

Judith Jarvis Thomson, Goodness and Advice

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book "Goodness and Advice" by Judith Jarvis Thomson.

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Article:

Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Goodness and Advice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), xvi+188 pp.

This is an interesting, uneven book. Its core consists of the 1999–2000 Tanner Lectures on Human Values that Thomson delivered at Princeton University and subsequently revised. Part I of these lectures is entitled "Goodness" (39 pages long), Part II "Advice" (40 pages). These lectures are preceded by an introduction by Amy Gutmann (10 pages) and succeeded by comments by Philip Fisher (12 pages), Martha Nussbaum (29 pages), Jerome Schneewind (6 pages), and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (13 pages). The book ends with Thomson's reply to these comments (33 pages). The interest is due entirely to Thomson, the unevenness to the other contributors. In her lectures, Thomson proves herself still to be at the top of her game: as insightful, incisive, and pithy as ever. Neither the introduction nor the comments do her justice, but an unabashed fan of Thomson such as myself can gain a perverse pleasure (on which Thomson might herself frown) from the decisive manner in which she dispatches her critics.

I

Part I of Thomson's lectures opens with remarks about "the fact-value gap." The belief that there is an "unbridgeable" gap between fact and value has become, Thomson says, a part of our culture. Freshmen show that they bring this belief to college with them when they reject any appeal to reason in their discourse about values, resorting instead to the slogan, "It's all just a matter of opinion." One of Thomson's goals is to rebut this tiresome bromide.

To achieve this goal, Thomson first turns her attention to Consequentialism, which she characterizes as the view that “a person ought to do a thing if and only if the world will be better if he does it than if he does any of the other things it is open to him to do at the time” (p. 7). She declares this view “deeply satisfying” (p. 8) but rejects it nonetheless; in so doing, she attempts to refute the notion of an unbridgeable fact-value gap, to which she believes Consequentialism lends itself.

Thomson notes that Consequentialism itself says nothing about what would make the world be better or worse than it would otherwise be. Some theory of value needs to be conjoined with it before any substantive prescriptions may be inferred. One classic proposal, which Thomson calls Hedonism About Goodness and attributes to Bentham and Mill, is that value resides in episodes of pleasure and pain. As she puts this proposal, “an event is good just in case it consists in someone’s feeling pleased” (the more pleased the better) and “bad just in case it consists in someone’s feeling pain” (the more pain the worse) (pp. 9–10). Consequentialism plus Hedonism About Goodness yields Utilitarianism.

Thomson rejects Hedonism About Goodness since it declares all pleasure good, including pleasure taken in the pains of others. “Insofar as we have intuitions about what counts as a good event,” she says, “it strikes us, intuitively, that a man’s feeling pleased at the pain of another is not a good event” (p. 12). She notes further that Hedonism About Goodness conjoined with Consequentialism implies that an act’s having such perverse pleasure as a consequence counts in favor of the conclusion that one ought to perform the act, a conclusion that she repudiates.

What might supplant Hedonism About Goodness as a complement to Consequentialism? Thomson’s answer is radical: nothing. She says this because she takes Consequentialism, despite its initial appeal, to be fundamentally flawed. Echoing a theme found in several of her previous writings (see Thomson 1992, 1994, 1996, 1997), she maintains that nothing can be “just plain good (or bad)” as Consequentialism presupposes. On the contrary, all goodness is “goodness in a way.” What is good for Alfred may be bad for Bertha; what looks good may taste bad; someone who is good at chess may be bad at tennis; and so on. Because Consequentialism ignores this simple truth, Thomson says, it “has to go” (p. 19). She devotes Part II to the question of what should replace it. Before addressing this issue, however, she remarks on some benefits that may be gained by attending to the ways in which things may be good.

First, there is no longer any threat, Thomson claims, of an unbridgeable fact-value gap. If there is one fact-value gap, there must be many—as many as there are ways of being good. The facts about a fountain pen that justify our calling it good will be quite different from the facts about a brandy that justify our saying that it tastes good, which in turn will be quite different from the facts about some hot lemonade that justify our declaring it good for Alfred. Whether there are any “gaps” here between facts and values is immaterial, since they are clearly not “unbridgeable”; the inferences are warranted.

A second benefit that Thomson cites, discussion of which occupies the remainder of Part I, is that an illuminating account can be given of the concept of a reason for action. She distinguishes three kinds of locution, instances of which are as follows (p. 23):

- (1) There is a reason for Alfred to press the doorbell, namely X.
- (2) Alfred has a reason for pressing the doorbell, namely X.
- (3) Alfred's reason for pressing the doorbell is X.

Thomson says that, on at least one common understanding of these locutions, (2) entails (1) but not vice versa; the reverse entailment fails since (2) also entails that Alfred accepts (1). Similarly, she says that (3) entails (2), but not vice versa; (3) also entails that Alfred presses the doorbell for the reason mentioned. She then undertakes an extended inquiry into the truth conditions of (1).

Two observations drive this inquiry. The first is that a reason for a person to do a thing is something that counts in favor of his doing it (p. 22); the second is that a reason is something one might reason from (p. 24). The latter observation indicates that reasons are propositions; this precludes their being desires or desires-cum-beliefs, contrary to what is so often maintained (pp. 28 ff.). Thomson prefers to say, furthermore, that only true propositions, or facts, can be reasons. This is in keeping with our saying, for instance, that Alfred has no reason for believing (a) that Bertha's pig can fly, when he believes this in virtue of the belief (b) that all pigs can fly. His having no reason for belief (a) is of course compatible with there being an explanation of his having it, the explanation being precisely that he has belief (b).

Bearing in mind that all goodness is goodness in a way, Thomson makes the following proposal: a fact is a reason for a person to do a thing if it is a fact to the effect that his doing it would be good in some way (p. 32). She denies that this proposal has reasons for action "come too cheap," since there being a fact in favor of one's doing something is quite compatible both with one's not caring about this and with its being wrong for one to do the thing in question (p. 35). She denies, moreover, that the sufficient condition proposed for there being a reason for action is also a necessary condition, since reasons may arise in other ways. She lists some of these ways, but makes no claim that the list is complete, and concludes her inquiry with the following open-ended account: a fact is a reason for a person to do a thing if and only if it is a fact to the effect either that his doing it would be good in a way, or that his not doing it would be bad in a way, or that his doing it would be better in a way than his doing anything else, or that someone (or something) has a right that he do it, or . . . (here room is left for other "evaluative facts" to be added) (pp. 37-38).

II

Part II of Thomson's lectures deals with what she calls the "advice sense" of "ought" that is featured in such expressions as "Alfred ought to press the doorbell" and "Alfred ought to pay Bertha five dollars." She acknowledges that it is plausible to think that what a person ought, in this sense, to do is closely connected to what would be good or bad. Given the indefinite number of ways in which something may be good or bad, the reader might expect Thomson to say that there are correspondingly indefinitely many advice-senses of "ought." She denies this, however (pp. 45-46). Suppose that Alfred's paying Bertha five dollars would be good for Bertha but bad for Alfred. It is of no help (indeed, Thomson believes it makes no sense) to say that Alfred therefore ought in the "goodness for Bertha" sense, but not in the "goodness for Alfred" sense,

to pay Bertha five dollars; for the question still remains whether Alfred “just plain ought” to pay Bertha. It is with the truth conditions of “just plain ought” that Thomson concerns herself.

Thomson makes four suggestions on this matter. Where “A” stands for somebody’s name and “V” for some verb or verb-phrase, her first suggestion is this (p. 48):

(I) If A’s V-ing would neither be bad for anyone (or anything) other than A nor infringe anyone’s (or anything’s) rights, and if it would be better for A than his doing any of the other things it is open to him to do instead, then A ought to V.

(In cases of ties regarding what would be best for A, A ought to take his pick.) Thomson says that, as far as (I) is concerned and inasmuch as it omits any mention of A’s state of mind, what a person ought to do is an “objective” rather than “subjective” matter (p. 50).

After some remarks about what it is for something to be good or bad for a person, an animal, a plant, an artifact, and so on—all “first-order” ways of being good or bad—Thomson turns to ways of being good or bad that she calls “second-order” because their exemplification is a function of an act’s being good or bad in some first-order way. She suggests (p. 59):

(II) Justice and generosity are second-order ways of being good; their contraries, injustice and (as Thomson calls it) miserliness, are second-order ways of being bad.

To act unjustly, in the sense intended, is to fail to do what another person (or thing) has a non-overridden right to one’s doing. (In terminology that Thomson has used elsewhere—see Thomson 1986 and 1990—to act unjustly is thus not simply to infringe but to violate another’s right.) To act in a miserly way is, roughly, to do something that is very bad for someone (or something) else but which provides oneself with at most a small gain, when nobody (or nothing) has a non-overridden right that one do that thing. (This is only rough, because Thomson claims that miserliness and generosity are context-dependent in a way in which injustice and justice are not. She also leaves open the possibility that further conditions should be placed on miserliness (p. 64). In this regard, I would suggest that she might want to modify the account just cited as follows: “. . . but which provides oneself or another with at most a small gain . . .”) With this account in hand, Thomson makes her third suggestion (p. 67):

(III) If A’s V-ing would be either unjust or miserly, then A ought not to V; and if A’s not V-ing would be either unjust or miserly, then A ought to V.

As before, Thomson takes the question whether A ought to V to be an objective one. She therefore declines to say that justice and generosity are morally good, or that injustice and miserliness are morally bad. She believes that the moral goodness or badness of an act has to do with the praise- or blameworthiness of its agent, which itself has to do with the agent’s state of mind when acting (pp. 66–67).

Thomson notes that many philosophers claim that “A ought to V” and “A ought not to V” may both be true at once; in particular, those who embrace the possibility of moral dilemmas hold this view. Thomson rejects the view and explains how (III) does not commit her to it. In particular, it

cannot be that A's V-ing would be unjust while his not V-ing would be miserly. If A's V-ing would be unjust, then somebody (or something) has a non-overridden right that A not V; but in that case, A's not V-ing would not be miserly. Thomson's final suggestion is this (p. 73):

(IV) Doing what one ought only requires giving the adequate minimum weight to the interests of all who are affected.

This allows for the possibility of an act's being supererogatory, as Thomson believes a very generous act may be. She notes, however, that a very generous act can fail to be supererogatory. If one risks one's life in order to cure someone's sore throat, for example, one will have failed to give adequate weight to one's own interests.

Having made her suggestions, Thomson next ties her discussion of "ought" to her earlier discussion of reasons. She of course denies that there being a reason for A to V suffices for its being the case that A ought to V, since there may be a stronger, countervailing reason for A not to V. However, if we say that there is "most reason" for A to V just in case there is conclusive reason to believe that A ought to V, she is prepared to accept not only that A ought to V if, but also that A ought to V only if, there is most reason for A to V. And from this it follows, she says, that A ought to V only if there is a reason for A to V.

Thomson ends Part II by observing that she has not supplied a theory of what a person ought to do, but has only laid out some key features of the structure that such a theory should have. Filling in the structure would require an account of rights, something that she has provided in detail elsewhere (Thomson 1990). It would also require an account of what constitutes giving adequate minimum weight to the interests of all who are affected by an act. She says that she has no such account to offer.

III

I have summarized Thomson's rich lectures at some length—accurately, I hope, although I have of course had to omit a number of details and subtleties. With her commentators I can be much briefer.

Fisher and Herrnstein Smith take Thomson to task for her methodology. In the absence of further details, they see little use in asking what might make it the case, for example, that Alfred ought to press the doorbell. Fisher wants to know how the act in question "stepped out of the flow of experience and became questionable" (p. 88); he thinks it almost always a mistake to regard actions as "isolated or freestanding" (p. 89). Herrnstein Smith similarly complains about "the egregious . . . sparseness and triviality" of many of Thomson's examples (p. 136); she rejects "the static and atomistic conception of judgments and acts that appears . . . to be assumed in Thomson's lectures" in favor of an alternative conception according to which "our judgments, actions, and the relations between them would be seen as more fluid, dynamic, and reciprocally interactive than conventionally represented in moral philosophy" (p. 137). In addition, Herrnstein Smith rejects Thomson's appeal to evaluative facts and hints at a complex form of non-cognitivism, according to which value judgments are to be assessed in terms, not of truth

and falsity, but of their “communicative force,” “social effectivity,” and other attributes (p. 134).

While agreeing with much of what Thomson says, Schneewind takes issue with her characterization of the “ought” that concerns her as the “ought” of advice. Whether to heed advice is, he appears to say, a discretionary matter; whether to do what one ought, in the sense that concerns Thomson, is not. As Schneewind puts it (pp. 128–29):

If by way of offering you some advice I tell you that you ought to sell those shares now, you can take my advice or leave it: it’s your business. But . . . [Thomson’s] account is meant to cover the use of “ought” with which we express the belief that there is something that you have to do, like it or not, and that your doing so is other people’s business, not just yours.

Schneewind adds that the conception of “ought” that Thomson articulates is distinctly modern, one that was not common before the nineteenth century.

Nussbaum addresses two issues: Thomson’s rejection of Consequentialism, and her rejection of the possibility that A both ought to V and ought not to V. Nussbaum says that she finds what Thomson says about goodness “subtle and convincing” (p. 97) and that Thomson gives a “very powerful argument” (p. 98) against G. E. Moore and the version of Consequentialism that Moore espouses. Nussbaum believes that this version neglects the fact that goods may be, and indeed sometimes are, incomparable. What she calls Sensible Consequentialism does not neglect this. A Sensible Consequentialist is one who will define Consequentialism in the following terms (p. 103):

It is right for S to do A (S ought to do A or S should do A) if no total state of affairs that would be a consequence of S’s doing any alternative to A would be better than the total state of affairs that would be a consequence of S’s doing A.

She attributes this definition to David Sosa (but there is a typo: Sosa says “iff,” not “if” [Sosa 1993, p. 101]) and comments on it as follows (p. 103): “To say that no other option is better, I need not have before me a complete ranking of the options. And it is only if I demand a complete ranking of the options that I am coerced into an implausible thesis about the unity of the good.” Though not prepared to endorse Sensible Consequentialism, Nussbaum claims that Thomson’s objections leave it unscathed.

Given her view that “the good is plural,” Nussbaum says that she finds it “natural to suppose that there will be serious contingent conflicts of value, some of them involving moral values” (p. 113). She cites the much-discussed case of Agamemnon as a case in point. She believes, or at least believes it possible, that Agamemnon had “an absolutely stringent moral requirement” to obey Artemis, and hence ought to have obeyed her, but also had “an absolutely stringent moral requirement” to disobey Artemis, and hence ought also not to have obeyed her. Whatever Agamemnon did, then, must involve “violating some genuine moral requirement.” This is compatible with there being “some all-things-considered way of deciding” which requirement to violate, but that does not alter the fact that “the other ‘ought’ still remains, undefeated” (p.

114). Such is the stuff of tragedy, and Nussbaum complains that Thomson's treatment of "ought" neglects the tragic, saying (pp. 121–22):

[Thomson] moves straight from the prima facie conflict of oughts to an allthings-considered ought, with no sense that there might remain another genuine "ought" on the scene whose demands have not been satisfied . . . By effacing the phenomenon of tragedy, Thomson . . . [is committed to the view] that once we've found a suitable decision procedure, that's the end of the matter. The losing claim ceases to exert any pull.

Thomson's reply to her commentators is divided into five sections entitled "Method," "Consequentialism," "Moral Dilemmas," "Advice and Requirement," and "Skepticism." I will confine my remarks to those parts of the reply that deal with those parts of the comments upon which I have just reported.

In response to Fisher and Herrnstein Smith, Thomson says (p. 147): "Perhaps Alfred ought to press the doorbell, perhaps it is not the case that he ought to. What concerns me is the question what would make it the case that he ought to. What do we have to find out if we are to find out whether he ought to?" Exactly! Fisher and Herrnstein Smith seem not to have understood the point of Thomson's enterprise. If you want to come to understand what is relevant to determining whether so-and-so ought to do such-and-such, you would be well advised to begin, as Thomson does, simply with the act at issue and then methodically consider what sort of details concerning circumstances and consequences need to be added to the case in order to arrive at an answer to your question. (In doing so, you would be conducting what John Martin Fischer aptly calls an analogue of controlled experiments in science [Fischer 1996, p. 10].) If instead you begin, as Fisher and Herrnstein Smith appear to recommend, with a complex case in which the act at issue is somewhere embedded, you must then seek to strip away details that are irrelevant to your question. This approach might in principle be as successful as Thomson's, but in practice is it likely to prove far less wieldy; certainly, there is no reason to think it preferable. Of course, it may be that Fisher and Herrnstein Smith have understood the point of Thomson's enterprise after all but regard it as somehow misguided; they may believe that it is a mistake to ask whether so-and-so ought to do such-and-such, and that it is only entire cases (however they are to be individuated) that call for moral evaluation. If so, I submit they are mistaken.

In response to Schneewind, Thomson points out that advice often comes in the form "You have to, like it or not." This can be so, whether or not the "business" in question is purely personal. If it is purely personal, perhaps it does not matter morally whether the advice is heeded, so that in this sense one can take the advice or leave it; but that of course does not mean that it does not matter in some other way—e.g., prudentially—whether the advice is heeded. Thomson says (p. 169):

If you are ill, and drinking a certain nasty-tasting medicine will cure you, I say you ought to drink it. You reply "Oh, I don't want to!" I say "You have to, like it or not."

Just so! The "ought" of advice is thus quite compatible with the idea that the person to whom the advice is given is under some sort of requirement to follow it. Thomson notes further that "You have to" is typically more emphatic than "You ought to," and that to add "like it or not"

is to add more emphasis still. This too seems quite right, insofar as “ought” expresses a requirement. (I should add, though, that it seems that, contrary to what Thomson suggests, “ought” sometimes expresses not a requirement but merely an ideal or desideratum. This may be the sort of “ought” Schneewind has in mind. Consider the proposition that no child ought to have to suffer from the ravages of cancer. This strikes me as perfectly cogent, even if it contains no implication that anyone is under a requirement to do anything.)

In response to Nussbaum’s remarks on Consequentialism, Thomson points out that Sensible Consequentialism invokes the very same kind of goodness that Moorean Consequentialism invokes and which Thomson rejects. The claim that certain goods are incomparable—that certain “total states of affairs” are incomparable in respect of goodness, so that none is better than any other—does nothing to blunt Thomson’s attack on Consequentialism. Nussbaum discusses a case in which she has a choice as to how to spend a hundred dollars. She can (a) give it to a needy friend, or (b) give it to Oxfam, or (c) flush it down the toilet, or (d) buy herself a luxurious dinner. A Sensible Consequentialist, she says, could argue that each of (a) and (b) is superior to both of (c) and (d), but that “it is not possible to rank (a) against (b) because the goods of friendship are too different from the goods of famine relief” (p. 105), and thus that it would be right for her to do (a) but also right for her to do (b) instead. Thomson replies, in effect: “So what? As long as (a) and (b) are being declared (just plain) better than (c) and (d), the Sensible Consequentialist is indulging in the very sort of comparisons that I reject.” Exactly! It is true that Moore does seem to have thought that all things that have intrinsic value are comparable in terms of such value, whereas others have denied this; but this is irrelevant to the matter at hand. Nussbaum mistakenly counts Thomson among the others, failing to recognize that Thomson rejects the very notion of intrinsic value at issue. (It is worth noting that Nussbaum also fails to recognize that the thesis that some intrinsic goods are incomparable is distinct from the thesis that “the good is plural.” The former entails the latter, but not vice versa. Moore himself accepted the latter.)

In response to Nussbaum’s remarks on moral dilemmas, Thomson points out that, while she does indeed reject the possibility that Agamemnon both ought and ought not to have obeyed Artemis, there is nothing in her (Thomson’s) view that implies that Agamemnon’s choice was not tragic in the way in which Nussbaum takes it to be. She says (pp. 164–65):

Nussbaum . . . thinks I say that given a person’s right is overridden, “that’s the end of the matter. The losing claim ceases to exert any pull.” But I quite certainly did not and do not say this. An overridden right is . . . defeated [in one way]: the agent need not accord it. But it is not . . . defeated [in another way]: it has not gone out of existence.

Just so! It is hard to understand why so many of those who are concerned with the tragic aspects of life persist in mischaracterizing those who reject the possibility of moral dilemmas as being blind to tragedy. Ever since W. D. Ross’s discussion of conflicts of obligation, if not before, opponents of dilemmas, such as Ross himself and, more recently, Terrance McConnell and Earl Conee, have gone out of their way to explain (i) that they do not reject the possibility of a conflict between what Ross calls *prima facie* duties or obligations, (ii) that in cases of such conflict at most one of the *prima facie* duties can constitute an all-things-considered duty (and hence that, in this sense, moral dilemmas are impossible), and (iii) that those *prima facie* duties

that do not constitute all-things-considered duties are, though overridden, not eliminated and do continue to exert some pull, as is made evident by the fact that the agent, even though he is acting as he ought when he fails to fulfill an overridden prima facie duty, should show compunction in so acting and will also typically be saddled with what is often called a residual prima facie duty somehow to make amends for his action. All of this is perfectly in keeping with what Thomson has to say. She herself does not use the terms “prima facie duty” and “all-things-considered duty,” and she would deny that one ought to do whatever one has a prima facie duty to do, but that is strictly a terminological matter. She would certainly agree that Agamemnon had a very strong reason for obeying Artemis and also a very strong reason for disobeying her, and that he would therefore have cause for considerable regret no matter how he acted.

As mentioned previously, Nussbaum accuses Thomson of moving “straight from the prima facie conflict of oughts to an all-things-considered ought, with no sense that there might remain another genuine ‘ought’ on the scene whose demands have not been satisfied” (p. 121). Of course, this is not Thomson’s terminology, but nor is it her view. Perhaps Nussbaum has been misled by the term “prima facie.” She seems to understand it to mean the same as “merely apparent”; hence the contrast with “genuine.” (Consider this passage from Nussbaum 2000, p. 1010:

Many moral philosophers, among them some distinguished ones [including Ross, according to a note that Nussbaum makes at this point], have insisted that tragic conflicts are conflicts of prima facie obligations only: there can be only one right choice, and once that choice is arrived at the conflicting obligation drops away, no longer exerting any claim.)

But this is simply a mistake, one that Ross himself explicitly tried to forestall when he wrote (Ross 1930, p. 20):

The phrase ‘prima facie duty’ must be apologized for, since . . . [it] suggests that one is speaking only of an appearance which a moral situation presents at first sight, and which may turn out to be illusory; whereas what I am speaking of is an objective fact involved in the nature of the situation, or more strictly in an element of its nature, though not, as duty proper does, arising from its whole nature.

One other point worth noting: Nussbaum seems to think that tragic choices can arise only when goods of different sorts conflict. She calls Utilitarianism “the anti-tragic philosophy par excellence” (p. 121), since it recognizes only one kind of good (pleasure) and one kind of evil (pain). But this is another mistake. Suppose that I am so situated that I cannot avoid the great suffering of someone (perhaps someone to whom I am in some special way beholden). If I do A, Smith will suffer terribly; if I do not do A, Jones will suffer terribly. Even if it is clear what I ought to do and I do it, there will surely be ample cause for regret. (Cf. Hurka 1996.)

In saying that opponents of dilemmas can consistently acknowledge the tragic aspects of life, I do not mean that they can consistently accommodate everything that has been said to warrant being called tragic. Some people might say that genuine tragedy arises when and only when a

person is faced with a conflict of all-things-considered obligations. At one point Nussbaum seems to have such tragedy in mind, when she characterizes Agamemnon's situation as a conflict between two "absolutely stringent" moral requirements. But she immediately counteracts this suggestion by saying that there may be "some all-things-considered way of deciding" what to do in such cases of conflict. Whatever Nussbaum's official position on this may be, opponents of dilemmas are of course committed to denying the possibility of tragedy in this very strong sense. But, again, they are not committed to denying, and so need not be insensitive to, the fact that life can sometimes force one to make awful, searing choices.

V

In my estimation, then, Thomson's reply to her commentators is wholly successful. It is thus with some trepidation that I now tender some criticisms of my own.

I begin with a confession: I have never understood just what a or the "fact-value gap" is supposed to be, nor what it means to call such a gap "unbridgeable." Furthermore, Thomson's remarks on the matter do not enlighten me. If ethical non-cognitivism is true, then of course there are no "evaluative facts" of the sort that Thomson mentions, in which case there is admittedly a great difference in the functions of such expressions as "Alfred pressed the doorbell" and "Alfred ought to press the doorbell": the former has a truth-value (it states some purported fact), whereas the latter does not. Fair enough. But what can an ethical cognitivist (such as Thomson) have in mind by talk of a or the "fact-value gap"? In one sense, there can be no such gap; "Alfred ought to press the doorbell" will have a truth-value. In another sense, there can indeed be a gap, and an "unbridgeable" one at that, insofar as one cannot validly infer an ethical statement from statements none of which is ethical. In this sense, ethics is "autonomous." (This is a complicated matter, of course. One problem has to do with settling on what counts as an "ethical statement." Another has to do with just how to deal with certain recalcitrant inferences of the sort cannily concocted by Arthur Prior.) But this would seem to signal nothing special about ethics, since such autonomy is widespread. One cannot, for example, validly infer a geographical statement from statements none of which is geographical, but who has ever been tempted to speak of a or the "fact-geography gap"? Perhaps the gap Thomson has in mind has something to do with the obscure distinction between natural and non-natural properties, or perhaps it has to do (as she indicates on pp. 16–17) with differences in how we can establish the truth of evaluative, as opposed to non-evaluative, facts. I am uncertain, for nowhere does she say precisely what is supposed to be at issue.

Let me now turn to a more important matter, about which I am in serious disagreement with Thomson: her rejection of Consequentialism on the basis of the claim that there is no such thing as the sort of goodness that Moore and others have invoked. I have responded to Thomson's case in detail elsewhere (Zimmerman 2001, ch. 2); I will simply sketch this response here. Thomson says that all goodness is goodness in a way, and hence that there is no such thing as something's being just plain, or pure, good. Consider an analogy: all shape is shape in a way, and hence there is no such thing as something's having pure shape. Or again: all color is color in a way, and hence there is no such thing as something's having pure color. Understood in a certain way, each of these analogous statements seems true; but understood in this way, they emphatically do not license the inference that there is no such property as (unqualified) shape or (unqualified) color.

After all, what is it that two distinct shapes or colors have in common, if not their being distinct species of a common genus? So too, what is it that goodness-for-Alfred and goodness-for-Bertha have in common, if not their being distinct species of the genus goodness? The fact that whatever is good, or shaped, or colored must be so in some particular way does nothing to impugn the existence of the genera goodness, shape, and color; on the contrary, it would seem to presuppose their existence.

Thomson might say that I have missed her point, since goodness (in whatever way it may be manifested) comes in degrees, whereas shape and color do not. She says (pp. 18–19):

St. Francis was good. How so? Well, he was a morally good person—he was just and kind. Chocolate is good. How so? Well, it tastes good. If what I have supplied you with are grounds for thinking that St. Francis and chocolate are good, that is, grounds for thinking that they both possess the property goodness, then it ought to be in order to ask which is better, for the adjective “good” has a comparative. But do you make sense of the question whether St. Francis was better than chocolate?

Suppose that we agree with Thomson that, if one thing is better than another, both things must be good (or bad) in the same way, and hence that the question just raised makes no sense. Why must we further agree that two things that are good in different ways do not have goodness in common? What would warrant our calling them good (or goods) at all, if we could not categorize them as both belonging to the genus goodness, even while recognizing that they are incomparable otherwise (and hence incomparable in terms of betterness)? Consider another analogy: an elephant is a large animal, and a billion is a large number, but which is larger? Or again: a horse is a strong animal, and scotch is a strong drink, but which is stronger? Must the senselessness of these questions force us to the conclusion that there is no such property as (unqualified) size or strength? What would then warrant our calling both objects in question large or strong?

Even if I am wrong about this—as I might well be—and Thomson’s case against there being a property of goodness (or size, or strength) succeeds, still her case against Consequentialism is wanting. This is because Moore et al. were and are concerned not with goodness in general but with intrinsic goodness in particular. Thomson neglects to mention this when she first gives her account of Hedonism About Goodness; as noted in section I above, she characterizes this thesis simply as the view that “an event is good just in case it consists in someone’s feeling pleased, and bad just in case it consists in someone’s feeling pain” (pp. 9–10). This is put too loosely, since the hedonist’s view has in particular to do with intrinsic value. Thomson is of course well aware of this; she goes on to mention the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value a little later (p. 13). What does this distinction turn on? In part, on the difference between something’s being nonderivatively good and its being derivatively good, a distinction that Thomson does not discuss in the present work but has acknowledged and embraced elsewhere. This distinction, she says, is not itself a distinction between ways of being good but rather “cuts across” ways of being good (Thomson 1992, p. 99). That it cuts across ways of being good seems clear. For example, something may be either non-derivatively or derivatively good-for-Alfred, either non-derivatively or derivatively good-for-Bertha, and so on (although this “and so on” is somewhat disingenuous; for some ways of being good— e.g., being good at tennis—it is

hard to see how the distinction may be drawn). That non-derivative and derivative goodness are not themselves ways of being good is not so clear, since just what it is for something to be a way of being good has not been spelled out. Still, let us grant Thomson this point. What is supposed to follow from it? Well, if the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental (or, more broadly, extrinsic) value were said to consist solely in the distinction between non-derivative and derivative value, then Thomson would be right; no particular way of being good would have been identified. It seems clear that she believes this to be the fatal error committed by Consequentialists (and some others). Should we agree?

I think not. First, a Consequentialist could take issue with Thomson's own characterization of Consequentialism. As I noted in section I, she says that Consequentialism is the view that "a person ought to do a thing if and only if the world will be [intrinsically] better if he does it than if he does any of the other things it is open to him to do at the time" (p. 7). But if we think of intrinsic goodness simply in terms of non-derivative goodness, so that to say that something is intrinsically good is simply to say that there is some particular way of being good such that the thing in question is nonderivatively good in that way, clearly this characterization of Consequentialism is too meager. On this understanding of intrinsic goodness, there is a huge abundance and variety of intrinsic goods, and no self-respecting Consequentialist would say that all such goods are relevant to what a person ought to do. On the contrary, many goods would presumably be declared irrelevant. If no such declaration were forthcoming, then, we may agree, the view would be incomplete, but that would be no reason to say that it suffers from any conceptual incoherence.

A second response is open to the Consequentialist, and that is to accept Thomson's characterization of Consequentialism while insisting that there is some particular way of being good such that for something to be intrinsically good is for it to be non-derivatively good *in that particular way*. Again, if no identification of the way in question were forthcoming, the view would be incomplete, but it would not be conceptually suspect.

There is evidence that some Consequentialists have embraced the first response and some the second. Moore himself seems to have vacillated on this issue. At one point he says (Moore 1922, p. 260, in italics):

To say that a kind of value is "intrinsic" means merely that the question whether a thing possesses it, and in what degree it possesses it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question.

Barring questions having to do with the relation between a value's being nonderivative and its supervening on the intrinsic nature of its bearer, this characterization of intrinsic value is in keeping with the first response. I think it is clear, though, that most Consequentialists, including Moore most of the time, have embraced the second response. When they talk of intrinsic value, they have a particular way of being non-derivatively good in mind. This is not to say that there is some way of being non-derivatively good that all Consequentialists who take this tack identify with intrinsic goodness, but only that all Consequentialists who take this tack agree that there is some way of being non-derivatively good with which intrinsic goodness is to be identified. They all agree that intrinsic value is a kind of ethical value, but just what kind is a subject of debate.

Clearly, not everything that is or has been said to be intrinsically good is morally good, in the sense(s) in which “morally good” is usually understood. My own view (in keeping with proposals made by Franz Brentano, C. D. Broad, A. C. Ewing, and many others) is that that which is intrinsically good is, roughly, that which it is morally appropriate to favor for its own sake (Zimmerman 2001, ch. 4). One need not accept this view in order to rebut Thomson’s attack on intrinsic value, however. One need only claim that to be intrinsically good is indeed to be non-derivatively good in a particular way.

It may be objected that this claim is not all that is needed. Unless a Consequentialist who embraces the second response tells us which particular way of being non-derivatively good is to be identified with intrinsic goodness, why should we agree that there is such a property at all? The burden here is on the proponent of intrinsic value, since “intrinsic value” is not a term used in common discourse but is rather a piece of philosophical jargon. I think this objection is without merit. Whether or not “intrinsic value” is a term of art, the concept expressed by it is one that is familiar to nonphilosophers, and has been so for a very long time. As Panayot Butchvarov has pithily observed, in response to doubts about the concept of intrinsic value (Butchvarov 1989, p. 17):

Nevertheless, millions have thought they understood Genesis 1:31: “And God saw every thing he had made, and behold, it was very good.”

Moreover, I cannot forbear adding an observation *ad feminam*. As reported in section I, Thomson initially rejects Hedonism About Goodness, not because it invokes the concept of intrinsic value, but because it has the counterintuitive implication that it is (intrinsically) good to feel pleased at the pain of another. This clearly indicates that she has more than a passing grasp of the concept of intrinsic value, and it is curious that, once having exploited her intuitions in this respect, she proceeds to repudiate them.

I conclude that the concept of intrinsic value is beyond reproach. Perhaps, in the end, Consequentialism “has to go”; but if it does, this is not because of its reliance on this concept.

Let me next turn to Thomson’s account of reasons for action, which I find attractive in many respects. My one, not very far-reaching complaint is that it seems just too high-handed to deny that reasons can and do play the sort of explanatory role that so many philosophers have accorded them. This is perfectly compatible with Thomson’s insistence that reasons play what I will call (though she does not) a justificatory role—compatible, that is, if we make sure to distinguish not only these roles that reasons can play but also the sorts of things that can play these roles. I think Thomson is quite right: justificatory reasons are facts that count in favor of something. (This includes not only reasons for action but also reasons for believing, desiring, and so on.) Her open-ended account of what it is for something to be a reason for a person to do a thing seems very plausible (although I share the misgiving that it has such reasons “come too cheap”; I suspect that only some ways of being good or bad should be said to ground or constitute reasons for action, but I am afraid I have no criterion to offer that would discriminate between those ways that qualify and those that do not). Explanatory reasons for action are something else entirely. Whether they are desires, or desires-cum-beliefs, or facts concerning

such mental phenomena, they provide an explanation of a person's action. (Of course, where an explanation for something other than a person's action is at issue, the reason cited may have nothing at all to do with mental phenomena. Consider: "The reason the building collapsed is that the intense heat melted the girders.") It is unfortunate that these two kinds of reasons, and the distinction between them, are not more frequently acknowledged. Too often, philosophers who focus on the explanatory role of reasons for action appear to deny that reasons can also play a justificatory role or, worse, to assert that only those that play an explanatory role can play a justificatory role. Thomson ought not to return the favor. Consider again the three locutions mentioned in section I:

- (1) There is a reason for Alfred to press the doorbell, namely X.
- (2) Alfred has a reason for pressing the doorbell, namely X.
- (3) Alfred's reason for pressing the doorbell is X.

It seems to me a mistake to insist that "reason" means the same throughout. (1), which is the focus of Thomson's extended inquiry, is most naturally understood to concern a justificatory reason for Alfred's pressing the doorbell. In contrast, I would have thought that (3) is most naturally understood to concern an explanatory reason for his doing so. (A fourth locution, "The reason Alfred pressed the doorbell is X," would perhaps even more obviously concern an explanatory reason for his behavior.) (2), it seems to me, is more flexible; it can quite naturally be understood in either way.

Let me turn, finally, to Thomson's account of "ought." I think it a mistake to deny that "ought" has several senses (or, at least, uses). It is surely common to find oneself in the sort of situation where morality requires one thing, prudence another, the law yet a third, and so on, and it would seem natural for someone to sum up this situation as follows: "Morally (or from the moral point of view, or insofar as morality is concerned), you ought to do A, prudentially you ought to do B, but legally you ought to do C." Indeed, I see no reason not to split "ought" further. It may be that, taking all morally relevant considerations into account, one ought to do A. (A would thus be what Ross calls one's "actual" moral duty, one's duty "proper," or one's duty "sans phrase"; better, perhaps, would be to call it one's "overall" moral duty, or one's duty "all-morally-relevant-things-considered.") But why not also allow "ought" to express what Ross calls "prima facie" duties? This too seems natural. Consider: "Insofar as you promised to go, you ought to go; but inasmuch as your child is sick, you ought to stay at home."

As I indicated in section IV, this may simply be a terminological dispute; for Thomson can certainly acknowledge that there are reasons (or sets of reasons) corresponding to each of the "oughts" just mentioned. (I do not know whether she would agree that the law furnishes a distinct way of being good, however.) Moreover, she could, and no doubt would, point out that none of these "oughts" clearly indicates just what one is to do—what, that is, one ought to do absolutely-everything-considered. This is true. It is surely natural to respond to the observation that morally one ought to do A, prudentially one ought to do B, etc., with the question: "But what ought I to do, period?" I am far less sanguine than Thomson is, however, that this very natural question has, or can have, any good answer. Any such answer would seem to presuppose the commensurability, not just of moral reasons with moral reasons, prudential reasons with prudential reasons, and so on, but of moral reasons with prudential reasons with legal reasons,

and so on. I would very much like to believe that there is such commensurability, but I have myself not been able to discover the pertinent scale.

Thomson might deny that such commensurability is required in order to arrive at a principled answer to the question “What ought I to do?” Although at the end of Part II she ties her discussion of “ought” to her earlier discussion of reasons and asserts that A ought to V if and only if there is most reason for A to V, this is a move she makes only after having presented each of her four suggestions, none of which makes explicit mention of reasons for action. But such reasons are nonetheless implicitly at work, I believe, since, as noted in section II, she accepts that A ought to V only if there is a reason for A to V. (While I also accept this, it is not clear to me just why Thomson accepts it. Contrary to what she seems to say, it would appear consistent to assert that there is conclusive reason to believe that A ought to V and yet to deny that there is a reason for A to V.) When, according to suggestion (I), it is said that A ought to V, this is (in part) because there is no reason for A not to V. When, according to suggestion (III), it is said that A ought to V, if not V-ing would be unjust, this is because injustice consists in infringing a non-overridden right, that is, a right that there is stronger reason to satisfy than to infringe. When, according to that same suggestion, it is said that A ought to V, if not V-ing would be miserly, this is because miserliness consists in doing something that there is a very strong reason (grounded in the interests of others) not to do while there is at best a weak reason (grounded in self-interest) to do it. When, according to suggestion (IV), it is said that doing what one ought only requires giving the adequate minimum weight to the interests of all who are affected, it seems to be presumed that these interests can all be weighed on the same scale.

None of this is to say that any of Thomson’s suggestions is false. If the commensurability presupposed does not exist, the suggestions would appear empty; if it does exist, they may well be true. An advocate of intrinsic value, such as myself, might take issue with the first suggestion, claiming that some states can be intrinsically bad even if they do not consist in the nonsatisfaction of someone’s interests or the infringement of someone’s rights, but adding an extra clause to the antecedent would take care of that. The second suggestion is very plausible; justice and generosity and their contraries would seem to have to do at least in part with serving people’s interests. Insofar as injustice consists in the infringement of a non-overridden right, to say that one ought not to act unjustly, as the third suggestion does, would seem analytic; to say that one ought not to act in a miserly manner is not analytic but, again, seems very plausible. Finally, the fourth suggestion likewise appears analytic, if “adequate” is given a certain reading. The plausibility of all these suggestions, however, derives from their modesty. As Thomson herself acknowledges, they are far from constituting a theory about what a person ought to do.

VI

My criticisms notwithstanding, I hope I have managed to convey the considerable virtues of this book. Anyone interested in the broad array of issues that Thomson manages to address so succinctly and trenchantly will benefit from reading, and thus has a good reason to read, and perhaps even ought to read, this book .¹

Note

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