

Good-for-nothings

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Delivered at the One Hundred Seventh
Annual Meeting of the Eastern Division
of The American Philosophical Association

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When I was in graduate school, a story was circulating about a philosopher—I can't remember which one—who was invited to present a paper by a department he held in high esteem. Flattered by the invitation but anxious to make a good impression, he struggled to come up with a paper that would be suitably original and provocative for the distinguished audience. When the day arrived, he took the podium, thanked the department for having invited him and explained his concern to give a paper with which they would not be disappointed. In consequence, he proceeded to announce, he had chosen to present “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” by W. V. O. Quine.

The story has stayed with me, not only because philosophy anecdotes are few and far between, but because I have often found myself in sympathy with the story's protagonist. That is to say, I have often been struck by the thought that if instead of reading my work or listening to me speak, people spent the same time reading or discussing the works of my philosophical heroes and heroines, they would be better off. Lest you think that this is false or undeserved modesty on my part, I should add that what I think about my own work, I think applies to most contemporary work in the discipline. Most philosophy, even most quite good philosophy, I believe, is such that it would have been no loss to the world if it had never been published. No one would have been worse off for not having read it. This is not to say that no one is ever stimulated or inspired by these works, that no one ever gains insight or clarity from them. But if the readers of these works had spent the time reading Leibniz or Hobbes, Bernard Williams or Iris Murdoch instead, it would have been just as well. And I suspect that similar charges could as justly be made of work in many other academic disciplines, and also in the arts.

These introductory remarks might have served to pave the way for my ending my essay here and urging you to take the time you would have spent reading a full article of mine reading P.F. Strawson's “Freedom and Resentment” or Philippa Foot's “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” instead. But, for better or for worse, the moral I wish to draw from these remarks takes me in a different direction.

If I am right that many academic works as well as many works of art are such that if they had never been produced no one would be worse off, then there is at least one sense in which it can be said of these works that they do not and cannot be expected to *benefit* anyone except the artists or authors themselves, and only then in the straightforwardly prudential sense of giving them something to do and possibly advancing their careers. We might put this by saying that, with the exception of the authors or artists themselves, such works are not likely to be good *for* anyone. Moreover, if the relevant disciplines or art forms as a whole would not have been worse off, we can say, even more strongly, that the works in question are *good-for-nothing*.¹ And yet, if one attends to and considers the works themselves, it is hard to resist the judgment that many of the works I have in mind are good nonetheless. Not only are they good “of their kind”—good works of art, of history, of philosophy, and so on. They are, in a sense, good *period*. We are rightly grateful that these works were created; we rightly admire them, appreciate them, and take pains to preserve them. And the authors and artists who produced them have reason to be proud. Although in ordinary discourse “good-for-nothing” is a term of abuse, and although as it seems to me, the dominant philosophical views about value reflect and encourage this, attention to art and to contributions to knowledge should lead us to question the view that in order for a thing to be good, in a sense which implies that the thing merits our attention and positive concern, it needs to be good *for* someone or something whose welfare is enhanced by it.

Let me say up front that I have no theory of value to advance that will illuminate or explain this judgment. My aim today is not to defend a positive theory of value so much as to question some theoretical assumptions about value which many philosophers and others take for granted. At the theoretical level, I believe that we should take more seriously the possibility of things being good for reasons that are not ultimately grounded in their contribution to anyone’s welfare. More concretely, I think that we should think more creatively and imaginatively about the value of things we love in ways that are not confined to identifying some way in which we or others benefit from them.

Let me begin, though, by examining more closely the claim with which I began, that many works of art and literature, of history, philosophy, and so on, *are* good-for-nothing, in the sense that they benefit no one, for there are many reasons one might doubt this claim and the statement is in need of qualification. In order to reduce the chances that I offend my readers, I will focus on examples of works of art rather than philosophy, and, more specifically on good, even excellent works of art. The thought that such works are nonetheless frequently *good-for-nothing* comes from reflection on the fact that there is more great art, literature, music, and so on around than I, or anyone, has time to appreciate in a lifetime. If the excellent novel or film you actually enjoyed had not been available, or the painting you contemplated on your last trip to an art museum had been on loan to another gallery, there would have been another just as good and worthwhile that you could have read, watched, or pored over instead.

If it were not one Rembrandt self-portrait, it would have been another. If not the *Palliser* novels, then *Barchester Towers*. Even the entire outputs of individual artists and authors, distinctive though they may be, might never have existed without anyone necessarily being worse off for it.

For example, there were so many Dutch Masters in the seventeenth century that it is at least arguable that the artworld did not need every single one of them to supply its patrons with things for their walls or to develop the techniques of light and shade and the pictorial innovations that make that period of art so wonderful and distinctive. It is not obvious therefore that had Gerrit Dou, say, become a chemist instead of a painter, it would have been worse *for* anyone. Dou himself might have flourished as well as a chemist as he did as a painter. Those who purchased, collected, or studied Dou's paintings would have found other paintings from which they would have learned just as much, and been as pleased. And yet if one appreciates Dutch painting and attends to Dou's work, one will see that he is an outstanding painter; his works are a source of delight. If, in one sense, it would have been no loss if Dou had become a chemist instead of a painter, in another, it seems, it would have been a great shame.

Reflecting on this second sense, in which it would have been a shame had Dou's works never been created or preserved, gives us reason to resist the claim that they are good-for-nothing, which needs to be addressed. In acknowledging that Dou's works are a source of delight—and not just delight, but enrichment, I seem to be acknowledging that they have been and continue to be good for some people after all. This suggests that there is something wrong with interpreting or identifying the question of whether an object is good for anyone with the question of whether if it had not existed, anyone would be worse off.

The objection is reinforced if we consider other cases. Think of a man who, seeing a child struggling in the ocean, jumps in to rescue him and saves the child's life. Surely, he has benefitted the child—he has done something good *for* the child. Were the child's parents to say to his rescuer, "Well, we are very glad our son survived, but if you hadn't saved him, someone else would have," it would be appallingly inappropriate and ungrateful even if it were true.

This seems right. And yet there seems to be a further sense of benefit that does depend on the question of how well or badly the affected parties would have been if the act or object whose goodness is at issue hadn't existed or taken place.

We can bring this out by considering the values that often go into people's decisions about what to do with their lives or, more specifically, about what career to pursue. One frequently hears students who are applying to medical school, for example, say that they want to become doctors in order to help people—that is, they wish to do something that will be good for others. If they ultimately go on to become dermatologists—currently one of the most competitive specialties in medicine—then it seems to me that there is a sense in which they will have succeeded in

realizing their goal, but a sense in which they will not. On the one hand, like the rescuer, the doctor will surely benefit her patients in one sense: she will cure their acne, treat their eczema, prevent the development of skin cancer, and so on. If she is good at her job, her work will benefit many people, and in significant ways. They will have reason to be grateful to her (at least if she does not overcharge them), and she will have reason to be proud. At the same time, since it is clear that had she chosen another specialty, plenty of other highly competent physicians would have gladly rushed in to take her place, she should not be too self-congratulatory about the nobleness of her career. While some medical specialties and locations for medical practice have plenty of willing practitioners, there is a crying need for physicians in other places and with specializations of other kinds. If a medical student's motivation is really to do some good for others, if she really wants to make the world a better place, it would seem that she has reason to look to these less popular career paths.

These examples suggest that there is an ambiguity in what we mean when we say of an act, activity, or object that it is good for someone. In one sense, the dermatologist's work, the rescuer, and Gerrit Dou's paintings are clearly and unequivocally good for people: by curing skin disease, saving lives, and providing aesthetic enrichment respectively, they provide clear benefits to those with whom they interact. But, as we have seen, their being good for people in this way is compatible with the possibility that if they had not existed (or if the relevant actors had behaved differently), no one would be worse off. In those cases where an object or act provides a benefit to someone or group who would *not* otherwise have been made as well off, the thing or act thus seems good for the beneficiary in an even stronger sense. We could call the former way in which things can be good for someone "the weak sense," and the latter way "the strong sense," but this would suggest that the former way is in some respect disappointing or defective. It is not. Most often, I would guess, the fact that something benefits someone in the first sense is all we rely on to make the judgment that the thing is good for that person, and it is all we expect to have been intended when we hear such claims made by others. We do not consider, nor feel we need to consider, what would have happened if the thing had not been around (or the act had not occurred). Still, there are times when we seem to assume, if not intentionally to assert, that the thing is good in the stronger sense. This seems especially true when one talks about an accomplishment that is said to "make the world a better place," or say of a person that the "world is better off for his being a part of it."

To avoid the impression that the first sense of "good for" is weak, we may call the first sense "the Ordinary Sense" of "good for." In contrast, the second and stronger sense we may call "the Robust Sense." In the Ordinary Sense, then, a good dermatologist will be good for her patients, a man who saves a child's life has done something good (even wonderful) for the child, and Gerrit Dou's paintings are good for art appreciators. Still, a doctor who offers medical care to a community that would otherwise not receive any, a rescuer who saves a life which would otherwise have been lost, and—if this makes sense—a painter whose work is so incomparably

original and rewarding that people could not have reached the heights of aesthetic enrichment or success without it, do things that are not only good for people in the Ordinary Sense. What they do is good for people in the Robust Sense as well.

As I hope I have made clear, I do not mean to knock dermatology or belittle those who choose to specialize in it. The commitment to doing something that will directly and actively benefit people rather than exploit them or ignore them or influence them in ways that are neither good nor bad (a commitment that may lie behind a decision to go into medicine, say, rather than marketing, or to specializing in environmental law rather than mergers and acquisitions) is an admirable one, even if no net balance of human welfare is increased as a result. But it is admirable as an expression of virtue—as an indicator of a benevolent attitude towards others and of a desire to live in a way that is in harmony with that; it is not admirable because of its beneficial consequences.²

Returning to the paintings of Gerrit Dou, considerations of virtue are by the way in any case. I am not interested—at least not today—in Dou's character or his motives in painting, but in the work he produced, work which I have suggested is good, indeed very good, even if it is *good-for* no one. The objection we have just been considering does seem to me to require a modification to this claim. For, in the Ordinary Sense—the sense in which a good dermatologist benefits her patients even if, had she gone into geriatrics, someone else would have benefited them just as well—Dou's paintings have been, and continue to be good for plenty of people. To focus on this, however, seems to me to take us in the wrong direction for understanding the value of Dou's paintings. It is their quality and not their consequences, or their expected consequences, that makes it appropriate to value them.

I shall return to this point in a moment, but want first to take a detour to respond to another objection one might have to the line I am pursuing. Specifically, one might worry that by focusing on the particular products of Dou's vocation, whether on the individual paintings or on his body of work as a whole, I am failing to appreciate the degree to which art, like literature, philosophy, and science, is a collective enterprise, whose flourishing depends on an active and ongoing community of creators, appreciators, critics, and the like.³ As long as one admits that art as a whole (as well as literature, philosophy, and so on) is robustly good for us, in the sense that at least some of our lives would be diminished without it, then an appreciation of the communal nature of the enterprise should lead us to evaluate an individual's contribution or benefit to the world not exclusively in terms of the value of his individual output, but in terms of his participation in the practices and institutions that nourish and sustain the field. Even an artist whose own work is not so great as to warrant the judgment that the world would be worse off without it may make a contribution to the flourishing of the community in which great work can be produced. Further, we should recognize the evident epistemological fact that one cannot tell in advance how good or important one's work will

be. As Bernard Williams pointed out in his discussion of Gauguin, we do not want to support a principle that says you should be an artist only if you are confident that you will be a *great* artist. Such a principle would only reward vanity and punish humility.⁴

This point, too, seems right as far as it goes, and I am happy to concede it. It provides a justification for people who devote themselves to art, philosophy, and such, that does at least loosely identify a way in which their projects are robustly good for something that can be conceived in terms of human welfare. And, of course, there is typically the further justification that people who devote themselves to such things are contributing to their own welfare—they are engaging in fulfilling projects and developing their potentials. Considerations such as these justify the activities of writers, artists, composers in a way that is quite independent (or nearly so) of the quality of the work they individually produce. To those of us who are loathe to assess the importance of our own articles and ideas, or who suspect that if we were to assess it, it would not score very well, it may provide a perfectly adequate defense of our choice of activities.

But I must confess that when I write, I *aim* to produce something whose value is less instrumental than this. And whether I succeed in this aim or not, it seems to me that some people do succeed in producing work that we have reason to study and be grateful for even if it is not *so* great as to warrant the judgment that had it not existed humankind would be worse off. I have offered the paintings of Gerrit Dou as an example because I deeply admire Dou's work. Though one might defend the choices that led to Dou's production of his paintings by reference to his contributions to his own well-being and to the flourishing of the world of Dutch Renaissance art, I believe these defenses are unnecessary in his case. There is another defense or justification of his artistic activities—namely, that they produced wonderful paintings. My point is that the value of Dou's paintings, a value which is more than adequate to justify our admiration for Dou and our treasuring of his works, does not depend on their potential to make us better off. Insofar as we try to understand the value of good art, good philosophy, good science, too exclusively in terms of their potential to benefit to us, we are looking in the wrong direction.

Of course, much art, much philosophy, and much science do benefit us. Science can discover cures for disease and methods for harnessing energy; art and literature can teach us useful lessons about history, society, and psychology, and it can raise our political consciousness in ways that lead to a more just and peaceful world. Even when art and science do not yield such direct and specific benefits, their study develops our minds, broadens our horizons, and heightens our powers of perception, thereby cultivating what we might think of as all-purpose virtues, which will help us respond to life's unpredictable challenges and realize our individual goals. But first and foremost, what is good about good art is its beauty, broadly conceived, or, to use an even vaguer term, its aesthetic excellence. And at least part of what is good about philosophy, history, and science is similarly noninstrumental.

My point, however, goes beyond the claim that the arts and sciences are noninstrumentally good. The ideas that art is valuable for its own sake and that philosophy can be, as it is sometimes said, “intrinsically interesting” is utterly familiar. But these thoughts are frequently understood in a way that does not challenge the claim that these things are good because they are good *for us*. When we say that we value art or philosophy for its own sake, in other words, we often mean only to point out that we find it *directly* rewarding or enjoyable; our interest in it does not depend on any further, separable benefits it might have. We might say the same of food we like for its taste and not for its nutritional value; of sports we play for the challenge or for the fun of it, and not because it is good for our health. The claim I am exploring today goes further. It involves the idea that rather than explain the value of art from the pleasure or other positive experience we get from it, the order of explanation must go the other way around.

This idea contradicts what seems to me to be a dominant view about values in contemporary philosophy—namely, the view that nothing can be good unless it is good *for* someone—unless, that is, it can enhance someone’s welfare or support the existence of beings who have a welfare themselves. According to one type of value theory, goodness can only be goodness *for* someone. There is no sense to be made of a kind of goodness beyond that: something can be good for you, for me, or for us, even for us as a species—but there is no such thing as something’s being good *period*. According to a second type of theory, it *is* good *period* that creatures who can flourish do flourish. Everything else that is good, however, is good because it contributes or could contribute to that end. This second sort of theory admits of different versions, which vary according to the scope of the set of creatures whose existence and flourishing are regarded as good in themselves. A particularly familiar and important version takes the flourishing of rational beings to have a different and higher status than the flourishing of everything else.

The view I am considering takes issue with any theory of value that is so welfare-oriented. None of these theories, as I understand them, makes the right kind of sense of the value of art or philosophy. For even if it is true, as I believe it is, that art and philosophy do benefit us, it is not *because* they benefit us that good art and good philosophy are good.

One reason for doubting the adequacy of welfarist views can be seen if we entertain for a moment the second type of theory just mentioned, according to which an object is good only if it is good *for* some creature or creatures whose existence and flourishing are themselves good. According to views of this sort, an object’s being good for some X does not ensure that it is “good full-stop”—that will depend on the evaluative status of the X. A swamp that is a good breeding ground for mosquitoes, or a weapon of torture that is good for a sadist, may be good for the mosquitoes or the sadist respectively, and yet not be “good full-stop.” If the source of an object’s value lies in its capacity to benefit someone, its value full-stop is conditional on the value of the beneficiary. But this does not seem to be the case with art or philosophy. The value of a beautiful poem or

symphony does not seem to depend on our judgment of the worthiness of its audience. We need have no opinion about whether people, let alone music lovers in particular, are good-in-themselves in order to judge that the creation, existence, and preservation of Chopin's *Nocturnes* are good.

There is a second reason for rejecting a welfarist theory of value as well. For, if we accept the view that all objects that are good must be good because they are good-for-someone, what conceptions of benefit or welfare are open to us? Naturalistic theories, which assess benefits according to their potential to contribute to a long and healthy life, seem to be the most promising. Pleasure (in moderation), and freedom from pain, from anxiety, and even from boredom may have their place. But I doubt that these terms are adequate to explain and vindicate the judgments we make of the relative value of the novels of George Eliot as compared to those of Dan Brown, of the television series *The Wire* as compared to most reality TV, of the choice to spend one's time practicing the cello or training for a marathon rather than playing Angry Birds, trying to get to the 15th level of difficulty.

It may be suggested that reading *Middlemarch* develops some potential that reading *The Da Vinci Code* fails to cultivate, or that we learn more from *The Wire* than we do from *Project Runway*. But how do we decide which potentials are such that developing them constitutes an enrichment, and on what basis do we distinguish the kind of learning that is thought to improve us from the kinds, like celebrity gossip, baseball statistics, and movie trivia, that simply take up space in our minds?

It is possible that there is an answer to these questions that can illuminate our judgments in terms of a non-question-begging conception of benefit or welfare. And it is possible that, in the absence of such answers, we ultimately give these judgments up. But insofar as the tendency toward this latter response is fueled by the assumption of a welfare-oriented theory of value, we should not be too hasty. It is possible that it is not the judgments that are wrong, but the theoretical assumptions about value that they contradict.

If what made good art valuable was the fact that we were capable of benefitting from it, it would seem to follow that *how* valuable a work of art is would be a function of how much benefit it could potentially yield. Again, we would have a problem squaring this with the judgment that *Middlemarch* is more valuable than the *Da Vinci Code*. Empirical evidence suggests that people benefit more from the latter than from the former. At least, they seem to like it more—to read it more avidly, to recommend it more to friends. They get more enjoyment, in other words, out of reading Dan Brown than George Eliot.

It might be suggested, in the spirit of John Stuart Mill, that this fails to take into account the “higher quality” of pleasure one gets from George Eliot, a feature which can be appreciated only by those who are capable of getting the most from both novelists.⁵ If we are to understand this remark as suggesting that a competent judge will necessarily get a literally more

pleasurable kind of pleasure from the one book than the other, however, it is a dubious claim. If, on the other hand, the point is that in addition to the hedonic character of the experiences, reading *Middlemarch* offers something extra, then I suspect that the specification of the additional benefit will make my point rather than defeat it.

Specifically, I suspect that any features or consequences of reading *Middlemarch* which could plausibly be offered as candidates for extra benefits will reveal assumptions about value that contradict the welfarist conceptions I am arguing against. The complexity of the novel's structure, the quality of the prose, the depth and subtlety of the character development, the insights into civil society, all go into explaining why *Middlemarch* is a better novel. But why is it better *for us* to read a novel that is better in these ways? One possibility is that it better exercises or realizes our potential as intelligent and perceptive creatures capable of entertaining complex thoughts and understanding our world. This thought, however, seems to reveal a commitment to the idea that realizing our intellectual and perceptual potentials is good-in-itself. These things are not good because they benefit us; they benefit us because they are good. Another alternative to which I am attracted is even more obviously opposed to a welfare-oriented value theory. It involves the idea that a part of human good involves being connected in appropriate ways to what the world has to offer. More particularly, if we understand the world as containing objects and opportunities for experience that are of value in themselves, then we may think of our lives as better, as more fortunate, insofar as we are able to be in appreciative touch with some of the most valuable of these.

To lay my cards on the table, this is a way it seems natural to me to think about life. The world seems full of things of immeasurable value, including objects and environments of the natural world, works of supreme human accomplishment, not to mention people themselves, and it is a kind of good fortune to be able to interact with these, in a way that involves going some way toward understanding and appreciating their value. As Robert Adams has put it, a good human life involves "enjoyment of the excellent."⁶ My point is that in many cases the identification of "the excellent" must be made prior to its determination as good *for us*.⁷

A nonwelfarist theory of value conforms better, I think, to our phenomenological experience of art. At least some of the time, our early acquaintance with a poem or a novel or a painting—like our early acquaintance with a person—has the character of a discovery of something valuable in itself. Learning about an art form, one can feel a whole realm of value opening up before one. For many of this essay's readers, I suspect, the introduction to philosophy felt the same way: Here were questions and problems, or ways of looking at the world which you (and I) found challenging and worth exploring further. We were drawn to them; they called out to us—not as forms of entertainment we found ourselves to enjoy, but as problems and ideas that were worthy of study and contemplation.⁸

It is important to note that these thoughts make no commitment to a Platonic world of ideas and values that are independent of human existence. Philosophy and art are human activities—they do not exist in the absence of conscious human life. And the products of these activities—the books and paintings and musical compositions—would have no value in the absence of subjects who had the capacity to appreciate them. They would simply be dead and worthless things.⁹

It may seem that this point amounts to the concession that if art and philosophy are good, they must be good *for us* after all. The claim that art and philosophy have no value if there is no one who is capable of appreciating them may seem to contradict the claim that they are good-in-themselves. The point is confusing because such expressions as “good-for” and “good-in-itself” can be used in different ways.¹⁰ I have been using the phrase “good-for-X” synonymously with “is beneficial for X” or “contributes to X’s welfare.” It is the use we employ when we tell someone that it would be good for him to eat more vegetables or to stop working so hard. But it is easy to slide into using “good-for-X” in somewhat different ways. Importantly, in the case of art and philosophy, there is frequently if not always an intended or imagined audience to whom the created work is addressed. One aims, perhaps, to express an idea or an emotion in a way that will evoke a certain response. But this sense in which art may be *for us* is not a matter of being made for our good.

To see this, consider a child who has a tantrum as a means of getting her parents’ attention or of showing them her anger or frustration. We might say that the child is having the fit “for their benefit,” but we do not mean this literally. The tantrum may be for them, in the sense that it is intended for their attention, but it is not aimed at making them better off.

Even leaving the intentions of artists and philosophers aside, it seems right that art and philosophy are valuable only insofar as they can be understood and appreciated as good by a competent audience. Art which cannot be understood or which, when understood is seen to be insipid or ugly is bad art, and has little or no value as art. But even good art, which is capable of yielding experiences of insight, excitement, or joy, would seem to be of no value in the absence of a potential community of spectators. A great painting locked in a vault that will self-destruct if humans tampered with it would not be worth saving. Contemplating a future in which human life has been destroyed, there seems nothing further to regret when one learns that the Louvre and all its contents have been destroyed as well. This point, too, might well be expressed by saying that if art is good, it must be because it is good *for us*. Its value depends essentially on the existence of subjects who are at least in principle capable of appreciating it. Again, however, our being capable of appreciating it is not equivalent to our being capable of benefitting from it.

Philosophers tend to assume that the only alternative to a welfarist theory of value is a view which is willing to accord intrinsic value to objects unconditionally, independent of the existence of human or indeed of any conscious life. This latter type of view is often associated with G.E. Moore,

as well as with Plato. Though Moore's view has some supporters, many others, including myself, find it obscure and implausible. I suspect that the popularity of welfarist theories of value is in part due to the belief that it is the only way to escape the strange metaphysics of a view like Moore's.

My own reasons for being skeptical of welfarist views, however, contain no metaphysical commitment, and so give no support to a Moorean view. These reasons, to repeat, have to do first with the fact that my appreciation of such things as good artworks and good philosophy seem to ground judgments of these objects' value that are not at all proportional to *how much*, if at all, they are likely to benefit anyone, and second, that insofar as they do benefit anyone, their value does not seem explicable in terms of that benefit. Rather, it seems that the explanation of why it *is* a benefit for us to attend to these works comes from the facts about such works that make them interesting, insightful, provocative, and so on—in sum, it comes from facts about the works that make them good independently of their contribution to our welfare.

At a more abstract level, we might say that my reasons for being skeptical of welfarist views are negative: welfarist views seem unable to capture an important way in which good art and good philosophy are good. If I am right that the value of art and philosophy cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of a benefit to us, this does not imply that their value is wholly independent of our existence and our concerns.

I must confess some sympathy with those who find the idea of nonwelfarist value for which I am arguing puzzling. What *is* so good about beauty or knowledge, one might wonder, if it is not to be understood in terms of benefit to us?¹¹ To my mind, this is a good, difficult, and supremely philosophical question. I deeply regret that, as yet, anyway, I have no satisfactory answer to it. But having no answer to a question does not make the question unintelligible or inappropriate. It may just imply that there is more work for philosophers to do.

A card-carrying intuitionist might dig in her heels at this point. The experience of good art and philosophy, she might say, *shows* us that these things are good, but to ask *why* they are good, if this is not a request for the details of what makes these objects beautiful or interesting, is either a question-begging attempt to draw us back into welfarist patterns of justification or simply a mistake. Works of beauty and interest just *are* good, she might insist—there is nothing more to say. Others, unsatisfied with this response but unable to think of a nonwelfarist answer, might either conclude that the value of beauty and knowledge must be based on their contribution to our welfare after all or decide, more radically, that the impression that beauty and knowledge are valuable, even when they do not benefit us, is just wrong. All these responses seem to me to be ways of eliminating a problem by philosophical fiat, however—a reflection, perhaps, of an impatience or frustration with unanswered questions to which philosophers may be especially prone.

While not wishing, therefore, to deny that there is something mysterious about the idea of nonwelfarist value, I have tried to show that this mystery

need not be identified with the mystery some of us feel to be at the heart of Moorean metaphysics. We have reason, or at least, so I have argued, to think that art and philosophy, beauty and knowledge are good, but not, or at least not wholly, because they are good *for us* or for anyone. Suspicion about Moorean metaphysics should not lead us to deny that this can be so.

If I am right that the value of art and philosophy, or, more generally, of beauty and knowledge, cannot wholly or even primarily be understood in terms of their benefit to anyone, there are at least two implications of which philosophers should take note. The first has to do with our understanding of the values of and in nature.

Earlier I referred to the naturalness with which at least some of us are inclined to describe our encounters with art and music, maybe even with Kant, as discoveries of value of a kind that is not grounded in their capacity to benefit us. These objects do not strike us as good because they please or interest us, much less because they yield more separable instrumental benefits; rather, it seems that they please or interest us because we perceive them to be good in some other way. From the point of view of one who responds in this way, I added, it seems a kind of good fortune to be able to come into contact with such things, in a way that allows us at least partly to see, understand, and appreciate them.

It is probably even more common for people to be inclined to describe encounters with nature in these terms. Some such encounters are themselves very like the encounters with art that I have been discussing. We are moved by the beauty and desolation of a desert landscape, awed by the power and majesty of a towering mountain, charmed by the delicacy and variety in a meadow filled with wildflowers, much as we are moved, awed, charmed by works of art. Other experiences of the wonders of nature, however, are not aesthetic in this narrow and familiar sense. Birders and botanists, so far as I can tell, find interest and value in every sort of bird or plant, and do not discriminate very much on the basis of straightforwardly aesthetic distinctions. Any of these experiences may have the character of bringing us into contact with objects that merit our interest and concern. When we marvel at a species of plant or stand in awe overlooking a mountain range, we seem to recognize a value in these phenomena that is independent of our welfare, a value that is not grounded in our happening to find them interesting or beautiful. Rather, in finding them interesting or beautiful, it seems to us that their value is revealed.

It is not my aim today to argue that such impressions should be trusted and accepted at face value; this is not a defense of the claims frequently associated with deep ecology that natural objects, environments, species, and so on, have a value independent not only of their benefits to us but even of our experience of them. Still, my remarks do imply that such claims should not be easily dismissed.

Many people, I believe, do dismiss such claims too easily. It seems to them only common sense to think that mountains and rivers, marshlands and wilderness areas have value only insofar and to the extent that they

have value *for* creatures who benefit from them. Insofar as such thoughts are reflections of an implicit commitment to a welfarist conception of value, however, they ought to be reconsidered. For, as I have argued, welfarist conceptions cannot account for all our values regardless of our attitudes to nature. Since we need to admit the possibility of goods-for-nothing anyway, there is no reason not to consider natural objects, species, and environments as candidates for such value.

Further, many who reject the possibility of nonwelfarist value—and, for that matter, many who accept it, too—assume that a framework that allows such value must be committed to a Platonic or Moorean metaphysics. That is, they assume that the only way to make sense of the possibility that an object may be good, though good-*for-nothing*, involves accepting the intelligibility of a View from Nowhere, independent of all human interests and concerns, from which the value of such objects can be determined and assessed. As I mentioned earlier, I suspect that many who reject nonwelfarist value do so because they think the alternative would require them to accept such a metaphysics, and I would guess that many who accept the metaphysics do so because they think that it follows from their evaluative commitments to the existence of nonwelfarist goods.

My discussion of art and philosophy calls the necessity of this association into question, however. For, although, as I have argued, the value of art does not consist of art's potential to benefit us, the reasons for drawing this conclusion do not invoke any attempt to occupy so inhuman a point of view. An acceptance and appreciation of the value of art and philosophy understood in nonwelfarist terms at least *appears* wholly compatible with the belief that their value is nonetheless anthropocentric in the sense that it depends on, or even consists in, their capacity to give rise to human experiences of certain sorts. This shows that the question of whether there can be nonwelfarist value can be pried apart from the question of whether a robustly realist metaphysics of value such as Moore's is correct.

The value of natural objects is presumably very different from the value of art, philosophy, and other human achievements, in ways that may make the idea of nonwelfarist value seem all the more puzzling in connection with them. Art and philosophy are human endeavors whose *raison-d'être* are to give rise to human experiences of beauty, knowledge, and understanding. Even if, as I think, their value is not dependent on their contributing to our *well-being* in any sense in which that can be defined independently, their value exists only insofar as they remain appreciable by creatures like us. We cannot say the same of natural objects and environments. It is not clear that they have *raison d'être*, and if they do, it seems unlikely that they would have anything to do with us. Still, the questions of whether and if so how and why nature has value that is independent of its contribution to anyone's welfare are different from metaphysical and linguistic questions about the nature of values and the meaning of value ascriptions.

I said earlier that accepting the conclusion that art and philosophy have a kind of nonwelfarist value has at least two implications philosophers

ought to find important. I have so far been talking about the first of these, namely, the relevance of accepting a nonwelfarist framework for our understanding of the values of and in nature. The second concerns the ways we conceive, explain, and justify our own activities as philosophers, ways that over time can be expected to shape the activities themselves.

I suspect that most professional philosophers get asked at one point or another to justify philosophy and their choice to devote themselves to some part of it. There is the ubiquitous challenge, “If you’re so smart, why aren’t you rich?” that many of us have had to face from family members and friends. Equally ubiquitous and perhaps more serious are the needs to explain to university administrators why they should not cut our budgets (or our entire departments!), to prospective donors why they should endow a chair or a lecture, and to students why they should take our courses and even consider majoring in our field.

It is not surprising that in response to the request to justify our field, our immediate response is to look for welfarist, not to mention instrumental, justifications. The very raising of the question, “What’s so good about philosophy?” shows that the questioner does not feel its attractions immediately, and so we search for ends to which philosophy can contribute which we suspect the questioner already has. We talk about how studying philosophy can improve critical thinking and clear writing and how it can increase one’s chances of getting into law school; we point out that a strong philosophy department will enhance an institution’s respectability and show its commitment to maintaining intellectual traditions. Teaching ethics, it is hoped, will make people better citizens and more conscientious professionals, and will help them think more clearly and more subtly about the morally complex issues that they will encounter in their careers and their lives. Eventually, we may add a less instrumental benefit—namely, that philosophy can be fun—which we tend to illustrate by focusing on neat paradoxes and challenging puzzles and on thought experiments that are eccentric and amusing.

I do not wish to deny that these reasons to study, support, and do philosophy are good reasons. These benefits are real and significant, and may well be the most effective ways of convincing the people around us that there is value in what we do. But they are not the whole story, and it seems to me dangerous not to mention and try better to understand the other part of the story, even if this other part is unlikely to carry much weight with our siblings, our parents, or our deans. This other part has to do with the ways in which philosophy expands our imaginations and our minds and deepens our perspective on ourselves and our relation to the world. It has to do with whatever it is about philosophy that makes it worthy of our attention and energy in a way that is disproportional to its benefit to us as either useful or fun. The danger is that if we do not mention that philosophy has this other kind of value, we will stop noticing that it is there, and indeed, the more deeply entrenched welfarist conceptions of value become in our language and in our thought, the less likely it is that we will even recognize the possibility that it is there.

It is becoming commonplace to bemoan the degree to which students have come to approach college with a consumerist mentality. They know what they want to get out of their college education—what, as they will be quick to point out, they or their parents are paying for, and they judge their experience to be successful or not according to the degree to which their expectations are met. The charge is most often made and most obviously applicable to those who take a purely instrumental attitude to college, who see it as nothing but a stepping stone to a good job and maybe a good social life as well. But it can apply even to some who are willing to consider the possibility that philosophy, literature, history, and so on, might be valuable for their own sakes in the sense that they would be satisfied with their courses as long as they find them intrinsically interesting or fun. For what is at the core of the charge of consumerism, I think, is not that one approaches one's purchases instrumentally; it is more fundamentally the idea that the consumer knows what she is looking for in advance and assesses the product according to her pre-formulated criteria. It can be contrasted with an attitude of a deeper kind of openness to seeing what the world has to offer. One who approaches philosophy or art or college with this more deeply open attitude will aim to see and understand what if anything is good about the subjects or works to which the courses introduce him, and not about how or whether they are good *for him*. Being open in this way to the world, moreover, makes one more open to change in oneself, and to change in what one recognizes as a benefit for oneself.

I began this address with the suggestion that much of the work we as philosophers individually produce, as well as much of the work produced by artists and academics of many other kinds, is good-for-nothing, in the sense that if it had never been created or published, no one would be any worse off. But for most of my talk, I have emphasized a different, more important and less inflammatory point, namely, that what is good about such work cannot be explained in terms of its benefits to us. The order of explanation, I have argued, must go the other way around. It is only because and insofar as there is something good about philosophy, or about its effects on us that is *independent* of its benefit to us that philosophy can also be good *for us* in noninstrumental ways. Assuming that I am right that philosophy has such nonwelfarist value, then, it can also have welfarist value, insofar as “enjoyment of the excellent” or “appreciation for what the world has to offer” contributes to our flourishing. In that case, philosophy (and art and literature, and contact with nature as well) will rightly be seen as good for us, but good not *because* they are good for us.¹²

This idea that philosophy, as a field, or as a realm of questions and ideas, is good for us, might seem inconsistent with my opening remarks, requiring me to rephrase and qualify the judgment with which I began: if philosophy is good for us after all, you might think, then if one's work is good philosophy, *it* is good for us, too, even though, as you may now be willing to admit, it is not good *because* it is good for us. This is true in what I earlier labeled the Ordinary Sense of “good for” (the sense in which the superfluous dermatologist's work is good for her patients), but not in the Robust Sense. The inclination to think it must be true even in the Robust Sense may reflect

the persistence of our tendency to think of value in welfarist terms. For my point about our individual contributions was that there is more of it than anyone could ever read and appreciate. Though a world without philosophy (or without art or literature) would be an impoverished world, and at least some of our lives would be diminished because of it, one cannot say the same about a world without *my* or probably also without your specific and individual contributions to philosophy.¹³ This is and should be humbling, I think, but it need not be devastating. For the fact that one's work is not likely to be (robustly) good *for anyone* does not make it worthless. It may clarify a concept, illuminate a problem, offer a novel way of interpreting our experience, or of understanding our relation to the world. These are the sorts of things that philosophy does, and—whether or not these accomplishments make anyone better off, whether or not, in other words, these accomplishments are good *for anyone*—these are the sorts of things that make philosophy good.

Endnotes

- * I am grateful to the participants of the 2010 Moral Philosophy Conference in Reykjavik for their questions and feedback in the efforts leading up to the preparation of this address and to the audiences at St. Louis University, the College of Wooster, and the BSET Conference in Oxford for their responses to an earlier draft. I owe special thanks to Sarah Buss, Douglas MacLean, and Richard Kraut for detailed and helpful comments.
1. We might judge this to be true even in the large majority of even those relatively rare cases when a work has had a significant effect on the direction or character of the field—philosophy, for example, would not have been worse off if Nelson Goodman had never existed, it just would have been different.
 2. The lifesaving case is somewhat different and can arguably be thought to be beneficial in a stronger sense. For even if the struggling child would have been saved by someone else had the actual lifesaver not come to the rescue, the man who jumped in takes on some personal risk or sacrifice which another person would have had to take had he not acted as he did. As such, he took on the “costs” of lifesaving, thereby relieving someone else of that burden. If his action had no net benefit to the child, it was perhaps robustly beneficial to the child's alternate rescuers.
 3. As Arthur Danto put it, on an “artworld.” See Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy* (1964): 571-84.
 4. See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20-39. See also John Koethe's commentary on my Tanner Lectures in Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 67-74.
 5. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861), Chapter 2.
 6. Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 7. It might be helpful for understanding my position to distinguish two conceptions of human welfare, a narrower or thinner conception, and a
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wider or thicker one. According to the narrow conception, X contributes to Y's welfare if and only if X increases Y's ability to live a long and healthy life, where health is to be understood in naturalistic terms. According to a wider conception, what constitutes human flourishing (and so, human welfare) is not necessarily tied to its effect on one's long term health. It is, I take it, largely an empirical question which human potentialities are such that their development contributes to our welfare in the narrow sense. A view that identifies a good life with "enjoyment of the excellent," if it does not rest on such empirical confirmation, would exemplify a wide conception of welfare, as would an ancient conception of well-being, according to which, for instance, a hero who dies a courageous death at an early age may have lived a better life (from a self-interested point of view) than a coward who lives a long and comfortable one, or a view according to which a life of great accomplishment may be better than a less distinguished one even if the former comes at the costs associated with anxiety and stress. It appears to me that *wide conceptions of welfare* depend on *nonwelfarist conceptions of value*. Therefore, a defense of a welfarist conception of value that depends on a wide conception of welfare is invalid.

8. Thomas Scanlon seems to hold a similar view. See, e.g., *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1998), p. 143: "If I devote my life, or a part of it, to research in pure mathematics or to mastering the rudiments of theoretical physics, these activities contribute to making my life better. But what makes these pursuits worthwhile is not that contribution...but rather the fact that they constitute serious attempts to understand deep and important questions."
9. In saying that such things as (even superb) books and paintings would have no value in the absence of subjects capable of appreciating them, I mean to say that there would be no point or reason to preserve them in a world that would be forever devoid of such subjects and to deny that a world in which these things exist even without any potential appreciators is in any sense a better world than one in which they have been destroyed. But it may be that the best analysis of "X has value" would not have these implications. If so, the claim I want to make would need to be rephrased.
10. As others have pointed out. See, e.g. Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *The Philosophical Review* 92, no. 2 (April 1983): 169-95.
11. This is parallel here to a familiar difficulty in arguing against egoism. Insofar as egoism is taken to be the default theory of motivation, there seems something mysterious about the idea that there can be reasons to do something that do not benefit oneself. As egoism is, for many people, the default theory of motivation, welfarism may be the default theory of value.
12. These remarks invoke a wide conception of welfare, according to the distinction between narrow and wide conceptions of welfare I make in footnote 7.
13. In this respect, the production of good works of philosophy or of art is different from finding the cure for a disease or preventing a famine or, for that matter, providing comfort or sustenance to a single individual. Even if it were true that if one person hadn't found the cure for the disease, for

example, someone else would have done so a few months later, some additional people may be cured because of the extra months in which a cure has come to be known, and the researchers who would otherwise have found the cure later will be free to turn to the next disease, and so on.
