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Contenido

Artículos

Notas

Thomson on Goodness

Thomson sobre la Bondad

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Judith[1] Jarvis Thomson has written extensively on what is usually (though she does not seem much to care for the word) known as 'metaethics'. Notably in the Thomson half of Harman and Thomson's 1996 *Moral Knowledge and Moral Objectivity*,[2] the 1997 *Journal of Philosophy* paper "The Right and the Good",[3] and her Tanner Lectures in *Goodness and Advice* published in 2003.[4] Her Carus lectures on *Normativity* published in 2008, the most recent of these contributions, is also the most substantial. This body of work represent perhaps the richest and most interesting of contemporary attempts to make clear sense of the moral and normative domains in straightforwardly naturalistic terms. Now "naturalism" itself is not a word Thomson tends to use. Like many others she finds the notion of a natural property rather obscure.[5] But she thinks she can avoid the metaphysical and epistemogical darkness (her word[6]) that threatens less straightforward views and that her view of ethics allows it to "[fit] comfortably into the world revealed by the senses and described by the natural sciences."[7]

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[1] This paper was originally read to a workshop on the work of Judith Jarvis Thomson at Newnham College, Cambridge on 17th October 2013. I am grateful to all the other participants and especially to Judy Thomson for the lively discussion we enjoyed. I am also grateful to Anneli Jefferson for helpful comments on a late draft.

[2] Harman, Gilbert and Thomson, Judith Jarvis, *Morality and Objectivity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

[3] Thomson, J. J., "The Right and the Good", in *Journal of Philosophy*, June 1997.

[4] Thomson, Judith Jarvis, *Goodness and Advice,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

[5] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 2008, pp. 78-9.

[6] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 11.

[7] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 36. Cf., p. 122.

A central target of what Thomson says in these writings is consequentialism. Consequentialism supposes there is a property, goodness, which good things share, that the right action for a given person at a given time is the action that maximizes, or aims to maximize, how much of this property, the world as a whole has. This is hopeless, thinks Thomson, as she thinks there is no such general property as goodness. There are various ways of being good but they cannot be measured on some single scale. *Normativity* is a very good book and the Fox and Hounds does very good food but it makes no sense to ask which of these things has the more goodness because goodness qua scholarly book is a quite different thing to goodness qua pub grub. Some things moreover are not intelligibly described as good at all. There is no such thing as being good qua pebble or good qua smudge. And, again, fatally to consequentialism, worlds or states of affairs are like pebbles and smudges. They are not as she has it, goodness-fixing kinds.

Thomson thinks there is no such thing as being good simpliciter. There is only what she sometimes talks of as being good in a way or being good in some respect. A thing can be good at stuff, good at football or baking or whatever. A thing can be good for stuff, good for Sheffield Wednesday football club, good for carrying your shopping in. And there is the central attributive use of good where we speak of being a good K, or good qua K, where K is what Thomson calls a goodness-fixing kind.

A goodness fixing kind K is just a kind K such that there is such a property as being good qua K. A pebble is not a goodness-fixing kind. There is no such thing as a good pebble qua pebble. Of course there are other ways for a pebble to be good. Some pebbles are, while others are not, good for skimming, but that is not being good qua pebble. There is no such property as being good qua pebble.

The simplest cases of goodness fixing kind are artefacts, things such as umbrellas, carving knives or lawnmowers. These are straightforward enough to need no discussion. The tricky things is to extend the thought, as philosophers of a roughly Aristotelian bent are given to trying to do, into the biological realm. It is perhaps especially hard once we take on board what Bernard Williams called "the first and hardest lesson of Darwinism", that there is, fundamentally, no teleology in the ordering of nature.[8] Some cases are perhaps relatively easy, notably the cases of domestic animals and plants which serve some human purpose. Thomson's examples here are guide dogs and beefsteak tomatoes. These clearly enough can be taken as goodness-fixing

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kinds. But what of other things? Sometimes to be sure we can adopt what Dennett calls the design stance to the products of evolution provided we do so with very considerable care and circumspection. Things work most smoothly here with parts of organisms, things like the human heart, lungs and eyes. The adaptive quasi-purposes these serve cohere neatly enough with our interest in their healthy functioning for it to be clear enough, most of the time, what we might mean by good eyes or bad lungs. But what of 'tiger'? In *Normativity*, Thomson suggests that something is good qua tiger if it is a well-grown member of the species 'tiger'.[9] It might not be wholly clear what that means. Can a one-day old tiger be said to be well-grown? I'm not sure. She offers a further gloss however, A well-grown tiger is a physically fit tiger, by which I take it not just strong but generally in good health.

Is a healthy tiger a good tiger? I'm not sure what to say. How far we can run with the idea that tigers are functional kinds in any way comparable to that in which lawnmowers are functional kinds is a hard question in the philosophy of biology that I doubt it would possible for me to pursue very deeply here but it is at least unobvious to me that tigers are not a lot more like pebbles than they are like lawnmowers. Any intuition we may have that they are not may be because they are in some ways, in some contexts, a little bit like guide dogs and beefsteak tomatoes. If you are a zookeeper on your way to the shops to buy a new tiger you will of course want to make the best return on your investment by finding a healthy one that will last a long time, perhaps making lots of valuable baby tigers you can sell, and not costing you a fortune in veterinary bills. So it is certainly healthy tigers that are good for the small number of people who want tigers.[10]

Other organisms nobody wants. Take a smallpox virus. Nobody wants those. What would a good smallpox virus be like? A healthy smallpox virus? Perhaps we might extend the word 'good' to smallpox viruses by a kind of polysemy where it simply means healthy, given that health is a good in creatures like human beings whose health we care about. Just as by a kind of polysemy we apply the term 'children' to offspring who are no longer, in that term's primary sense, children at all, as when someone says, "I have two children, both in their forties". Saying that X is a good K, says Thomson, is

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[9] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 20.

[10] With some kinds there is perhaps a problem about the way the notion of being a good K is introduced and explained. "First, belong a good K is being good as, or for, a K. Alternatively put, being a good K is being a model, exemplar, paradigm or good specimen of a K" (Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 19). The problem with this is that while *specimen of K* may be a goodness-fixing kind it is not the same goodness-fixing kind as K. Something can be a good specimen of a lump of quartz even though lump of quartz is not itself a goodness-fixing kind. We may understand well enough what a good specimen of a tiger would be but that is not to understand what a good tiger would be.

not always praising X *simpliciter* but is always praising X qua K.[11] But I don't myself see how there can be any interesting and credible sense of the word 'praise' in which I see any reason to praise a healthy smallpox virus.

So I think tigers and viruses are tricky. Human beings, notoriously, are *really* tricky. What Thomson says is this: "Unlike tigers, human beings *can* act morally well or badly, and that is why their being good *qua* human beings consists in their acting morally well".[12] Unlike tigers, human beings can act morally well or badly, and *that is why* their being good qua human beings consists in their acting morally well. That is an *enormous* step in reasoning and I am not really convinced that it is a *sequitur*. So I'd like to have a better understanding than I do of why it is that Thomson thinks acting morally well is what fixes the goodness of human beings. Certainly we have come a long way from lawnmowers. It certainly doesn't seem to be the case that acting morally well is the function of human beings in any sense that is at all continuous or closely analogous with the sense in which it is the function of lawnmowers to mow lawns.

Human goodness for Thomson is all about moral goodness and to make sense of what she says about this we must look to what she says about virtues. She offers this general analysis. For something F to be a virtue in a K, it must be the case that, first, K is a goodness –fixing kind; second, a K can be as good as a K can be only of it has F; third, something can lack F and still be a K; and four, it is not nomologically impossible for there to be a K that has F.[13]

I think there is stuff to quibble about in this definition. First take condition 2. To be a virtue in a K something must be a necessary condition for a K being as good as a K can be. I'm not so sure. Surely, as we ordinarily use the term, there can be inessential virtues. Thus one might sensibly believe that having a very attractive beard is an aesthetic virtue in a man. Surely it is. But at the same time, I feel forced to concede that a man does not have to have a beard to be as aesthetically good as a man can be. Perfection here is *multiply realizable*. One of Thomson's examples here, slightly altered, is that it is a virtue in a comedy to be humorous. That is certainly true. But humour can also, I suggest, be a virtue in a tragedy. *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are full of humour (think of Lear's Fool and the drunken porter in Macbeth's castle.). And this is a virtue. But, unlike a comedy a tragedy does not *have to be* humorous. A tragedy can be as good as tragedies get and be quite free of hilarity.

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[11] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, pp. 55-56.
[12] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 21.
[13] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 73.

The best cases of inessential virtues might involve agglomeration. Thus I think it plausibly a virtue in a scholar of comparative linguistics to have a deep knowledge of Chinese. And it is also plausibly a virtue for him to have a deep knowledge of Russian. And of English. And of Greek. And indeed of any other human language. But, necessarily, these are all inessential virtues. For it cannot be a virtue in a scholar of comparative linguistics to have a deep knowledge of *every* human language. That would fall foul of Thomson's fourth condition if it is true, as it surely is true, that it is not nomologically possible for such scholar (if we ignore fantastic possibilities involving nonhuman such scholars as we surely should) to have a deep knowledge of every human language, given the obvious limits to our cognitive capacities and the brevity of our lives. So Thomson's definition of virtue may need a little finessing.

So much for Thomson's general account of virtue. In some cases, notably the case of moral virtues, it is important to note that the first clause drops out. Something can be a morally virtuous K and K not be a goodness fixing kind. So for something F to be a moral virtue in a K it must be the case that, first, a K can be morally as good as a K can be only of it has F; second, something can lack F and still be a K; and third, it is not nomologically impossible for there to be a K that has F.[14] This is important as Thomson want to make sense of the notions virtuous *act* and morally good *act* and she does not think that act is a goodness-fixing kind. There are morally good acts but morally good acts are not good qua acts. Nothing is good qua an act as act is not a goodness fixing kind. This does strike me as a little strained. The inference from "X is a morally good act" to "X is a good act" looks intuitively so straightforward that I'm reluctant to suppose there might be anything amiss with it. If moral goodness is the sort of thing that can fix the goodness of the kind human being, surely it can also fix the goodness of the kind act. Or better still perhaps the kind 'human act'. So perhaps the best thing to say would be that act is not a goodness fixing kind and human act is. So the actions of beetles are like pebbles, not sensibly thought good or bad qua acts; while the actions of human beings are like lawnmowers and good or bad qua human acts.

The account just offered of moral virtue is not yet very informative given the way it invokes the concept of moral goodness: if F is a moral virtue in a K, a K can be morally as good as a K can be only of it has F. Here moral goodness seems to be conceptually fundamental and so far a little underdescribed. But when we look at the things Thomson tells us about moral goodness it comes to look as if it is in fact moral virtue which is conceptually fundamental. Her understanding of morally good actions and people appears to be in terms of the moral virtues of which she thinks there are

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[14] Thomson, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 79.

essentially two, namely justice and generosity. And in earlier writings we find her defending the idea that what makes moral virtues moral virtues is their being traits of character such that whatever else is true of the people among whom we live, it is good for us if they have them.[15] Whatever else is true of those around us it is good for us that they be generous and just. But e.g. being clever is not a moral virtue. Because Moriarty is a villain, it is really not good for those around him that he is so smart. Likewise she does not think the so-called executive virtues such as courage and industry count as virtues. Courageous, industrious villains do not make good neighbours. But this rather elegant account of moral virtue is not repeated in *Normativity* where instead we get the above analysis of moral virtue (partly) in terms of moral goodness. And I am not at all sure that I know how to tell you what Thomson means by moral goodness other than by explaining it in terms of the moral virtues.

I end with a proposal. I think we can understand things or state of affairs as a goodness –fixing kind in a way at least no less credible than Thomson's own understanding of human being as a goodness-fixing kind. Thomson thinks we cannot make good sense of the notion of a good state of affairs or good things because states of affairs and things are not goodness fixing kinds. Nor does she allow that there can be morally good states of affairs as there can be morally good acts even though she does not think acts are goodness fixing kinds. I'm not quite comfortable with this thought. I'm not quite comfortable because I think talk of the goodness of states of affairs is not just a figment of consequentialist theorizing but a part of everyday evaluative thought that I would be reluctant to throw out. Suppose George and Joy are very good people. And suppose they are very happily married and their marriage brings both of them great joy. Then I want to say that the happiness of their marriage is a good thing and so I think does everyone else and not just consequentialists. That looks to me like a theory-neutral platitude. Likewise I think the Holocaust was a bad thing and that again looks like a platitude everyone would surely endorse not just an obscure theoretical notion only intelligible to consequentialists.

Of course Thomson doesn't deny that states of affairs can be good in any way. She thinks after all that everything is good in some way. There are just so many ways of being good that this ends up being trivial. So she can often handle what is happening when we greet some item of news, Sheffield Wednesday winning the cup, my winning the lottery, Nelson winning the Battle of Trafalgar, by a cry of, *Now there's a good thing*! Sheffield Wednesday's victory after all is good for Sheffield Wednesday (to whom I might be

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[15] Thomson, J. J., "The Right and the Good", p. 282.

well disposed), my lottery win is good for me and the Battle of Trafalgar was good for Great Britain (to whom I am well disposed). And Thomson is quite happy with all these ways of being good, even for things or states of affairs. Everything is good in some way just as everything is bad in some way. The fact of George and Joy's happy marriage is good for them but bad perhaps for Algernon, George's embittered rival in love. The Holocaust is bad for its millions of victims but good in, er, what way exactly? Well, if all else fails, Thomson suggests, perhaps raising a nice little paradox as she does so, it will be a good thing to raise in conversation as a likely-looking counter-example to the hypothesis that everything is good in some way.[16]

But I remain unsatisfied. The fact that George and Joy are happily married is good for George and Joy and bad for embittered rival Algernon. But when I say it's good I don't just mean that it is good for George and Joy. And I don't either mean it is good in some way or other in the near trivial sense in which everything or at least nearly everything is good in some way or other. I think it is a good thing in a sense which is neither of those senses. And I think moreover that we can make sense of this thought in a way that is pretty friendly to Thomson's general approach.

I think the presently relevant sense in which I think it a good thing that George and joy are happily married is roughly a matter of my *welcoming* it. Better perhaps here, it is a matter of my judging that it would be *correct* to welcome this state of affairs. Thomson tells a story about correctness which would license unpacking this as a claim that this is fact that *deserves* to be welcomed.[17] But I think we can push this a little further. The fact of George and Joy's happy marriage is not, we just saw, good for Algernon. But Algernon might nevertheless welcome it. In particular Algernon might welcome it if Algernon is generous and just. In fact, surely a fact like this should be welcome to any just and generous person, (even if they are disadvantaged by it, so long as that disadvantage is not itself unjust). Just as the fact of some appalling crime should be unwelcome to any just and generous person. And I propose that this is a good way to understand such commonplaces of ordinary talk as that happy marriages between nice people are good things and states of affairs involving genocidal murder are bad states of affairs. So my proposal is that a good state of affairs is a states of affairs that it would be virtuous, i.e. just and generous to welcome.

Thomson thinks talk of good states of affairs qua states of affairs is nonsense so consequentialism is nonsense. I think there is a rather Thomson-friend-

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[16] THOMSON, J. J., *Normativity*, p. 10.
[17] THOMSON, J. J., *Normativity*, chapter VII.

ly way, namely that just aired, to make good sense of the former but that consequentialism is still nonsense. For as well as being friendly to Thomson, the above account of good states of affairs is utterly unhelpful to the consequentialist. At least it is utterly unhelpful to the consequentialist insofar as we understand consequentialism as committed to regarding the relevant notion of goodness he wants to apply to states of affairs as prior to and independent of other normative concepts, in particular as prior to both deontic and aretaic concepts. But the notion of goodness of states of affairs just suggested is defined in terms of virtue and so is not prior to and independent of the aretaic.[18] Accepting it is thus no help to the consequentialist.

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[18] Foot makes a similar point. Cf. Foot, Ph., "Utilitarianism and the Virtues", in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 57, 1983, p. 282.