

DEVELOPMENT AND REASONS

BY MARK LEBAR

What is Good and Why: the Ethics of Well-Being. BY RICHARD KRAUT. (Harvard UP, 2007. Pp. xi + 286. Price £22.95.)

Richard Kraut's *What is Good and Why* is his first full-length foray into ethical theory. Of course, he has done plenty of ethical theory in working on Plato and Aristotle. In the decades since its publication, his 1979 paper 'Two Conceptions of Happiness' has been seminal in philosophical investigations into human well-being. But *What is Good* differs from Kraut's earlier work by attempting a full-scale development and defence of a central element in ethical theory, in just the way its title suggests. One way to construe this work is as a development or completion of the earlier paper. But to leave it at that would be an injustice; Kraut's ambitions extend much further – to the role of the good overall in practical thinking.

Kraut carries out this larger project in his characteristically lucid style. He frames a distinctive view which offers original contributions across a wide variety of subdisciplines within ethics. In fact, his view is remarkable for the range of positions it disagrees with while maintaining a high degree of plausibility. A theme consistent with his earlier paper is his rejection of what are sometimes called 'subjectivist' accounts of well-being. Kraut now subsumes these under the heading 'conative theories', and mounts a vigorous repudiation of them. Often the contrast class for such theories is taken to be 'objective list' theories, but Kraut distances himself from the objective list approach too, as well as from the objective theory of welfare (as 'rational care') defended by Stephen Darwall. Is he then defending some version of eudaimonism, carried over from his work on Plato and Aristotle? No, not that either, and I shall return to this point. His view also is in some ways similar to what are sometimes called 'perfectionist' theories, but Kraut gives good reason for not accepting this classification either. Though his approach has similarities to Philippa Foot-style ethical naturalism, he repudiates her naturalism. In short, he has created a theoretical niche all his own.

Kraut calls his approach *developmentalism*, and it has at its core the notion that there is a 'tight connection' between a living being's doing well and its developing and using its powers (p. 133): 'when we consider the good of any living thing, we should look to the process of growth and development that best suits things of its

kind' (p. 136n.). Kraut's developmentalism maintains that the good for a living being is the highest development of its natural powers. One great advantage of this approach is that it yields an account of *good for* which generalizes across species. At the same time, Kraut thinks developmentalism pays off in thinking about the good for human beings – our welfare or well-being or prudential good – in a plausible and attractive way. By attending to the way children develop and grow, and in particular to the common sense normative judgements we make about when they do so well or poorly, we can identify the natural capacities it is good for us to develop. These Kraut identifies as our cognitive, affective, sensory, social, and (to a lesser extent) physical powers.

His argument for the view proceeds in stages. The first two chapters are path-breakers for the full articulation of the theory in ch. 3 and its defence and application in ch. 4. The earlier chapters aim to distance developmentalism from a variety of views. The prime target is the 'conative' family of theories of well-being, which for some time now have dominated theories of well-being. Kraut's is the most developed critique of these approaches I have seen, and as elsewhere, his aim is to vindicate his claims by appeal to 'platitudes' about what is good for us.

Kraut's critical work hardly ends there, however. Among the other theories he rejects are theories which make good somehow *mind-dependent*; views (such as those of Moore and Ross) which privilege goodness *sans phrase* over good-for; theories which make practical reasons depend on things other than considerations of goodness and in particular good-for (e.g., principles of right);¹ hedonism; egoism; utilitarianism; views which distinguish agent-neutral from agent-relative values; and Foot-style naturalism. That is a lot of brush to clear, but Kraut's method is to draw on ordinary intuitions about conditions under which living things thrive (in particular, but not only, human beings), in order to show that all these fail. Readers with different predilections will doubtless form different judgements as to which of his arrows miss their marks. Still, Kraut's arguments in most cases will, I suspect, earn their way into rebuttals in a wide variety of venues.

Ch. 3 is the heart of the positive account. Here Kraut lays out the shape which developmentalism takes in the human case, and explains in detail what are the kinds of power the proper development of which constitutes what is good for us. His argument features much sensible development of platitudes about what is good for us which are easily overlooked but ought to be staples of any adequate account of well-being. Many of the platitudes we accept about children and about what counts as good for them in their development carry more force and attract less controversy than vexed questions about what competent adults choose for themselves and the bearing of those choices on their good. Kraut drew attention to the significance of the process of growing up in his 1979 paper, and brings home here the full force of what we believe is right for those becoming fully fledged human beings. Rosalind Hursthouse remarked that Aristotle never forgot that we were once children,² and Kraut perhaps more than anyone else working in the area has taken this to heart.

¹ In this way Kraut's theory is *welfarist* in the sense identified by L.W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 184.

² R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 14.

Ch. 4 applies the insights of developmentalism, with the aim of showing the reach of the theory, in particular that we do not have to go beyond good-for considerations to account for the reasons we have for action. Kraut considers possible sources of demurral on this point – promising, punishment, desert, rights, consent – to argue that none needs to go beyond considerations of good-for to account for the proper sorts of reasons to act in each case.

This is an all too brief survey of a plausible and attractive account of well-being; I cannot do justice here to all of its valuable lines of enquiry. In the remainder of this review I shall consider some issues which arise from the relationship between good-for (which is central to Kraut's developmentalism) and reasons for action. Kraut touches on this subject repeatedly without making clear just what this relationship is. Partly as a result, I believe there are real puzzles in making sense of the import of developmentalism for ordinary practice.

Kraut's developmentalism bears an uneasy relationship with the eudaimonism of the ancient Greeks, and I shall bring out my concerns about his approach by focusing on some crucial points of disagreement between them. It is striking to consider the contrasts between Kraut's developmentalism and ancient eudaimonism, for two reasons. First, Kraut has written extensively on ancient value theory, in particular the ethics and politics of Plato and Aristotle. It is therefore instructive that he does not toe the ancient line when it comes to an account of what is good for us. Secondly, though Kraut's view is not eudaimonist, it is obviously deeply influenced by his work on the ancient accounts. Moreover, his earlier landmark paper on happiness explicitly challenged contemporary 'conative' theories of happiness from a perspective grounded in ancient thinking about well-being. So his departure from eudaimonism is worth scrutinizing.

Where does he part company with the ancients? For one thing, Kraut is interested in a general account of good-for which can apply not only to humans but to all living things. In general the ancients seemed simply not interested in this broader question, at least for purposes of ethical theorizing. More importantly, Kraut departs from the ancients in treating our capacities for engaging reasons as just one more suite of powers among many. On the developmental view, our capacity for rationality matters, but so does our capacity for social development, and our capacity to sense, and feel, and so on. All are equally important in the story of what is good for us, and each has its stake in the demands for development.

Not so on ancient accounts, where rationality plays a distinctive role and stands in a special relationship with every other element of our nature. While the ancients agree that we have these other capacities, and that their development matters, they insist that our cognitive powers have a special place in the story of their proper development. This is partly because the complexity of human nature and the multiplicity of our capacities open up to us a range of developmental possibilities, so that the path to developing them in ways that are good for us is more complex than nature alone settles. There is a 'natural indeterminacy' to the course of proper development for us, but because we are by nature practical reasoners, an essential element in our developing properly is learning to cultivate our own capacities in response to reasons. The best path of development for each of us is in large part the

work of our own practical reason to sort out, and for this reason the development and exercise of practical wisdom occupies a special place in the story of what is good for us. It is not merely that practical wisdom is *more important* than other developed capacities. It orders and structures what counts as the proper development of our other capacities: it has what Daniel Russell has called a *directive* role in our good.³

On Kraut's view, there is no such recognition of a special significance for the development of our rational capacities – they need development in ways that are recognizably good for us, but in this respect they are on all fours with *all* our natural capacities. Because there is no recognition in Kraut's view that directing the living of a good human life is the work of practical wisdom, there is also no recognition of what I shall call the *internal relationship* between practical wisdom and a good human life. This internal relationship entails that each of us is uniquely positioned to contribute to our own living well in a way in which others simply cannot. A good human life is, on the ancient view, one with an appropriate rational structure in the choices and conduct which constitute it, and it is the agent's capacity for rational agency which provides this structure. This is what explains the internal relationship, and because Kraut fails to acknowledge that relationship, his account does not establish a clear linkage between what is good for us and what reasons we have for acting; the eudaimonist approach does. I now turn to two places where this loss is especially problematic.

Whose good to seek, and why

On the ancient views, it is the work of practical wisdom to recognize and respond to reasons for action, beginning with the reasons we have to live well. However, on Kraut's account, the good-for relation has no direct connection at all with reasons for action. Presumably we have reasons for action, and Kraut is explicit that these reasons must come from what is good for somebody or something. Yet there is no account at all of how this might be so. Kraut rejects utilitarianism, not only because he believes we should reject its maximizing commitments (§4) but also because it does not give proper place to concerns for *whose* good we are to advance (pp. 14–15). Impersonal regard for the good of all is, he says (p. 65), no appropriate moral standard; so there is no connection with reasons for action from anything like a maximizing principle of rationality. But Kraut also rejects even a weak form of egoism which holds that among those goods which each of us has reason to advance is our own good – that we must have direct concern for our own well-being (p. 49). He argues that we *can* endorse the strategy of someone who cares for his own good only instrumentally, as a necessary means to caring for the goods of others (p. 50).

This leaves a puzzle as to how exactly *anybody's* good becomes reason-giving for us, given that there is no immediate connection between reasons for action and either one's own good or everybody's good. Somehow, *somebody's* good must be

³ D. Russell, *Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford UP, 2005), ch. 1. Though the details vary from account to account, the ancient eudaimonists – Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics – are in unison on this point. Because *eudaimonia* is (on all these ancient accounts) something that is the *product* of practical wisdom, eudaimonism is not even a species of developmentalism: that is to say, it is not Kraut's general account as applied to the human case.

reason-giving, but how? Kraut maintains (pp. 56, 61) that there is no philosophical answer here:

... we do *not* need a formula that tells all people whatsoever, regardless of their circumstances, whose good they should promote. We can instead rely on common sense, and recognize that the world as it is already offers countless opportunities for doing what is good.... To act, one must answer the question ‘Whose good should I be serving?’ and not merely ‘What is good?’. There are unlimited ways of properly answering the first of these questions, and so philosophy cannot help us here; it can only help with the second question.

The answer to the ‘who to serve?’ question depends in each case on lots of contingent factors over which it is impossible to generalize. We stand in various social relationships – family member, doctor, promisor, teacher – which make certain responses salient, and beyond that there is nothing more for philosophy to say.

But insisting, as Kraut does (pp. 15, 60), that these ‘social roles’ answer the question leaves open the reasons we have for taking up and occupying such roles.⁴ What philosophy *can* and *should* say something about is how the goods of some people (or for that matter of some other living things), but not others, come to be reason-giving for us, and thus in part why we have reason to take on such roles with respect to some people but not others. We are awash in a sea of possibilities for promoting the development of living things. If the goods of some but not others are reason-giving, it is a philosophical question when and how this occurs. If such connections are beyond reason and rational scrutiny, then they are arbitrary, and we can hardly suppose that this is the case. Yet Kraut’s account offers no clue as to the rational structure of our interest in the well-being of human beings. Our own good is not in itself necessarily reason-giving; neither is the maximum good. We are left without an account of when and how a being’s good establishes reasons for action. This is a hole which some prescriptive story needs to fill, even if it is not one which can address the contingencies that spell out particular cases. Philosophy need not yield determinate solutions to these practical problems in order to offer insight into how to think about them.

We might also wonder about the *content* of the attitudes available to those who would care for their own goods only instrumentally. Suppose Ally does not see her own good as reason-giving except instrumentally, but sees her father’s good as something that *is* more than instrumentally reason-giving for her. It is not clear what form her concern for him might take. After all, Ally cannot share in his thinking that his good is something which by its very nature must be reason-giving for him. Ally must, it seems, see his concern for his own good as in a sense arbitrary, for the reasons I have just considered. What kind of attitude can that leave her, not only towards his well-being but towards *him*?

In Aristotle, the love of self and the love of others are deeply connected. In commitments of the best sort, Aristotle says, I love my friend as a ‘second self’.⁵ This

⁴ Kraut has re-emphasized in private communication his concern about social roles in answering this question.

⁵ *NE* 1166a 31, 1170b 6, 1171b 32; *EE* 1245a 29; *MM* 1213a 12.

is a way of extending the love I already have for myself (in particular for myself as rational agent) for my own sake.⁶ Aristotle thinks this connection between people who love their own goods *first* is possible because we recognize our own rational agency as essential to ourselves, and we do likewise with those we care about. We see their rational agency, their love for themselves, and their love for others as inextricably bound together, psychologically and normatively. But it is not clear that Ally can do this. She does not understand what it is like to be someone *for the sake of whom* people have reasons to act, since she has no sense of being a self whose own good gives her reasons for action. For this reason also, being the object of love for one's own sake is a notion alien to her. Better that her concern for her father's good is grounded in a concern for *him* – a concern which it is hard to see that she could have without regarding herself in that way first.⁷

What this points to, once again, is what is lost by abandoning the connection between what is good for us and our capacity for rational agency, as recognized in the ancient eudaimonist accounts. *Proper* concern for others – concern of the sort that is appropriate to psychologically complex human beings – is impossible without recognizing the internal connection between reasons for acting (and the work of practical wisdom) and living well. The absence of that connection seems to make real friendship and love impossible. But these are not the only important social relations that are affected.

Development and respect

I can best bring out a further dimension of loss by exploring the proposal that we should see ourselves and each other not merely as receptacles or locations of development (or even good-for), but as beings entitled to *respect* – as *claimants* on others.

Kraut does insist that we have obligations not to harm others. Not only impediments but lots of other things (e.g., pain) can be bad for us, and in so far as some action is bad for something, in general this provides reason not to perform it. Developmentalism can thus account for many of the considerations bearing on (for example) promise-keeping, punishment, and other social practices.

What it cannot account for is our status as entitled to demand or *claim* that others must keep their promises to us, or more generally our claim to be respected by others. Kraut (p. 222) says of the harm done to relationships by breaking promises that

Breaking certain promises is *very* wrong, because the damage their violation does to one's relationships, or the good that one promised but failed to deliver, is very great.

This is certainly true, but a crucial part of why such harm is done to relationships cannot be explained by developmentalism. If you break a promise to me in a way that brings about more good for me than keeping it would have, I may yet have a

⁶ *NE* IX 4, 1166a 12ff.; cf. also IX 8, 1168b 36.

⁷ For formidable versions of this argument, see J. Hampton, 'The Wisdom of the Egoist', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 14 (1997), pp. 21–52, and 'Feminist Contractarianism', in L. Antony and C. Witt (eds), *A Mind of One's Own* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), pp. 337–68.

complaint against you. The complaint is not simply that you have damaged our relationship. In fact, given that (by hypothesis) you have actually made me better off, an explanation is needed of why I should think you have damaged it. Simply looking at what is good for me cannot explain this. What does explain it is precisely the ‘internal relation’ to our own good which each of us has in virtue of our rational agency, and which your action ignores. Because developmentalism loses sight of the crucial role of rational agency in what is good for us, it is prone to get things wrong just when agency matters in ways which concern for good-for can mask.

Similar problems arise about Kraut’s treatment of the Millian notion that we are entitled to a moral ‘wall’ protecting us from interference. Kraut rejects what he calls ‘pure anti-paternalism’, the view that the consent of others is required for interfering in their lives or actions (§61). This view is, he says (p. 237), ‘arbitrary’ in holding that another’s will should be respected when no good is performed by doing so.

We bypass people’s will[s] all the time, by preventing them from harming others and requiring them to contribute to the good of others, whether they want to or not. There is no merit in the general idea that we should all be allowed to do whatever we choose.

On Kraut’s view the only possible point of respecting the wills of others must be that they perform a crucial epistemic service, because they are generally better situated to know what is good for them than we are. This is, of course, very often true, but it fails to capture important intuitions about the respect others may claim from us by right.

Those who think it an important feature of normative ethical theory that we are entitled, as rational agents in moral community with other rational agents, to make claims on other moral agents will not be satisfied that developmentalism can capture this. As Stephen Darwall has argued in recent work,⁸ it is hard to resist the proposal that this sort of standing is central to our moral and other practices in much of human social life – promising and anti-paternalism among them. But developmentalism neither makes a clear and central place for rational agency in understanding what is good for us, nor forges any clear connection between what is good for us and the ways we respond to reasons. Those who think our rational agency is what gives us our distinctive moral standing will feel that Kraut’s account of the ways in which we can harm others – or for that matter the ways in which our relationships with them can be enriched and improved – simply falls short.⁹

Practical wisdom, good-for, and matching

I conclude with a related puzzle arising from Kraut’s venture into meta-ethics. Though Kraut distances himself from the ‘naturalism’ of the sort defended by Foot, he resembles her in denying adamantly that goodness is mind-dependent. What is

⁸ S. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint* (Harvard UP, 2006).

⁹ In a similar vein, Kraut offers a ‘buck-passing’ view of rightness (§65) which many will find unsatisfactory, because his conception of goods and harms (and thus his conception of reasons) is too narrow. It does not, for example, recognize Darwall’s ‘second-person reasons’, nor the good of second-person relations, in any systematic way.

good or bad for living things is in no way dependent on human minds: it is ‘not brought into being by, or dependent on, human attitudes, or minds in general’. It is ‘already “out there” in the world, existing independently of any mind’ (p. 9). Kraut takes himself to be affirming what Christine Korsgaard calls ‘substantive realism’, in contrast with her ‘constructivism’ and with other mind- or response-dependent views of the nature of goodness or good-for.¹⁰ Yet he gives no account of how he would meet standard objections to realism of this sort – how he might explain, for example, how such evaluative properties can fit into the natural world, or how we come to know about them. Presumably, claiming that (say) the growth of a healthy root system for a plant is good for it is doing something more than simply reporting on the botanical facts about the plant and its roots. It is ascribing a property that is not merely descriptive of the natural facts, but is an evaluation of those facts. But Kraut says nothing about the provenance of this extra-botanical property – how it comes to be, or how we might be in a position to detect it.

However, Kraut does give us something of an analysis of the good-for relation without yet addressing those issues. One important reason he offers for privileging the notion of good-for as opposed to good *simpliciter* is that the ‘for’ in the former is, as Kraut puts it, a relation of a certain sort of *suitability*: ‘the “for” in “*g* is good for *S*” is best taken to indicate that *g* has a certain kind of suitability to *S*: their properties are so *matched* to each other that *g* serves *S* well’ (p. 87; my italics). By way of example, Kraut offers a case in which one might think that a certain career – that of a physician, say – is good for some particular individual: ‘if we say of someone that it is good *for him* that he is living the life of a doctor, there must be some suitability between him and that life, some match between them that makes it the case that such a life serves *him* well’ (p. 111).

So the nature of good-for consists in these matching relations. I myself think Kraut is right in thinking about good-for in this way, but doubt that we can best understand these relations as mind-independent. In any event, if we are to respond to opportunities to realize good-for in the world around us, our doing so must depend upon our capacity to detect and respond to these relations. Given the varieties of things that can be good for us, there must be many different kinds of matching relations that matter for promoting our good. Many of these matches we no doubt can discern ‘by nature’ – without reflection or training. However, given the significance we ordinarily accord to wisdom in finer cases of discernment, it is odd that the development of a capacity to detect these matches reliably and accurately should receive no greater priority than Kraut gives it. Of course, it might just be that acting morally is only one of several arenas of human life and action, not in itself specially important. Kraut denies the priority of the right over the good (§5), but says nothing about the priority of the good among the many possible exercises of our capacities.

If, however, we think that morality – in particular, the promotion of good for ourselves and others – is especially important for living well, we again notice a sharp contrast with the ancients. It is because the capacity for discrimination is so crucial to living well that practical wisdom enjoys the pride of place in human development

¹⁰ C. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, 1996), Lecture I. See Kraut, n. 11 §3.

which it does on the ancient accounts. This also explains why, amid recognition of a broad and general need to develop as whole beings, the ancients emphasized the significance of moral education. This discriminatory capacity, among all our capacities, bears a special role in our living well, because it is essential for virtue, and virtue requires (*inter alia*) getting those matching relations *right*.

Overall, it seems the central relationship between good-for and reasons for action is one that cannot rest in the indeterminate form in which Kraut has left it. Since recognizing and responding to reasons for action (perhaps including these matching relations) is so important for how we live, how we come to do this must be a crucial part of the developmental story as well. Moral philosophy can and should shed light on how the possible goods of the living things around us come to give us reasons for action.

On the other hand, the key insights of Kraut's developmentalism are not only compatible with the overall thrust of ancient eudaimonism, which makes that relationship explicit, but are actually a welcome complement to it. Eudaimonist theories (in particular, neo-Aristotelian theories) often emphasize the differences between us and other living things in the light of our reflective rational capacities. This sometimes comes at the cost of inattention to the natural facts about our development from children into adult human beings. Kraut brings onto centre stage in thinking about our good these facts about ourselves as developing beings. Eudaimonists, like others thinking about what is good for us and why, can only benefit from taking these lessons seriously.¹¹

University of North Carolina

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