MORAL GOODNESS ALONE IS 'GOOD WITHOUT QUALIFICATIONS'

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION AND CRITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOME KANTIAN AND PLATONIC ETHICAL INSIGHTS INTO MORAL FACTS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO THE MORAL EDUCATION OF HUMANITY

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Kant calls moral values the only values that are 'good without qualification,' and thereby states something very profound about morality. Let us read his great text in which he expresses many insights into eternal and absolute truths about morality, forgetting as it were his whole epistemology in the *Critique of Pure Reason* which would have forbidden him to make such statements valid „outside the world of appearance." Only an objectivist epistemology and therefore only a critique of Kant can justify these insights:[1]

> It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, wit, ..., and any other talents of the mind ... or courage ... and constancy of purpose, as qualities of temperament are without doubt good and desirable in many respects; but they can also be extremely bad and hurtful when the will is not good which has to make use of these gifts of nature ... Power, wealth, honour, even health and that complete well-being and contentment with one's state which goes by the name of 'happiness', produce ... often over-boldness ... , unless a good will is present. ... Moderation in affections and passions, self-control and sober reflection ... may even seem to constitute part of the inner worth of a person. Yet they are far from being properly described as good without qualification (however unconditionally they have been commended by the ancients). For without the principles of a good will they may become exceedingly bad; and the very coolness of a scoundrel makes him, not merely more dangerous, but also immediately more abominable in our eyes than we should have taken him without it.[2]

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[1] On such an epistemology cf. Adolf Reinach, 'Concerning Phenomenology,' transl. from the German („Über Phänomenologie") by Dallas Willard, *The Personalist* 50 (Spring 1969), pp. 194-221.Cf. also Dietrich von Hildebrand, *What is Philosophy?,* 3rd edn, with a New Introductory Essay by Josef Seifert (London: Routledge, 1991). Josef Seifert, *Back to Things in Themselves. A Phenomenological Foundation for Classical Realism* (London: Routledge, 1987).

[2] I. Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 61/2.

Kant describes – with some explanations added – moral values as 'good without qualification.' But what does this 'goodness without qualification' mean? Only by a return to 'things themselves' – to the moral data themselves – can this question be answered adequately. Let us therefore interpret Kant by a critical return to moral data and things themselves which alone can provide criteria to judge Kant's assertions.

1. Moral goodness is first of all good without qualification inasmuch as this goodness does not depend on the subjective judgment about it. Kant sees that the goodness of moral values is not relative to, not dependent on, anybody's judgment. Moral goodness is not just good according to some person's opinion. It is not just the purely intentional correlate of a judgment. It is of course possible that a Pharisee who is in reality very evil is *judged to be morally good by someone,* or that some good deeds evoke in a person subjectively bad feelings so that he or she judges the deed to be bad; but this never constitutes moral goodness or evilness themselves. Moral goodness, when it is really found in a person, is thus not just good in relationship to the judgement of a person but 'in itself.' Neither David Hume nor C.L. Stevenson and A.J. Ayer have seen this point.[3] John L. Mackie in his *Inventing Right and Wrong* recognizes the inherent claim of moral judgments to assert some objective qualities not relative to our judgment in ethical propositions but holds that these claims are illusory. Kant sees: if moral qualities were not properties of a will independent of anyone's judgment, they would not be morally good nor could they be 'good without qualification.'

2. 'Good' in the context of moral goodness is understood as 'good without qualification' also in the sense of intrinsic goodness, i.e., as that which is not merely subjectively satisfying or relative to our inclinations in its importance.[4] This unconditional goodness in the sense of the

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[3] See J. Barger, „The Meaningful Character of Value-Language: A Critique of the Linguistic Foundations of Emotivism," *J Value Inquiry 14 (1980), 77-91.*

[4] Later, Dietrich von Hildebrand and Rudolf Otto have clarified this sense of value far beyond Kant, and in criticizing his epistemology. See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Die Idee der sittlichen Handlung* in: Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung, 3. Band. Halle: Niemeyer, 1916, pp. 126-251; the same author, *Ethics*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978), ch. 1-3, 17-18. See also Rudolf Otto, „Wert, Würde und Recht", *Zeitschrift für Theologie*

intrinsic preciousness of a thing signifies also that which is not just good *for* an individual who has certain interests. This objectivity of value „which is not relative to our inclinations" (which is neither exclusively subjectively satisfying for our inclinations nor exclusively an objective good *for the person,* we may interpret), is clearly stated by Kant as an essential feature of moral and of morally relevant values, namely of the person's dignity which is of „absolute value" and from which moral imperatives proceed:

> But suppose there were something the existence of which had itself absolute worth, something which, as an end in itself, could be a ground of definite laws. In it and only in it could lie the ground of a possible categorical imperative, i.e., of a practical law.
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> Now, I say, man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will...All objects of inclinations have only a conditional worth, for if the inclinations and the needs founded on them did not exist, their object would be without worth...[5]

This meaning of 'unrestricted goodness', the objectivity of moral values which is inseparable from their character of intrinsic value-importance and goodness, is absolutely decisive for understanding ethics. Many persons regard moral values as subjective and therefore relativistic physicians will carry out patient's wishes thinking that the patient's morals are just as well as their own and that they therefore have to willfully carry out what the patient wishes. But this treats moral values or disvalues not as objective and intrinsic positive or negative importance of human acts but along the lines of the merely subjectively satisfying.

3. 'Good without qualification' can also be interpreted in the sense that moral values are values in a higher sense which express more purely the idea of value and goodness. If we say that cows or horses are good, we realize that we use the term 'good' in a relatively poor analogous sense compared with the manner in which we use it in reference to moral values. Similarly, the concept of evil, when applied to diseases, does not mean 'evil' in any similarly powerful way as the moral sense of 'evil.' Moral goodness is good in a new and higher sense

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und Kirche, 12 (1931), 1-67; reprinted in R. Otto, *Aufsätze zur Ethik,* edited by J. S. Boozer (München: Beck, 1981), pp. 53-106.

[5] Kant, *Grundlegung zu einer Metaphysik der Sitten*, BA 64, 65.

of goodness than extramoral goods, and moral evil is evil in a more terrible sense of evil than any extramoral evil. In German, two different words (*schlecht* and *böse*, *das Übel* and '*das Böse'*) indicate this difference which is so great that one might claim that between the two senses of good and evil (the moral and the extramoral one) there is not even analogy properly speaking but that we find in moral goodness a radically new sense of this term.

Also this profound truth, and the new and higher sense of goodness found in moral goodness, is frequently overlooked. One forgets that, while human life is *morally relevant* and imposes moral obligations on us, it is nevertheless not as high a good as the moral goodness of the acts in which we relate properly to life. For this reason, we should rather die than commit a morally evil act. A proper ethics can *only be built on this insight into the absolute primacy and higher meaning of goodness* in the case of *moral goodness* when compared to saving a life or curing a patient.

4. Good without qualification can also be understood in the sense that moral goodness cannot be 'abused' like other talents which turn terrible when abused. This involves a new and more pure sense of goodness found in moral goodness, which is that which is good unconditionally speaking and not only good depending on how it is used (such as wit, courage, self-control, etc.). While one could challenge this element of Kant's intuition posing the question whether not phariseism or proud humiliation of others constitute a form of 'abuse' of moral values even at a deeper level than the abuses of intelligence, one could reply in the following way: Moral qualities in the person change through this abuse in a very different way from that in which intelligence is vitiated by moral evil. Intelligence does not cease to be intelligence by its abuse per se (even though it may become affected and perverted by the stupidity resulting from pride), whereas the moral value in the person is changed immediately into evil by the abuse of phariseism. The 'abused moral value' does not remain morally good or continue to

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Vgl. auch Kant, *KpV* 61,62.

bestow moral goodness on the subject. Thus as long as the morally good quality and intention (*Gesinnung*) remain in the person, they cannot be abused as such.

5. Another important sense of the unrestricted meaning of moral goodness is precisely their absolute and unconditional value which appears in a special way in the negative sphere of moral evil: moral evil, *injustice,* must *never* be committed, as Socrates sees so clearly in Plato's *Crito*:

> *Socrates*: And if we find that we should be acting unjustly, then we must not take into account either of death, or of any other evil that may be the consequence of remaining here, where we are, but only of acting unjustly...
> ... Is not what we used to say most certainly the truth, whether the multitude agrees with us nor not? Is not acting unjustly evil and shameful in every case, whether we incur a heavier or lighter punishment in consequence?.
> If we ought never to act unjustly at all, ought we to repay injustice with injustice, as the multitude thinks we . may?
> ... And in conceding this, Crito, be careful that you do not concede more than you mean. For I know that only a few men hold, or ever will hold, this opinion. And so those who hold it and those who do not have no common ground of argument (Plato, *Crito*, 49 a ff.).

Moral evil (injustice) cannot be justified by *anything*. This is certainly *not* true for extramoral goods where we can always say „this is a lesser or greater evil than that other one."

Extramoral goods and evils *per se,* i.e., when they are not object of moral or immoral acts, can be weighed, even human lives; we can say, it is better to jump out on the left side of a ship to save five children's lives who fell off the board of the ship in a storm than on the right side where we can only save one child. When a morally evil act is at stake, its disvalue is far worse, it possesses quite another kind of ugliness than any other evil. Therefore we must *never* commit moral evil for any extramoral good such as health or life. This insight is particularly important for medical ethics. Think of the case of a gynecologist who easily wants to sacrifice the moral value for the comfort or even subjective wishes of his patients. Moreover, this absoluteness of the moral values even forbids that we 'sacrifice' our own moral innocence or commit immoral acts for the sake of higher *moral* values. When we are

faced therefore with an intrinsically evil act, we must not perform it *for any reason whatsoever*. The moral sphere possesses, in another way than human life and human dignity per se, such an unconditional value that it forbids us *ever* to perform it: there is *an absolute* 'Tua res agitur,' an *absolute* appeal to the unique acting subject here: **I** should *never* commit a moral evil, and in this no one can substitute me nor can I perform morally evil acts in order that moral good may come of it in another.

6. Moral goodness is likewise 'good without qualification' in the sense that moral goodness makes the *person as such* good and is thus 'good in an unrestricted' sense, not only in certain respects making him good *as actor* or *as philosopher*; it is not just something good *in him* but touches his very being. Interestingly enough, this is even more true of moral goodness than of the inalienable ontological dignity and value of the person. For this value, as Thomas says, makes the man good only '*secundum quid*' not '*simpliciter*'. Other goods (such as a brilliant mind) are very good but they do not make the person as such and as a whole good. Kant's insight then, when interpreted in this way, designates by the *unrestricted sense in which moral goodness is in an ultimate sense* the human person's *good*. This is, we may submit, the reason why Plato calls moral goodness the *proper* good of the soul.[6] This is an entirely new sense of 'unrestricted good'.

7. Related to this but really distinct is another sense in which moral goodness alone is 'good without qualification'. Moral values are the proper good of the person and the highest good for the person, the *unum necessarium*. The person can be in three ways related to moral values and in each of these ways in which he can participate in them, they also become an objective good *for* him:[7]

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[6] See Plato's *Gorgias* and *Politeia*, X.

[7] See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Modes of Participation in Value*, in: International Philosophical Quarterly. New York. Vol. I. Nr. 1. 1961. S. 58-84.

a) The person can be the bearer of moral values, and in consequence of this they are a high objective good *for him;*

b) moral values can become the object of his knowledge or frui, and in this respect also *and primarily* the moral values in *other* persons and especially the infinite moral holiness of God become an objective good *for* him;

c) Moral values can be participated in by bringing them into existence, by making them be. This is directly possible only *within the moral agent himself.* While only other values can be created or brought into being directly in a given person also by a person outside that person himself, this is impossible in the moral sphere. Here only the person of the agent himself can become the source through which moral values arise in him. Nevertheless, through education, spiritual direction, through example and in many other ways a human person can also contribute to the realization of moral goodness in others. And by becoming the cause of moral goodness in *others* whom he formed as model, parent or teacher, he participates in a unique way in their moral values.

This meaning of the unrestricted sense in which only moral values are good does not touch only the aspect of the intrinsic value-importance of moral values and our different ways of participating in these intrinsic values, but also their character as objective goods *for* persons. Moral goodness, when possessed by a person (but in other ways also when participated in in the two other ways of participating in value described above), is the highest objective good *for* the person; as the *unum necessarium* it is in a sense *the* good for the soul. Because it is the highest good *of* the person, making the person himself good in the supreme sense, it is also the highest good *for the person. In itself – qua morally good* – supremely good, it is also good *for* the person, and indeed even one decisive factor and ground for *the absolutely highest objective good for the person*: his eternal good. Why is this so?

Plato's argument in the *Gorgias* gives as main argument why it is better *for man* to suffer injustice than to commit it: that the moral value itself is higher and more beautiful than

freedom from suffering or life as such, and that the ugliness of moral evil is far greater than that of suffering injustice or dying a cruel death. *Because* the *doing injustice* is *intrinsically* a greater evil, it must also be a greater evil for the soul of man. Plato thus uses the insight that moral goodness is a good *in itself* in an unrestricted sense as the *ground* of it being also the greatest good *for* the soul. He does not argue vice versa from it being the greatest objective evil *for man* that it is also the greatest evil per se. Plato's is quite another argument than the one from moral values being a means to happiness and to the intellectual vision of God and only therefore (indirectly, as means) they would be related to our highest objective good. Even less is it the argument from punishment that will follow moral evil. In fact, Plato argues that the *unpunished crimes,* because in them the person of the evildoer has no connection to the beauty of justice at all, not even by being punished, is the *worst of all evils.*

While Plato here gains an absolutely stunning insight into the deepest reason *why* moral evil is the greatest evil for the soul and moral goodness the greatest good *for the soul,* this does not exclude the truth *that* moral goodness is the highest good *for* the person also due to some further marks of morality (especially its link to reward). Moral goodness thus is the highest objective good *for the person* for many reasons.

To say that justice is a higher objective good for man than life presents us with the problem of the apparent incommensurability of the 'fundamental human goods' so much emphasized by Finnis and Grisez.[8] Of course, it is hard to compare the two goods of life and of moral goodness with each other, because both are indispensable in different senses as well as truly incommensurable with each other in *many respects*: The good of knowledge is even more fundamental in a sense than moral goodness because it is a *condition* of all other spiritual goods. Nevertheless, the fundamental human goods are *not incommensurable* in *all* respects. There is a common and universal point of view of goodness as such, of value as such which

allows and forces us to say: That which makes a man most unambiguously and profoundly precious is neither knowledge nor play nor happiness but moral goodness. Therefore, this must also make moral goodness the greatest objective good *for the person.* And in this sense moral values alone are truly the highest objective good *for the person,* the *unum necessarium.* One could argue that Plato and Plotinus, when they claim in this absolute sense that moral goodness is the proper and highest good of the soul, first confuse here the 'objective' and the subjective meaning of *eudaimonia* and do not take sufficiently into consideration the dimension of experience (of *Erlebniszugewandtheit*) of the objective good *for* the person. Even a totally unconscious person who has done good would remain the bearer of this goodness and realize it, but this cannot be called the highest good for him absolutely. For it presupposes at least his continued existence. Moreover, its character as good *for him* certainly presupposes also some *Erlebnis* of that peace and happiness and joy which comes from the possession of these values, at least at *some time* in the future or in eternity.

Hence this conscious participation in the moral value is not simply a pure consequence of the higher value of moral goodness per se. For this reason, a metaphysics of the person which shows that moral values are the highest goods not only in themselves but also *for the person,* will have to show that happiness and the joy which normally come from moral goodness, will actually be given sometime to the good man. Otherwise only a *purely* objective sense of happiness is maintained which does not take into account the subjectivity of the person and that dimension of happiness which is inseparable from the *experiencing* of joy.

If we consider the dimension of *Erlebniszugewandtheit* of objective goods for the person, we might also ask ourselves whether the contemplation of *other* persons inasmuch as they are good are not in a certain sense conceivably a higher source of happiness than our own. This certainly is the case in the contemplation of God but also in the joy in the moral values of

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[8] See John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); see also the same author, *Natural Law and*

other human persons because they are more given as object of an explicit *frui*. This is so because of the other-directedness of the moral life and of love but also because humility forbids us to 'enjoy' our own virtues as much as we can delight in those of other persons whom we love.

Certainly, also the joy over moral qualities in other persons presupposes a certain goodness in ourselves, otherwise we might even suffer from seeing the good of others (for example, by becoming envious).

Moreover, the joy which comes to the person who is *bearer* of moral goodness and the way in which this goodness in him is a source of happiness is quite unique. We will experience good moral qualities of our own person in quite another inner experience and peace of conscience in which we can never experience the moral values of other persons. If we consider the uniquely close form of participation present in moral values which are linked to the very free center of the person, we understand why even 'participation' is here too weak a word.

8. Morally good qualities are „good without qualification" also in the sense that moral values are 'pure perfections': Kant implies this clearly when he says that neither in this world *nor outside it* we find anything that could be called good unqualifiedly except a good will. This can only be said if evidence of moral goodness as pure perfection is presupposed by Kant. For otherwise there could be a higher and more unqualified sense of 'goodness'. Kant is right in this intuition that the *ratio formalis* of moral qualities reveals that they are „pure perfections" which are absolutely better to possess than not to possess and therefore are all ontologically and logically compatible with each other and admit of infinity.[9]

This metaphysical intuition into the character of moral values as *pure perfections* which are not limited to finite human beings but are better absolutely speaking and even in an absolute

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Natural Rights (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

[9] See on this Anselm von Canterbury. *Monologion,* ch. 15. See also Josef Seifert, *Essere e persona. Verso una fondazione fenomenologica di una metafisica classica e personalistica*. (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1989), ch. 5.

divine being is also presupposed in the well-known atheistic objection against God that the evils in the world prove that God cannot be merciful and just and that therefore „there is no God“ and in the reply of 'theodicy' to this question. Against this most of all the *moral* goodness of God must be defended: *id quo melius nihil cogitari possit* also includes the moral goodness which constitutes the innermost dimension of divine holiness and can never be substituted by the *tremendum* of holiness.[10]

But in praising the good will as supreme value, Kant raises the problem of the 'seat' of moral value. This leads us to further essential intuitions into moral values, and into the character of the person as *pure perfection.*

9. This principle of due-ness and the call to give the proper value response also distinguish moral values sharply from what they appear to be in the conception of Aristotle; namely means towards happiness. Moral values are essentially never just means, they are to be considered and willed as ends in themselves even to be moral values. This is deeply seen by Saint Anselm: moral values must be willed *propter rectitudinem voluntatis ipsam*. They must never be regarded just as means towards happiness. A morally good act corresponds and responds properly to a morally relevant good that calls for a due response and *to the moral goodness of the act itself.*

This due-relation is a relation *sui generis* and entirely different from, and absolutely irreducible to, a means-end relation.[11] Any good endowed with objective value calls for an affirmation *propter seipsum*. In this sense of *first seeking the justice of the kingdom of God* the appearing 'on the back' of acts ('*auf dem Rücken Erscheinen'*) found in moral values according to Max Scheler is an essential characteristic of morality.

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[10] Also in Anselm the deepest meaning of '*maius*' is a moral one. Compare my *Gott als Gottesbeweis* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996), ch. 11.

[11] See on this *Ethics*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978), ch. 17-18; Josef Seifert, Josef Seifert, *Essere e persona, cit.,* ch. 9.

While moral values arise in the analyzed sense 'on the back of the act' because they involve a transcendent interest in some good endowed with value, they can be and ought to be willed for their own sake.[12]

10. Moral values imply a new and unique kind of *ought* which Kant sought to define as *categorical imperative: thou shall not kill! etc.* This ought is not identical with the mere call found in each value (for example in a beautiful landscape) for an adequate response. It is a much more serious and different kind of *moral* ought addressed to our freedom. Besides *unconditional obligatory oughts* (strict moral *obligations)* we find in the moral sphere also the new moment of a 'moral invitation' distinct from moral 'obligations'. Kant's position that turns all moral calls into *categorical* imperatives is reductionistic and omits the sphere of *meritorious* but 'optional' or 'heroic' moral acts. Take Father Maximilian Kolbe's action which is of extremely high moral value but not a response to an obligation: or think of the bestowing of a grace that is not owed, the generosity of a gift, the self-sacrifice of love. Nevertheless, in all moral values lives a unique and irreducible type of oughtness which elucidates this truth which can be regarded as a chief content through which Plato and Kant contribute to the *paideia* of mankind by elucidating the fact that "Moral Goodness alone is 'good without qualifications.'"

[12] On a sevenfold motivation of moral acts see Josef Seifert, *Was ist und was motiviert eine sittliche Handlung*? (Salzburg: Univ.Verlag A. Pustet, 1976).