

Is there an absolute good?

by *Bertrand Russell*

INTRODUCTION: MORE ON RUSSELL ON THE MEANING OF "GOOD"

THIS NOTE IS an extended footnote to the very first sentence of Harry Ruja's "Russell on the Meaning of 'Good'",¹ and an introduction to Russell's short essay "Is There an Absolute Good?", which is here printed for the first time. It may have some additional interest in showing Russell as the creator of a so-called "error theory" of ethics, along the lines of Hume before him and J.L. Mackie after, and in illuminating Russell's ambivalent account of whether there could be any such thing as moral philosophy, strictly speaking. If my reading of the essay is right, it is almost unique as a piece of what Russell would himself have understood as moral philosophy.

The date of "Is There an Absolute Good?" is not certain, nor is the occasion for which Russell wrote it. Probably it was written for a meeting of The Society on 4 March 1922 which divided on the motion "Is there Good in Goldie?" Russell's Cambridge pocket diaries show he was to be in Cambridge on 3–6 March, and on the 4th he was set to dine with his old friend and fellow Apostle, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson. There are references to various November issues of *The Japan Chronicle* on the verso of the manuscript's folio 2. Russell used some of the references in an article, "Present Anglo-American Policy in China", published in *The Daily Herald* on 26 January 1922. And the handwriting, ink and paper match those of the manuscript of "Free Thought and Official Propaganda", which he read as a lecture on 24 March. Thus the dating of early 1922, while not confirmed, has considerable support.

Professor Ruja reminds us that in *An Outline of Philosophy* Russell says that he had once followed G.E. Moore in believing that "good" was indefinable, but was "partly" led to abandon the doctrine by read-

ing Santayana's *Winds of Doctrine*. Ruja notes that Russell does not explain that "partly"; he does not explain what else induced a change of mind, nor why he had come to think that the arguments against defining "goodness" in terms of desire satisfaction which he had accepted in 1910 were not, after all, conclusive. "Is There an Absolute Good?" provides part of the answer.

Russell's little paper treats its question as identical to the question whether goodness is an objective property; and the point of the paper is to return the answer that goodness is not a property at all, and, more excitingly, that all ethical propositions are, strictly speaking, false. He refers back to Moore and to his contemporaries' ready acceptance of Moore's demonstration that there was an "absolute" good—observing, in something of the same spirit as Keynes was to do, that Moore's readers had been all the readier to swallow Moore's logic because *Principia Ethica* had made it seem that they themselves were "absolutely good". Russell's position was not quite like that. He had accepted Moore's account of goodness, not on moral or ethical grounds, but as a matter of analysis. If the predicate "is good" had a meaning, it followed that "good" must denote some property; of course, goodness was a somewhat odd property, and Russell plainly did not care much for its oddity. The chief difficulty was that *if* goodness was an objective quality, just like redness or heat, it ought to be possible for someone to say that he or she did not care whether *x* was good or not. I may, after all, happen not to want a red shirt or a hot meal; there is something suspect about happening not to want a good (all things considered) shirt or meal. It did not much help to say that goodness was a property *sui generis* which had this attractive quality; that recognized the disanalogy with redness but did nothing to explain it or reduce the logical unease. Russell seems to have swallowed the anxieties because he saw no way out, but it is worth noticing that he was always very dismissive of the pretensions of moral philosophy, even when he accepted objectivist views. Thus, when he was ready to take McTaggart's word for it that the ultimate good was a sort of universal intellectual harmony, he went on to say that it was impossible to know whether any particular action promoted that or not, so for practical purposes we had better be eclectic utilitarians.² As Ruja says, when Russell put forward his own version of Moore's case in "The Elements of Ethics",³ the result was utterly

² Russell, "Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver", *Cambridge Essays, 1888–99*, ed. K. Blackwell, A. Brink, N. Griffin, R.A. Rempel, and J.G. Slater, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 1 (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1983): 92–8.

³ *Philosophical Essays* (London: Longmans Green, 1910); new ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

¹ *Russell*, n.s. 4 (Summer 1984): 137–56.

unMoorean; Russell briskly declined to bother himself with producing a list of the states of affairs which exhibited goodness on the grounds that everyone else could do it for themselves, and if he and they disagreed there was no room for argument about it. *If* the best reason for taking moral philosophy seriously is that it can take us by rational steps to practical conclusions, it is plain that Russell thought moral philosophy failed to meet that standard. All moral philosophy could do was show by logical analysis *that* there was a property of goodness.

Ruja's essay suggests what, I think, any reading of Russell's essays in this area also suggests, which is that Russell was always tempted by some kind of emotivist and subjectivist view. Such a view, whatever its other merits and demerits, at any rate has no difficulty in understanding that the belief that some state of affairs is good is a motivating reason for seeking to bring it about. But Russell was held back from espousing it by Moore's view of analysis. Now one element in pushing him over the brink was not philosophical, and that was his experience of the War. In his acrimonious exchange with T.E. Hulme in the pages of *The Cambridge Magazine*⁴ Russell found himself under attack by Hulme for saying things which Hulme thought incompatible with Russell's ethical objectivism (or, as Russell misleadingly has it, absolutism). Russell replied that he had abandoned a belief in ethical objectivism years earlier; mankind was quite evidently moved to action by impulse and desire, not by the perception of objective moral properties. Ethical objectivism was simply incredible and he had given up trying to believe in it.

But if that gave Russell a more powerful push away from Moore and objectivism, it did not supply him with the intellectual apparatus required to deal with Moore's arguments. The little paper printed here shows what that apparatus was. It had two major components. In the first place, Russell adopted a new approach to meaning, because he now put forward an error theory of moral judgment. "Friendship is good" did not mean "I approve of friendship; do so too", even though it did express that affective attitude. The *literal* meaning of "friendship is good" was to ascribe the property of goodness to friendship. But, there is no such property. It is not true that for "good" to mean, there must be a property that it means. An approach which Russell himself characterized as looking for the "definition in use" of whole propositions

allowed him to say that Moore was quite right to insist that the sentence was not literally about our attitudes, quite wrong to think that that implied the existence of *sui generis* ethical properties. Why, though, should we express value judgments in this misleading form? Russell's answer not only explained that, but also solved the problem of explaining how value judgments were practically effective.

Russell supposes that we approve and disapprove of things, and then exhibit what Hume called the tendency of the mind to spread itself upon objects and project that approval and disapproval onto its objects. So we come to think that what friendship's goodness consists in is what it shares with, say, kindness, loyalty, justice and the like. Moore, then, is right about the literal meaning of value judgments, wrong about the contents of the world. But, if moral judgments *express* affective attitudes, the mystery of why we cannot sensibly decline to take any interest in the goodness and badness of states of affairs has also been cleared up. So, too, has the mystery of the ineffectiveness of most forms of philosophical argument in the face of ethical disagreement. What we have is a clash of affective attitude, not a disagreement about the data of perception. No wonder that arguments designed to change minds fail to induce a change of heart.

But, if this is persuasive, it is not yet enough. We need the second component of the new view, namely an analysis of the meaning of sentences such as "friendship is good" which will square with Russell's views on meaning. The necessary argument is produced by Russell. Years before, he had produced an analysis of "the present King of France is bald" which saved common sense by making the sentence meaningful in the absence of a present King of France. Now he applies that analysis to save common sense by making "friendship is good" meaningful in the absence of any such property as goodness. The intellectual device is identical. Just as "the present King of France is bald" asserts that there is a person who is identical with the present King of France and is bald, so "friendship is good" asserts that there is a property which is shared by friendship ... and all the other things we call good. Since there is no such property, all such propositions are, literally, false.

The only concluding observation to be made is that given this analysis, Russell's continued ambivalence about moral philosophy becomes wholly intelligible. Philosophy in its strict sense is a matter of truth and falsity, and its characteristic method is analysis. Philosophy, therefore, stops when it has explained the logic of moral discourse and has given a plausible *histoire raisonnée* of how metaphysical errors have crept into the language. All else is practical persuasion; if what really underlies

⁴ "Mr. Russell's Reply", *The Cambridge Magazine*, 5 (11 March 1916): 386. Hulme's articles and Russell's replies are all reprinted in Hulme's *Further Speculations*, ed. Sam Hynes (Minnesota: U. of Minnesota P., 1955; London: Oxford U.P., 1956; Lincoln: U. of Nebraska P., 1962).

moral judgment is affective attitudes, the moralist's task is not philosophical but rhetorical. With some hesitations, this is what Russell concluded.⁵

New College, Oxford

Alan Ryan

IS THERE AN ABSOLUTE GOOD?

WHEN THE GENERATION to which I belong were young, Moore persuaded us all that there is an absolute good. Most of us drew the inference that *we* were absolutely good, but this is not an essential part of Moore's position, though it is one of its most attractive parts.

Moore's position, in essence, is this: When we judge (say) "pleasure is good", the word "good" has a meaning, and what it means is a certain simple and unanalysable predicate. I wish to leave out of account the question whether the predicate "good" is simple, which is of minor importance; my point is that the word "good" does not stand for a predicate at all, but has a meaning only in the sense in which descriptive phrases have meaning, i.e. in use, not in isolation; further that, when we define it as nearly as possible in accordance with the usage of absolutists, *all* propositions in which the word "good" has a primary occurrence are false.

Moore is right, I think, in holding that when we say a thing is good we do not *merely* mean that we have towards it a certain feeling, of liking or approval or what not. There seems to me no doubt that our ethical judgments claim objectivity; but this claim, to my mind, makes them all false. Without the theory of incomplete symbols, it seemed natural to infer, as Moore did, that, since propositions in which the word "good" occurs have meaning, therefore the word "good" has meaning; but this was a fallacy. And it is upon this fallacy, I think, that the most apparently cogent of Moore's arguments rest.

I conceive the genesis of the notion of "good" as follows: We have emotions of approval and disapproval. If *A, B, C, ...* are the things towards which we have emotions of approval, we mistake the similarity of our emotions in the presence of *A, B, C, ...* for perception of a common predicate of *A, B, C, ...*. To this supposed predicate we shall give the name "good". It may be that *A, B, C, ...* will have several common predicates, but the irrelevant ones can be eliminated by the

⁵ I am grateful to Kenneth Blackwell for information that helped me find the probable occasion for which the essay was written. He prepared it for publication.

rule that the predicate "good" is not to belong to anything of which we *disapprove*. Thus the process is as follows:

A, B, C, ... are things of which we approve; *X, Y, Z, ...* are things of which we disapprove. We judge: "There is a predicate possessed by *A, B, C, ...* but not by *X, Y, Z, ...*" To this supposed predicate, so described, we give the name "good". Thus when we judge "*M* is good", we mean: "*M* has that predicate which is common to *A, B, C, ...* but is absent in *X, Y, Z, ...*" It will be seen that the emotions of approval and disapproval do not enter into the meaning of the proposition "*M* is good", but only into its genesis. The fundamental proposition of ethics, according to the theory I am advocating, is: "There is a predicate common to *A, B, C, ...* but absent from *X, Y, Z, ...*" I believe this proposition to be false. It follows that, if I am right, all ethical propositions are false. Their falsehood is of the same kind as the falsehood of the proposition: "the present King of France is bald"; except that what is described in an ethical proposition is the predicate, not the subject.

Why believe this theory?

(1) It is not considered by Moore, and the arguments which he brings against the rival theories he does consider do not apply against it.

(2) It seems to be an empirical fact that the things people judge good are the same as those towards which they have an emotion of approval, while the things they judge bad are those towards which they have an emotion of disapproval.

(3) The emotions of approval and disapproval influence our actions, whereas purely theoretical judgments do not. Therefore in so far as ethics is concerned with what people actually do, or with how to influence action, the emotions suffice without the help of the predicates "good" and "bad".

(4) Since people disagree in their judgments of good and bad to just the same extent to which they differ in their feelings of approval and disapproval, the objectivity secured by ethical predicates is only theoretic, and does nothing to mitigate ethical disputes in practice.

(5) Since the facts can be accounted for without the predicates "good" and "bad", Occam's razor demands that we should abstain from assuming them.

Apart from logical arguments, there is a mass of what one may call sentiment which leads me to entertain emotions of disapproval towards absolute good, i.e. to judge that good is bad. But I will not waste your time by developing these sentimental considerations.