Flourishing as the Highest Good

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A lost topic

Very few contemporary secular philosophers are especially concerned with whether there is or could be a *summum bonum*—a highest good. Of course, philosophers used to take it that developing an account of the highest good was crucial to work in ethics, social philosophy, and political philosophy, and, by extension, philosophy of education. *That* we need to understand the highest good was as a commonplace in ancient Greek philosophy, for example.[1] And interest in what might count as the highest good survived in 18th and 19th century European philosophy. It is no longer an ordinary part of Anglophone philosophical inquiry.

I suspect that concern over whether there is a highest good, and, if so, what that good might be, faded from view with the flattening out of thought about good in general. The 20th century brought us remarkably abstract, significantly subjective varieties of thought about choice-worthiness. When thought about choice-worthiness grows at once thinner and more abstract, it seems to take thought about happiness along with it. As near as I can tell, early- to mid-20th century thought about choice-worthiness is part of what cast a deep shadow over thought about virtue for much of the 20th century. Virtue has made something of a comeback. *Flourishing* as the contemporary Anglophone secular philosophical term for *eudaimonia*—what still is translated 'happiness' sometimes, although neither 'happiness' nor 'flourishing seems to capture the *daimon* in

[1] For a good summary discussion, see Sarah Broadie, "On the Idea of the *summum bonum*," in Christopher Gill, editor, *Virtues, Norms, and Objectivity*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 41-58.

eudaimonia—has made something of a return alongside neo-Aristotelian thought about virtue. I will try to motivate bringing back thought about the highest good.

I will explore, with a caveat, treating flourishing as the highest good. In so doing, I will draw from work by John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant on happiness. The kind of happiness at issue for both Kant and Mill is happiness shaped by good character. The way in which the kind of happiness worth having is shaped by character-development for Mill and for Kant brings their understanding of happiness in line with contemporary neo-Aristotelian work on flourishing. The variety of neo-Aristotelian thought about character—virtue—that will inform my discussion is drawn from Thomas Aquinas, although Aquinas will be more in the background than the foreground of my efforts.

A Highest Good?

Why isn't it enough to understand that people will try to seek such good as they can recognize without taking the extra step of supposing that we need to see ourselves as participating in communities striving to realize a highest good? What does a sense for the highest good add to our efforts to understand our general attraction to good, willingness to will the good in others, and self-understanding as unique individuals drawn toward participation in communities devoted to realizing good in the lives of all their members? Two kinds of consideration look like the most obvious sources of an argument that we need a highest good are concerns about setting priorities and concerns about making sacrifices.

A sense for the highest good, one might insist, will allow us to set our priorities better. If we know, for example, that we most want all of our students to flourish—to realize their potential, to develop their particular talents and capacities, and to support the flourishing of their fellow students, we know that lessons and classroom environments need to be geared to the needs and grounded aspirations of our students. We can use our concern over providing educational resources that promote flourishing to think differently about all aspects of our lives with our students, and to provide opportunities for students to contribute to the wellbeing of their fellows, setting up expectations in our classrooms that we thrive best when we thrive together.

Then too, having an overarching sense for the highest good explains why we may be willing to sacrifice some measure of private advantage for the sake of the higher good. As educators, we often find ourselves putting the interests of our students and institutions ahead of opportunities for private advantage. When we do so, we normally have some sense of doing so because we are willing to leave self-interest to the side for the sake of something more important.

And understanding ourselves as working for the sake of shared participation in realizing a higher good than mere private advantage helps us to build supportive and sustaining relationships with our colleagues, with our students, with parents, and with the broader communities that we serve, involving ourselves in networks of relationships that can sustain us when we face the ordinary run of frustrating or disappointing aspects of life and work.

But if all that having a sense for higher goods does is allow us to set our priorities in general, make sensible trade-offs, and work together when our interests happen to coincide, then it isn't clear why we require the highest good. After all, these concerns sound a lot like concerns about scheduling and coordination. Why wheel machinery as heavy as the highest good onto the stage to handle scheduling logistics and relatively straightforward coordination problems? Why go in for thought about the highest good at all?

I confess that such questions left me with some aversion to any claim about a singular highest good for many years. I am changing my mind, largely because I suspect that we need to side with the highest good to make sense of two aspects of an overall tendency to move toward good and away from bad in our lives as rational animals.[2] We need the highest good, I think, in order to understand:

1. The ways in which w our lives together are aimed at shared pursuit of a common good, where the common good cannot be reduced to an aggregate measure of the many private goods; and
2. Our willingness, individually and collectively, to orient ourselves to goods we have never experienced and find meaning in what we do for the sake of unknown good.

As far as I know, major European philosophers prior to the 18th century who thought about the *summum bonum* understood this as a good that none of us could fully realize

[2] . I take on board the Aristotelian commonplace that orientation toward what is specifically good and away from bad is a condition on the intelligibility of animal movement generally. For some treatment of this point see [Michael Thompson; Matthew Boyle]

individually. Further, none of us, they urged, could have unimpeded enjoyment of the highest good in this life. And yet, they argued, we are nevertheless bound to seek the highest good.

The claim that human beings tend to seek goods that they have never experienced finds some backing in ordinary experience. There is, I think, some plain commonsense psychological support for the claim. For example, encountering people who do not want anything that they have not had—not just people who prefer customary food and familiar surroundings, but people deeply unwilling to try for anything that is outside their experience—tends to suggest encountering people who are somehow dead inside, and likely terrified of any change. Far from looking like a symptom of wellbeing, the unwillingness to allow anything new into one's world looks like a sign of psychological trouble. I suspect that none of us has met a reasonably stable and functional adult human being who has not grown and matured *precisely* by being willing to pursue things that she has not experienced before. Quite apart from commonsense psychology, it is conceptually hard to see how anyone could grow up *at all* without reaching for what she never before had grasped.

Of course, it is one thing to point out that maturing requires some deliberate encounters with novelty to urging that an adult human being ought to orient her life to a single highest good that she cannot fully realize under her own steam. Why stretch the normal appetite for the unfamiliar that promises to make life better to such lengths?

The question becomes more acute when we notice that it's not just that orienting oneself to the highest good promises to make this life better. On some accounts of the

highest good, such an orientation holds out no such promises, actually. Rather, an orientation to the highest good opens the possibility of living a more meaningful life, even when a meaningful life fails to be an especially pleasant life. The height of the highest good comes in part from the diffusiveness of the highest good. The goodness of what I undertake for the sake of the highest good comes *from* the highest good rather than adding *to* the goodness of the highest good. It is precisely this aspect of thought about the highest good that can make some substantive orientations focused on a candidate highest good dangerous. No reasonable candidate highest good can render acts of injustice, cruelty, or wanton disregard good simply because the agent insists that such acts are done in the service of the highest good. Quite the contrary. An orientation to the highest good may well explain why such acts are beyond the pale. Any attempt to capture the sense that some kinds of act are always wrong generally depends upon some explicit or implicit thought about the highest good. Not only do some difficult acts done from and for the sake of justice take their goodness from a candidate highest good, types of act that are never justified normally get *that* status as acts that are contrary to the highest good. Related to this point, an orientation to the highest good is an orientation to participating in shared pursuit of a common good. In effect, thought about the highest good lends order to our individual pursuits and to our lives together. In the two examples I will consider, this order is the order produced through cultivation of virtue. virtue.

A Secular Account

The philosophical puzzle involving the highest good that will orient me goes like this: given that most prominent thinkers who have developed accounts of the nature and character of the highest good have argued that we *cannot* experience unimpeded enjoyment of the highest good in this life, in what sense can the highest good provide a target for us? Worse, most of these thinkers have held that even if I am determined to orient my life to the highest good, I cannot attain this end by my own efforts. In what sense can I sensibly so much as *seek* the highest good, much less have confidence that I have set my sights on an appropriate object, if I cannot know what it will be like in advance, and the one thing I can know is that I will never attain it under my own steam? Although some of the most profound thought about the highest good has been produced by thinkers operating in distinctive faith communities, nothing about this thought requires a theological basis. John Stuart Mill, for example, provided powerful secular work on the highest good throughout his career.

Philosophical interest in the highest good was still alive when John Stuart Mill published his much-maligned *Utilitarianism*. Mill wrote:

> From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and

> neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject, than when the youth Socrates listened to the old Protagoras….[3]

Famously, Mill held that the highest good is the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. And Mill took it that it was in our power to attain this end, although what Mill understood by 'happiness' is far more interesting than what Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, or, later, Henry Sidgwick had in view. More than this, Mill argued that attaining the end that governed and shaped his utilitarianism demanded significant collective action, political reform, and cultural change.[4] Complaining about Bentham, Mill wrote:

> [The problem with Bentham is that he has] confounded the principle of Utility with the principle of specific consequences, and has habitually made up his estimation of the approbation or blame due to a particular kind of action, from a calculation solely of the consequences to which that very action, if practised generally, would itself lead. He has largely exemplified, and contributed very widely to diffuse, a tone of thinking, according to which any kind of action or any habit, which in its specific consequences cannot be proved to be necessarily or probably productive

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[3] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), Vol. 10, p. 203.

[4] For example, Mill's understanding of happiness depends upon an account of higher pleasures. Higher pleasures are those pleasures involving what Mill describes in his writings on literature as "whole states of mind"—states of mind in which thought, feeling, and motivation are so strongly associated that the critical intellect cannot pull them apart. I discuss these matters in *John Stuart Mill's Deliberative Landscape: An Essay in moral psychology*, (London: Routledge, 2016).

> of unhappiness to the agent himself or to others, is supposed to be fully justified; and any disapprobation or aversion entertained towards the individual by reason of it, is set down from that time forward as prejudice and superstition.[5]

In short, Mill was *not* a consequentialist. Mill's utilitarianism is *not* consequentialist utilitarianism. Mill continues his criticism of Bentham by discussing the importance of habituation to an adequate moral philosophy:

> It is not considered (at least, not habitually considered,) whether the act or habit in question, though not in itself necessarily pernicious, may not form part of a *character* essentially pernicious, or at least essentially deficient in some quality entirely conducive to the 'greatest happiness'.... When a moralist thus overlooks the relation of an act to a certain state of mind as its cause, and its connexion through that common cause with large classes and groups of actions apparently very little resembling itself, his estimation even of the consequences of the very act itself, is rendered imperfect. For it may be affirmed with few exceptions, that any act whatever has a tendency to fix and perpetuate the state or character of mind in which it has itself originated. And if that important element in the

[5] John Stuart Mill, "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), Vol. 10, p. 8. Mill's understanding of the character of our desire for the highest good is likewise more interesting than what can be got by means of an illicit slide from talk about what is desired to talk about what is desirable. See Elijah Millgram, "Mill's Proof of the Principle of Utility," *Ethics*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (January 2000), pp. 282-310.

> moral relations of the action be not taken into account by the moralist as a cause, neither probably will it be taken into account as a consequence.[6]

In short, carefully read, Mill's interest was neither in the outcomes of individual acts, nor in the outcomes of a general adoption of one or another rule. Mill's understanding of happiness was instead rooted in concern over character and self-actualization as guided by character. Accordingly, his account of the highest good carries some of the depth of an account focused on *eudaimonia* and virtue. For this reason, it may be more accurate to couch Millian doctrine in terms of "flourishing" than it is to cast it in terms of "happiness." He is, after all, the thinker who famously insisted that it was better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a perfectly content and happy swinish person.

Now, it belongs to the tradition of thought about the highest good that even those thinkers who urge that we might attain the highest good through our own efforts and under our own steam—as does Mill—do *not* think that we can know in advance what it will be like for any individual or community of persons to attain the highest good. Mill shared this understanding.[7] For Mill as for many of his venerable predecessors, we are bound to aim for the highest good even though we cannot now know in detail what will

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[6] John Stuart Mill, "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), Vol. 10, p. 8. Mill's understanding of the character of our desire for the highest good is likewise more interesting than what can be got by means of an illicit slide from talk about what is desired to talk about what is desirable. See Elijah Millgram, "Mill's Proof of the Principle of Utility," *Ethics*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (January 2000), pp. 282-310.

[7] For example, in "The Subjection of Women, Mill argues for significant social and political reforms on utilitarian grounds—as he understands these—and insists that we can have no way of knowing what the social world will be like if these changes are made. See *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), Vol. 21, pp. 254-390. Chapter Three of his *On Liberty* argues that individuality is a component of happiness, urges that it is hard to imagine a social world in which we all can engage in the activities central to the cultivation of individuality, and insists that his countrymen do not even know how properly to value such a thing, much less take it as an aim. See *On Liberty* in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), Vol. 18, pp. 260-276.

be involved in sharing in the life of the community that manages to attain the highest good. We are bound to seek a thing that is neither part of individual experience, nor even of collective human experience more generally.

How are we to aim at a thing outside our experience? Mill's work can be read as providing a kind of *via negativa* in response to this question. In essays like *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* (as well as in a wide range of other works), Mill set out to identify those aspects of the shared life of a human community that work *against* the flourishing of its members and to develop strategies to at once remove the impediments and make such positive changes as might conduce to the greatest flourishing for the greatest number of community members, allowing all the while that not all members were likely to take advantage of the opportunities made possible by social, political, and cultural reform.

Kant's Account

It is possible that in urging that we try to understand the highest good in order better to understand the foundations of morality, Mill may have been drawing from the work of my second modern, Immanuel Kant. Understanding the concept of the highest good in Kant is a complicated matter. Kant insists that happiness is an aspect of the highest good—where the desires or inclinations associated with happiness belong to what Kant calls "self-love." But the happiness at stake in the highest good for Kant is happiness in proportion to virtue, and virtuous dispositions seem instead to carry the universality at issue in Kant's understanding of the moral law. It is not obvious how the dual-aspect of

the highest good can be brought into relation, much less welded together as a totality that is the supreme object of the will of a finite, sensuous being. I will rely upon Stephen Engstrom's magisterial interpretation to bring Kant into this exploration of thought about the highest good.[8] According to Kant, finite sensuous beings are necessarily interested in their own happiness, where happiness is understood in terms of satisfaction of desires, inclinations, and needs. As the practical face of self-love, desires, inclinations, and needs are among those features of agency that serve to distinguish one sensuous rational being from every other such being. They are subjective and contingent, that is, in Anglophone Kant-speak, *conditional*. As we all know, Kant takes it that the moral law, on the other hand, is objective, i.e., universal and unconditional. Whatever else one wants to say about happiness in proportion to virtue, then, one must at least say that this end will require that virtue or morality operate in such a way as to constrain pursuit of happiness. How is this supposed to happen?

Engstrom puts the matter this way:

> Kant characterizes self-love as an ineradicable propensity of finite rational nature to claim personal happiness to be something good, an end for others as well as for oneself…. Self-love is a natural propensity both to pursue one's own happiness and, in pursuing it, to claim it to be good.[9]

[8] See Stephen Engstrom, "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 52, No. 4, (December 1992), pp. 747-780.
[9] Engstrom, "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory," p. 760.

In self-love's implicit claim that satisfying its desires, inclinations and needs is *good*, self-love offers itself up as reasonable. Claiming a thing to be good is, for Kant, necessarily claiming it to be a thing reasonably desired, rationally pursued—a candidate, at least, for universal, objective regard. Virtue, as Kant understands it, is the settled disposition—the strength—to overcome such inclinations as are contrary to morality.

As Kant knows perfectly well, virtue—the disposition to constrain one's pursuits by the demands of the moral law—comes in degrees. The proportionality aspect of the highest good recognizes this point—it asks the everyone be only as happy as they are good, and that every virtuous person enjoy such happiness as is compatible with good character. This, then, is the nature of the highest good, by Kant's lights. Notice that the highest good is, for Kant (as it was, in a way, for Mill) a totality. It is not in my power to realize this totality, even if my rational benevolence functions beautifully in my efforts to support the happiness of everyone around me to the extent that they merit happiness. As Kant argues, it is not even in the power of any arbitrarily large society of finite rational beings to attain the highest good. After all, nature need neither reward virtue nor bring ruin to the lives of the vicious. Nothing about the working of nature makes it impossible that a whole society of the mostly virtuous will not be brought low by some catastrophe like the Lisbon earthquake that so shook thinkers in Kant's day. In this sense, none of us knows what it would be like to inhabit a natural world where the best of us was spared the many kinds of unhappiness associated with infirmity, injury, loss, and the like. And none of us can make the world such that what *will* happen always and everywhere coincides with what is *supposed to* happen. Practical reason tracks the laws governing

what is supposed to happen. These are not the same as empirical laws governing what will happen.[10]

It is at this point that Kant introduces two of his three practical postulates—that God exists and that the soul is immortal. As is true for understanding Kant's account of the highest good, understanding Kant's claims about the practical postulates has been a point of considerable scholarly controversy. I will give a fairly simple reading of the postulates and their status. My aim is simply to show how Kant works to respond to the question how we are to see ourselves as oriented to the highest good even though we can have no direct experience of its attainment—it is, I think, strictly *impossible* that finite, sensuous rational beings could have any experience of the highest good in their mortal lives, by Kant's lights. Kant's moral agent is *finite and dependent*. *By definition*, such agents are not in a position to bend the cosmos to their wills—to enact universal laws, to set laws of nature, and so on. To that extent, it cannot be in the power of the kinds of beings we are to attain the highest good under our own steam—individually or collectively.

For Mill, attaining the highest good required fairly radical social, political, and cultural reform—the development of modes of shared social life that are no part of anyone's experience. While he seems committed to the position that attainment of the highest good is out of reach in practice, nothing in the view suggests that it is out of reach in principle. The problem is much worse in Kant. For Kant, attainment of the highest good possible for finite, sensuous rational being is out of reach *in principle*. In what sense, then, can it serve to orient our activities?

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[10] The contrast goes to the heart of Kant's work in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Kant's response to this question, if I understand him, rests in his work on the practical postulates. There are three practical postulates—that I am free, that God exists, and that the soul is immortal. Most contemporary Anglophone scholars of Kant love the first and do their best to ignore the other two. I confess that I have yet to encounter an interpretation of the immortality postulate that I can understand, and there is, if anything, so much philosophical support for, and work on, the postulate that each of us is free that I cannot think what to add. What will concern me is, instead, the postulate about God.

A practical postulate, for Kant, is a framing assumption necessary to making the fundamental operations of practical reason, as he understands these, intelligible. If it makes sense to understand finite, sensuous rational beings as addressees of imperatives—as beings that can know the better and choose the worse—then such beings must be operating under the implicit assumption that they have the power to choose to do as they ought to do, or to choose otherwise. To that extent, the whole account of finite sensuous rational beings as addressees of imperatives relies upon the supposition that such beings are free—a thing that cannot be proved. Their freedom is no part of their experience of themselves. It is, rather, a background condition on the efficacy of practical reason, and that practical reasoning can be efficacious is presupposed in any exercise of practical reason. I can deliberate about what to do. I cannot deliberate about whether to do it under my own steam. That sort of thing.

How does God get into this picture? Kant thinks that he has established that a totality consisting in happiness in proportion to virtue is the supreme object of practical reason—what each of us strives to realize, even though none of us can produce a world in which

happiness is in fact proportioned to virtue. Since my practical reasoning in any instance is constrained by what it is in my power to accomplish, by Kant's lights, the thing that my own reason demands as its ultimate end lies entirely beyond my power. We cannot make sense of my practical judgment and my efforts to cultivate virtue without seeing these aspects of my life as aimed at my participation in the highest good. I cannot direct myself to any good that is entirely unrealizable. To the extent that I operate to allow morality to constrain my pursuit of happiness, I implicitly treat happiness in proportion to virtue as realizable. God's agency is the agency that could realize the highest good—a thing that is in principle out of reach for the very creatures necessarily directed to its realization. The practical postulate that God exists secures the possibility of the highest good.

Kant's God is in many respects peculiar. Kant's is a strangely thin god, knowable only in the sense that its existence secures the intelligibility of various aspects of practical philosophy. It is not just that Kant aspires to a religion within the limits of reason, as Kant understands these. It is that Kant is content with a god that operates as a necessary, but strictly incomprehensible, guarantor of the intelligibility of the highest good. This is a god spun from philosophy, a god that is at best at some remove from the operations of practical reason. Even if this god created finite, sensuous, rational beings, it is not a god that directly legislates the moral law by which these beings steer their lives, which constrains their pursuit of happiness, and which sets the terms for the best that any and all of them can hope to see. It is not obvious whether or how one would worship this god. It is not clear in what sense one might associate this god with love. This god is, in theory, a

source of providence. It is not clear in what ways this god might be in actuality providential, or whether and how it might concern itself with the very beings who unknowingly rely on it in in cultivating the strength needed to hold fast to the moral law in action. For all that, Kant takes it that we need some sort of god to secure the possibility of the good we aresall bound by reason to seek.

Flourishing in Accordance with Virtue

For both Kant and Mill, the highest good is best understood as flourishing in accordance with virtue. Bothe recognize that a fully virtuous life may not be happy in any ordinary sense of that term. It could, in fact, be fairly miserable. But in pursuing my own happiness and moral development I am, for both of these otherwise very different thinkers, operating in the interest of a common good rooted in shared humanity. I take it that this is, in fact, the most plausible contemporary candidate for the highest good, and that this account of the highest good will provide us with an account of the highest good that can accomplish what such an account needs o accomplish—making sense of sacrifice, lending meaning to individual and shared lives, showing why and how acts of types that are beyond the pale morally can never be taken as means to good, and lending the sort of order to a practical orientation that captures both the commonsense psychological aspects of our lives and the philosophical demands of a satisfactory picture of human good.