is danger, but that hardly shows anything about its significance when it happens to others. What we must now see is that to take its application to one's own case as somehow primary, and the only application we need consider, is to misunderstand the particular character of the concept of distress.

III

7. We can understand by 'distress' either the objective state an individual is in, a state of need or danger (as in 'ship in distress'), or his *subjective* state, his consciousness of being in (objective) distress. To describe subjective distress, distress *qua* mental state, as a consciousness of being in objective distress is, of course, to suggest that we see the notion of objective distress as central and fundamental. A more traditional philosophy of mind, however, or an introspectionist psychology, might place distress the subjective feeling at the centre of the picture, presumably on the grounds that it is our own subjective states that are most immediately known to us. It would, of course, be one's *own* distress that was thus placed at the centre of things. Our awareness of the distress of others would, on such a view, be seen as having a quite different character, with quite different motivational implications—perhaps with no necessary motivational implications at all. The distress of others will be seen as known only by way of an inference from behavioural similarities between myself and others to a similarity in subjective states, by way of an 'argument from analogy', thus making an awareness of the distress of others into a kind of intellectual feat, reflecting perhaps a higher level of general intelligence but implying nothing about the character of our motivation.

Some familiar difficulties face this way of looking at an awareness

of distress in others, but the root of the matter is that it involves a misconception about our knowledge of our own distress. It is a mistake to take our own subjective states, the way things seem to us, to be what is most immediately known. To know that I am in danger, I do not need to proceed by way of inference from an awareness of my own fear. Rather I am directly aware of this or that thing in my environment as dangerous. It is this awareness of something as dangerous which constitutes (or is the main constituent in) the subjective state of fear. There need be no awareness of this fear, no awareness of being aware of danger, and where such self-awareness exists, as in man, it constitutes an additional cognitive capacity beyond the simple capacity for recognizing danger. Let us then, as we have with the concept of danger, place at the centre of our picture the idea of a capacity for recognizing a certain objective state of affairs; in this case, a capacity for recognizing distress in the objective sense.

Even so, it may still seem that we should think of an awareness of the distress of others as arising from an inference from our own case to that of others. If we take an individual's awareness of danger or harm to himself as our starting point, we have what looks like a move from the first person application of a concept to its third person application. Not, that is, the acquisition of a new concept, but the extension of the range of application of a concept we already possess, an extension depending on our recognizing an analogy between the circumstances of others and what we already recognize as harm or danger in our own case. However, this way of seeing things still misrepresents the nature of our awareness of our own distress. It is a mistake to equate the primitive, egocentric awareness of harm, danger and need with an awareness of ourselves as in distress. A primitive awareness of danger is not an awareness of the self as in danger; it is an awareness of things other than the self as dangerous. It is a matter of making that particular discrimination among the items in one's environment. True, the danger in question is danger to oneself, but there is here no employment of the concept of *self*, no concept of a thing *in* danger. The 'I' in 'I am in danger' is redundant in the absence of a contrast with other possible things in danger. To possess a concept of the self as a thing subject to danger is to be able to make a quite different kind of discrimination: a discrimination between selves that are in danger and selves that are not. To see myself as a thing in danger is to see myself as one thing among others subject to danger.

The same goes for an awareness of harm or need. The primitive awareness of need is an awareness of this or that item in the environment as to be sought. The lion's awareness of its need for food, for example, consists in its seeing potential prey as requiring pursuit more urgently than it otherwise would. It involves no conception of the self as a thing *in* need. The primitive awareness of harm to the self—a sense of pain—involves, it is true, an ability to distinguish parts of the body which are harmed from parts which are not. But it does not identify a self that is thereby harmed and of which the parts are mere parts. It is, perhaps, a perception of 'things as wrong'. Again, in the absence of a contrast between self and others, the 'I' in 'I need food' or 'I am hurt' is redundant. To see myself as a thing harmed or in need is to see myself as one among others subject to harm or need. It follows that so see myself as a thing in distress I must already be able to recognise distress in others. The ability to recognise distress in others cannot, therefore, be seen as in any way secondary or derivative by contrast with its recognition in my own case.

8. More positively, what this shows is that the move from the primitive, egocentric awareness of harm and danger to an awareness of distress, whether in ourselves or in others, is a move that involves the acquisition of a new concept, the concept of a 'self' as a *thing subject to* harm and danger. This new concept is an essentially social concept. To employ it is to discriminate between individuals in distress and individuals not in distress. To be capable of making this discrimination is to be—sometimes—aware of the distress of others. In what way could such an awareness manifest itself in an animal's behaviour? It might seem that in principle an awareness of distress in others could be combined with a desire for either its alleviation or its aggravation, or perhaps simply with a tendency to take advantage of it in some way. The vulture, for example, is an animal that seems to specialise in taking advantage of the distress of others. It is an expert at spotting other animals in distress, without having the slightest inclination to go to their assistance. Distress is of interest to the vulture only as a sign of a meal in the offing. But why, then, should we attribute an awareness of *distress* to the vulture? Why regard him as making the inference from distress to a potential meal? Why not simply regard him as good at spotting potential meals? That is the character of the discrimination he is making. That is the 'meaning' an animal in distress has for the

vulture. There is simply no warrant for attributing to the vulture an awareness of distress, not at any rate in connection with its prey.

If, then, the question is: what kind of response to others would count as a manifestation of an awareness of their distress? it is fairly clear what sort of an answer it must receive. It amounts to asking what response to another can be seen as peculiarly appropriate to his being in distress. The specific response that is appropriate will of course depend upon the specific character of the distress. If a parent sees its young threatened by a predator it may attempt to drive off the predator or lure it away. But to put it in general terms, it would seem that the primitive response to a perception of distress must be an attempt to give assistance. To take a given individual to be in distress is to take him to require assistance. It is thus to be *inclined*, other things being equal, to give assistance.

To say this is to assert a conceptual connection between an awareness of distress and an inclination to a certain kind of action, but it must not be taken in any crudely behaviourist spirit. No reduction of awareness to behavioural tendencies is being attempted. The notion of 'assistance' does not refer to an independently specifiable sequence of movements. It refers to actions performed in the light of an awareness of and out of regard for the welfare of another individual, just as 'flight' is action performed in the light of an awareness of danger. The point is really one about the character of an awareness of distress: like an awareness of danger, it is fundamentally an awareness of something as an evil, as to be avoided. It is a point about the fundamental, constituting character of that awareness, as revealed most unambiguously in its primitive behavioural expression.

9. It has been crucial to the argument so far that the concept of distress is primitively, and not merely derivatively, one that is applied to others and thus that its most direct manifestation is a certain manner of acting towards others. A purely 'parental' consciousness of distress, indeed, need involve no application of the concept to the agent himself. If a parent bird recognizes only the needs of young birds and not those of adults, it cannot see itself as a thing in need. But though the case of self-attribution has no particular primacy it is nonetheless of interest. For one thing, it furnishes a more direct argument for the claim that an awareness of distress is an awareness of something as bad and to be avoided. As we have seen, to see oneself as a thing in distress is to see oneself as

one among others subject to distress. An awareness of distress differs from the primitive awareness of need or danger in that it involves the employment of a concept of the self as a thing subject to distress. To employ this concept is to employ a public as opposed to an egocentric perspective: to see oneself at all is to see oneself as others might see one. That is why we cannot equate the self-attribution of distress with a simple egocentric awareness of danger, harm or need. But there is, nonetheless, a necessary connection between the two. If it is true that there is danger present, it is true that one is a thing *in* danger, a thing in distress. If an individual capable of recognizing danger as a bad thing, as something to be avoided, is also capable of recognizing himself as being in danger, then he can only regard that state of affairs too as a bad thing. An individual capable of applying the concept of distress to himself must see his own distress as something to be avoided. But *ex hypothesi*, distress is distress no matter to whom it occurs. To be able to recognize oneself as being in distress is to be able to recognize others as being in that same state. If distress is a bad thing in my own case it is a bad thing wherever it occurs.

Note that this does not mean that for A to be aware of B's distress is for A to see it as something that is *bad for B*. To think of another's distress as bad from his point of view but not necessarily from mine is to make a further, more sophisticated distinction. It is to distinguish points of view, to see oneself as a being with a point of view and interests that may differ from those of others. That constitutes a further advance in self-consciousness beyond the ability to see oneself as a thing in distress. The simple awareness that another is in distress is not an awareness of something as bad from his point of view, something *he* (and perhaps he alone) has reason to avoid. Nor is it an awareness of something as bad from a point of view that is specifically mine. It is an awareness of something as bad *simpliciter*. What is seen as bad, both in one's own case and that of another, is the fact of *a man* being in distress. That is something anyone capable of recognizing it must see as, other things being equal, a bad thing.

IV

10. It must be emphasized that this claim concerning the character of an awareness of distress is not a defence of any particular ethic,

and nor is it an account of what it is to be sensitive to the claims of morality. There is more to morality than a sensitivity to the distress of others. The simple perception of distress as an evil, though it is surely a central element in our own perceptions of distress and in the perceptions of any moral agent, belongs in its pure form, as Rousseau saw, to a stage of innocence we have long left behind. We can perhaps think of it as part of a 'natural sympathy' which is, in us, overlaid by a variety of other perceptions and distinctions. With the distinction between friend and foe, them and us, and equally important, with the ability to see distress as justly deserved, comes the possibility of indifference to and even delight in perceived distress. Not that we should succumb to the temptation to romanticize the state of innocence in which to perceive distress is to be inclined to assist. Nothing says that a being *capable* of perceiving the distress of others will actually perceive it whenever it occurs. Indeed, it is clear that in practice the perception of distress in others is likely to be limited and highly selective. The analytic point is only that where distress *is* perceived, and in the absence of other qualifying perceptions of the kind we have alluded to, there will be an inclination to assist.

In a sense, however, our problem is that by contrast with other animals we are by nature extremely good at perceiving distress in others, though as with all natural abilities it can be greatly affected by training. We are, furthermore, self-conscious beings, aware in theory at least of the limitations of our own perceptions; we know that we would discover a great deal more distress if we cared to investigate. We are aware of far more than we can possibly do anything about so must find ways of 'bracketing' much of it as of no concern to us or even of no concern to anyone. The defender of an ethic of universal, impartial altruism like utilitarianism does not have the task of persuading beings that are pure egoists by nature to take an interest in the welfare of others. If he did he could never succeed, for such beings would be without even an awareness of how others are faring. Rather he has the task of persuading us to abandon the various distinctions we make between those of concern to us and those not and between the deserving and the undeserving. This is not such an obviously hopeless task, though since many of these distinctions are made in the name of morality itself it remains a formidable one.

V

11. It is clear, however, that even as an account of 'natural sympathy', of our natural response to distress, the discussion of section III above represents only a beginning. We have taken ourselves to be discussing a response to what we have called objective distress, a state of actual need or danger. But to say of an individual that he is in distress is usually to imply that he is in a certain mental state, that he is upset or distressed. An individual can, of course, be in this mental state and there be nothing objectively the matter, but, as we have suggested, it is possible to think of distress *qua* mental state as a *perception* on the part of the individual concerned that he is in distress in the objective sense, albeit a perception that may be mistaken or exaggerated, perhaps having been aroused by a frightening situation that is now past. We referred in section 9 above to the possibility of perceiving oneself as being in distress, but it may not have been clear in what way such a perception could manifest itself in behaviour—apart, that is, from simple flight from danger or the attempt to attain what one needs. We can hardly speak of an inclination to go to one's own assistance! However, we can perfectly sensibly regard the perception of oneself as in (objective) distress as implying the perception of oneself as in need of assistance from others, and the primitive expression of such a perception in behaviour must surely be a *cry* of distress. The cry of distress is an expression of that perception in the sense that it has the function of communicating it to others and making them aware of one's need for assistance. It is an attempt to get others to come to one's assistance.

It is clear that the perception of distress in others arises very largely from the fact that we are by nature sensitive to cries of distress, to the expression by an individual in distress of his own perception of being in distress. Our sensitivity to objective distress is thus in practice closely bound up with our sensitivity to subjective distress, to distress *qua* mental state. It would be wrong, however, to see this as involving a (relatively) direct awareness of an individual's subjective state from which we then infer his probable objective state. Rather our sensitivity to a cry of distress consists first of all in our being inclined to take the individual who utters the cry to be in objective distress. The most primitive manifestation of an understanding of the significance of a cry of distress is an inclination to go to the assistance of the one who utters the cry. Our response to a cry

of distress thus involves 'sympathy' not simply in the sense of concern for another's welfare but in the sense of a natural tendency towards agreement, a tendency to accept the other's view of things and thus to see things from his point of view. It does not, in the first instance at least, involve an awareness of the other as *having* a certain view of things, as being in a certain subjective state. To see what form an awareness of distress *qua* subjective state might take, we must ask ourselves what could count as a response to that subjective state.

12. A response to distress *qua* subjective state must be something distinct from an inclination to assist in the sense of rescuing from objective danger or ministering to objective need. Where objective distress exists, such assistance will be our first priority and will in itself tend to alleviate subjective distress, but the nature of a concern with subjective distress stands out most clearly in the case in which we regard assistance as inappropriate because we do *not* accept the individual's view that he is in objective distress. One possible response here is simply to ignore his cries of distress. Another possibility, however, is that we should respond by attempting to change his view of his situation, most directly by *comforting* him. We can respond to his expression of his view of his situation by expressing to him our own conflicting view of his situation. We can tell him, in effect, that he is all right, that there is nothing wrong and nothing to be afraid of. Such a response would certainly be a response to his subjective state. We do not, of course, need to suppose that we are aware of or concerned with distress *qua* subjective state only where objective distress is absent. Our question was simply: what sort of response would constitute a response to subjective as distinct from objective distress? One possible answer, then, is: the attempt to mitigate or eliminate it, the attempt to comfort the individual concerned. Such a concern with subjective distress can clearly occur in conjunction with the attempt to minister to objective need. To be inclined to respond in this way is to see subjective distress too as an evil to be avoided other things being equal. The question now is whether any *other* response could count as a response to distress *qua* subjective state. Again, it might seem that in principle any response is possible, depending on what desires the agent happens to possess. But again we must insist that the response is intelligible as a response that is *appropriate* to distress, for otherwise we have no grounds for regarding the agent's

perception as one of distress. A sadistic inclination to accentuate another's distress is perhaps intelligible given special circumstances and a special way of seeing the individual concerned, but it would make no sense at all as a response to distress in general. It simply could not be understood as a response to *distress*. The owl whose hooting terrifies its prey into helpless paralysis, for example, cannot be credited with an awareness of their terror.

13. If the above line of argument seems less than coercive, we can also employ an argument parallel to that used in section 9 above in connection with objective distress. We have assumed here, as we did with objective distress, that to be able to recognize distress is to be able to distinguish between those in distress and those not in distress. The application of the concept in our own case, we have assumed, is not to be regarded as having any particular primacy. Indeed it is conceivable that one should be capable of recognizing distress, even distress *qua* subjective state, in others but not in oneself. Nonetheless, if we take an individual who is capable of recognizing when he is himself in a state of subjective distress, it is hard to suppose that he can regard this state as—special circumstances (e.g. contrition) aside—anything but an evil to be avoided. Perhaps we ought not to regard it as entirely obvious that this should be so. We ought to ask why the *perception* of an evil should itself, if it in turn becomes an object of awareness, be perceived as an evil. Why should fear be something to be avoided, as well as danger? Clearly though, one's own distress *is* perceived as something to be avoided and it can hardly be a contingent matter that it is seen in this light. What makes fear generally an unpleasant experience is not some feature it could conceivably not have possessed, nor is it our possession of a desire to avoid it that we might conceivably not have possessed. Fear is unpleasant because of what it is an experience *of*, because it is an experience of an evil. But if to perceive our own subjective distress is necessarily to perceive it as (*prima facie*) an evil, then we must say the same for the perception of distress in general. It is not on account of its happening to *us* that our distress is an evil. To see oneself as in a state of distress, objective or subjective, is to see oneself as being in the same state that one can recognize others as being in. It is distress *simpliciter* that is an evil, and to perceive it at all is to perceive it as such.

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