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One goodness, many goodnesses, and the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory

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Abstract

Some theories of goodness are descriptively rich: they have much to say about what makes things good. Neo-Aristotelian accounts, for instance, detail the various features that make a human being, a dog, a bee good relative to facts about those forms of life. Famously, such theories of relative goodness tend to be comparatively poor: they have little or nothing to say about what makes one kind of being better than another kind. Other theories of goodness – those that take there to be absolute goodness – are comparatively rich: they offer grounds for judging some types of things better than others because they have more absolute goodness. Moorean accounts, for example, can tell us that humans and human experiences are superior to bees and blades of grass. But such theories tend to be descriptively poor: they struggle to tell us in virtue of what this is so. In this article we motivate and flesh out a view that splits the difference between accounts of *goodness as relative* and accounts of *goodness as absolute*. Such a view holds promise only if the mechanics of this kind of metaphysics of goodness can be worked out. Here we present a view on which the paradigm for absolute goodness is God and the paradigm for each kind of relative goodness is a divine idea.

Keywords: absolute goodness; relative goodness; divine ideas; Aristotelian naturalism; Moorean goodness

Introduction

Some theories of goodness have much to say about what makes things good. They are descriptively rich. Neo-Aristotelianism, for instance, details the various features that make a human being, a dog, a bee good relative to facts about those forms of life. Famously, though, such theories tend to be comparatively poor: they have little or nothing to say about what makes one kind of being better than another kind. Other theories of goodness are comparatively rich: they offer grounds for judging some types of things better than others because they have more of a single property, namely, absolute goodness. Moorean accounts, for example, can tell us that humans and human experiences are superior to bees and blades of grass. But such theories tend to be descriptively poor: they struggle to tell us in virtue of what this is so.

It would be preferable, all things considered, to have a theory of goodness that is both descriptively and comparatively rich.[1] In this article we motivate and flesh out a view that splits the difference between an account of *goodness as relative* and an account of *goodness*

as absolute. We begin by reviewing the problem of comparative poverty faced by accounts where goodness is relative – the primary example being neo-Aristotelianism – and the problem of descriptive poverty faced by accounts where goodness is absolute – the primary example being Mooreanism.

We present an account of goodness that is both descriptively and comparatively rich. It does this by countenancing *both* absolute and relative goodness. We will suggest that the paradigm for absolute goodness is God and the paradigm for each kind of relative goodness is a divine idea; so we call it the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory of goodness. The background theory of divine ideas, drawing on Islamic and Christian medieval theories of creation, supplies the metaphysical mechanics, enabling the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory of goodness to do real theoretical work.

Splitting the difference

Absolute goodness

Descriptively impoverished

To begin, why go out in search of yet another account of goodness? No realist account of goodness is perfectly good. Yet there is something especially unsatisfying about a view on which we can say nothing genuinely informative about what makes the things that are good, good. Moore's account of goodness represents a paradigm of such a view.

Moore famously argues that goodness is a simple, unanalysable property and cannot be reduced to any natural or descriptive property (Olson 2015, 1489).[2] For any analysis we try to give of the good, for example that goodness is pleasure, we can always ask with significance whether the analysans is really good. Contemporary Mooreans (and indeed other non-reductivists) think of goodness as normatively fundamental, an intrinsic property that cannot be reduced to natural or non-normative descriptive properties (Ross 1930). Conservative Mooreans take a nearly apophatic stance on the property of goodness or intrinsic value. Liberal Mooreans concede that some incomplete description of things which are valuable is possible, or that the value of non-fundamentally valuable things can be explained by descriptive relations they bear to fundamental value (Zimmerman 2001; Shafer-Landau 2003; Dancy 2004; Audi 2006, 99–100; Huemer 2006; Bradford 2015; Hurka 2020). Still, when it comes to the property of fundamental, intrinsic value or goodness, there can be no illuminating explanation for why things with that property are valuable or good. Moorean accounts of goodness are *descriptively impoverished*.

Recent critiques of Mooreanism pick up on this problem. Objectors have argued that defenders of the view have no resources to respond adequately to competing quasi-realist theories of value, like the buck-passing account. Nandi Theunissen explains, for instance, that the majority of metaethicists today believe that 'values are the kinds of thing that essentially matter to valuers' (MS, 2). The Moorean can give an account of why intrinsic values are valuable independent of valuers, and in virtue of what mind-independent feature people come to appreciate their value, so even if she accepts the truism that values matter to valuers, she cannot explain why it would be so on her theory. As a result, Moore's contemporary interlocutors 'seem to join in a common feeling that he left value in the dark' (Theunissen MS, 2). A descriptively impoverished realist theory of value seems unable to alleviate the pressure put on it by quasi-realists.

Comparatively rich

Moorean views have a marked advantage over competitor realist accounts when it comes to vindicating comparative evaluative judgements. If there is just one kind of primitive goodness, or value, then a judgement about one thing being better than another is correct

just in case it has more of that primitive property (Moore 1903; Raz 1999; Zimmerman 1999; Olson 2006; Orsi 2013; McDaniel 2014; Maguire 2016), or has it more intensely. The familiar Platonist idea, of course, is that the form of the good is paradigm goodness, and anything other than the form of the good is good to the degree it instantiates or resembles the form. Mooreans and Platonists will attach exactly the same sense to 'good' in statements about the goodness of poodles and the goodness of peonies, and as a result, inter-species comparisons like 'this poodle is better than that peony', are just as intelligible as intra-species comparisons like 'Guinness is better than Fido.' Things are good by a single property, goodness. If the property comes in degrees, individual things are better and worse depending on the degree to which they have the property. If it is simply a property a thing has or does not have, then anything with the property will be on a par, evaluatively, with everything else that has the property; and if certain things approximate the property of goodness more or less closely, then they can be compared evaluatively based on the closeness of their approximation. Mooreanism is a prime example, then, of an account of goodness that is *comparatively rich.*

Resemblance to a descriptively rich Deity is not enough

While we might think of comparative richness and descriptive poverty as mere theoretical trade-offs, this is not quite right. We cannot say *why* the best dog more resembles the form of the good or has more intrinsic value than the best dahlia without a descriptive account of that form or property any more than we can say why borogroves are more *brillig* than blue jays without any descriptive account of *brilligness* or the most *brillig* thing. That is, any claim about the comparative value of two things is liable to be stipulative. The Moorean view precludes us from answering the question 'why does the dog have more (fundamental) value than the dahlia' by adverting to any description of what the dog or dahlia is like.

   Could this problem be solved by introducing a substantive conception of the absolute good or fundamental, intrinsic value? Such a conception might be revealed to us by, say, a divinely inspired scripture. And it might be thought to enhance the Platonic or Moorean account in just the way needed. Robert Adams's theory on which God is the absolute good arguably does just this (Adams 1999).[3] Resemblance to God, or godlikeness, is the ground of goodness of any creature. Supposing a divinely inspired scripture can tell us what God is like – what features God has in virtue of which we might say the dog is good, by resemblance of God in having those features to some degree. Does such a view afford the descriptive richness ordinary Moorean and Platonic views lack?

   We hesitate to think it will afford richness in the right currency. For one thing, according to a now well-known objection to Adams's view, it's possible for a property to play the role of godlikeness and to fail to play the role of goodness, intuitively, for some creature with that property. Take the divine feature of tastiness: Adams claims that even a gourmet dinner can be good in virtue of being tasty; after all, the psalmist writes, 'Taste and see that the LORD is good' (Psalm 34:8 quoted in Adams 1999, 30). Mark Murphy famously argues:

> Suppose that I come down with a rare disease. Interestingly, the symptoms of this disease include my muscles taking on the taste and consistency of a piece of deep-fried tenderised round steak, my epidermis becoming crisp, like egg-saturated flour dipped into hot oil, and my pores oozing a whitish substance that is peppery and creamy. I begin to taste like a properly-prepared chicken fried steak. But this does not make me better, not in the least, or in any way. (Murphy 2012, 154–155)

   It is plausible to think that one's natural kind, or at least natural features one has, can partly limit which godlike features are appropriate for one to have. Without a story about

goodness as a function of one's natural kind, or as limited by some feature that plays a similar structural role, the Murphy-style counterexamples abound. For now, then, let us set aside the strategy of supplementing Mooreanism about the good with scripture about God's attributes and turn to accounts of goodness as relative.

Relative goodness

Descriptively rich

Accounts of goodness as relative tend to be descriptively rich. Goodness might be relative to ends (Finlay 2014), to species, or to life form (Foot 2001; Thompson 2008). Relative accounts of goodness afford fairly detailed explanations of what makes a thing good.

Take neo-Aristotelianism as the paradigm realist account, here. On this view, to be a good F is to be a member of some kind, F, and possess the features an F should have – those features which enable it to attain the best thing achievable by Fs (Geach 1977, 12–13; Foot 2001; Kraut 2007, 203; Thompson 2008, 80–82; Baker 2019b). Every natural kind of creature has a form of life, replete with activities like jumping and nourishing and reproducing, and with features that characteristically support and facilitate those activities. An excellent specimen of that kind of creature who performs these activities in the way they proceed in the ordinary life cycle characteristic of its kind will thrive precisely because of this. Its goodness consists in such excellence. Clearly, for any given living being the neo-Aristotelian asked about what makes the creature good (or bad) will have much to say in the way of explanation.

Suppose I'm wondering whether my dog, Guinness, is good. On the neo-Aristotelian account, it isn't as though there is some mysterious and unanalysable property, goodness, Guinness may or may not have. Instead, whether Guinness is good depends on what kind of thing Guinness is and what kind of features contribute to the well-being of things of that kind. If Guinness is a canine, then we must consider what the best activities canines engage in are, how they engage in them in canine ways, and what features facilitate such activity in the canine life course. We have, and can expand, our knowledge about canine well-being and the sorts of activities that contribute to it (Thompson 1995; Hursthouse 1999; Foot 2001, 25–37; Kraut 2007). The traits that enable them to participate in that kind of life are traits in virtue of which we already make both mundane and scientific judgements about individuals being good or bad canines, like survival, keeping the pack safe to continue the species, exhibiting pack loyalty and earning trust of fellow pack members, experiencing enjoyment of life in the pack and avoiding more suffering than is usual for canines (Hursthouse 1999, 224). The point is, if Guinness is good, there is *much to say* about what makes her so: her goodness consists in her having and doing those things that contribute to canine well-being.

The neo-Aristotelian account of goodness also plausibly makes sense of comparative judgements about the goodness of individuals of the *same* kind. Guinness is better than Fido just in case both Guinness and Fido are dogs and Guinness's canine traits and activities more nearly approximate the ideal of the canine life form (or Aristotelian canine categoricals) than Fido's.

Comparatively impoverished

Unfortunately, neo-Aristotelianism comes under fire for being *comparatively impoverished*. This criticism often takes the form of an objection that the view cannot tell us why we should aim to be good humans rather than, say, some mutant or alien (Millgram 2009; Woodcock 2018). Typically, defenders of the view stress that it is inapt or impossible to make meaningful assertions across species, such as whether a good dog is better than

a good dahlia, since judgements of primary goodness are fundamentally species relative (Foot 2001, 26–27).[4]

In general, cross-species comparative judgements get blocked on neo-Aristotelianism because of the fact that the attributive adjective 'good' does not transmit or detach. Put more technically, if x is a good F and x is a G, x is *not* thereby a good G (Geach 1956; Thomson 1997; Schroeder 2021). Suppose 'better' is an attributive adjective. Now take two claims:

(1) Rodin is a better sculptor than Rembrandt, and
(2) Rodin is an artist and Rembrandt is an artist

From (1) and (2) it does not follow that

(3) Rodin is a better artist than Rembrandt.

Neither does it follow from the facts that Guinness is a better dog than the dahlia, and that both the dahlia and dog are living beings, that Guinness is a better living being than the dahlia. Thus on neo-Aristotelianism, it is particularly difficult to attach any sense to judgements of the form 'this poodle is better than that peony' or 'better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied'.

The neo-Aristotelians' insistence on goodness as kind-relative *only*, in fact, generates some concern among interpreters of Aristotle. How does the neo-Aristotelian vindicate Aristotle's remarks about friendship between unequals in *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII (in Aristotle 1999) where he seems to assume that different kinds of beings can be inferior or superior to one another? There Aristotle relies on comparative evaluations across species to raise a puzzle. A good friend will wish the best thing for the beloved, that the greatest of goods is that the friend be a god and not a human, and so if gods and humans cannot be friends, the good friend will have to wish for his beloved to no longer be a friend to him – and to cease therefore to be a good for him. Aristotle does not resolve the problem by denying that it is better to be a god than a human being; instead he suggests that in friendship, we wish the sort of good for the friend that will allow him to remain the 'sort of being he is', and thus we do not wish him the greatest good strictly speaking.

Divine ideas imitation theory

What would it take for an account of the metaphysics of goodness to have the combined advantages of neo-Aristotelianism and Mooreanism without the drawbacks of each? One might think that the discussion above shows that there are *two* concepts – absolute and relative goodness – distinct and well described by each theory, and so it would be a fool's errand to try to give a metaphysics of goodness answering to a unified concept.[5] Is the best we can do offer two theories answering to two concepts?

We think we cannot treat goodness as bifurcating into two concepts without trying harder to give a unified theory. Our ordinary language and judgements presume that there is a single, at least focal, concept of goodness. Even someone who insists that there are two disjoint concepts owes us an error theory and loses out on theoretical elegance promised by a unified view.

We suggest a return to a certain medieval approach which countenances both absolute and relative goodness and has a metaphysical mechanics working out the relation between them, vindicating attributive and non-attributive uses of 'good'. This approach identifies absolute goodness with God and creaturely relative goodness with imitations

of distinct aspects of God. There is, on this account, one Goodness and many goodnesses, but the two are connected by more than a name.[6] The absolute good – God – has ideas of all the ways God might be imitated; and those ideas provide the paradigms for creaturely goodnesses. Hence, we call such an approach a Divine Ideas Imitation Theory of goodness.

As usual, the devil is in the details. To make a compelling case for the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory we need to show how it is both comparatively and descriptively rich, does not collapse into either neo-Aristotelianism or Mooreanism, and maintains its own internal coherence. This latter task is perhaps the most formidable for any view that purports to split the difference. It is not hard merely to assert that there is such a thing as absolute goodness and relative goodness, and that the former vindicates our inter-species judgements while the latter explains our more content-rich evaluative judgements and subsequent practices. But it is hard to work out how exactly the two sorts of goodnesses are related on a compelling and coherent metaphysical picture. The success of the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory stands or falls with the success of a theory of divine ideas. So in what follows we'll offer a more detailed explanation of how the theory delivers on all these theoretical goods.

God is the good

Begin with absolute goodness. On the medieval accounts to which we are attending (e.g. Aquinas, Scotus, Anselm), God is the Good. God is not good *by* goodness (by participating in, resembling, or instantiating, a form or property of goodness). In this respect, God is for these authors what the form of the good is for Plato: the Good. On this view, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an abstract object or universal, goodness. The real metaphysics, so to speak, is that whatever philosophical work abstract goodness would do for those who countenance abstract objects, is done instead by God.

This same God is supposed to be the First Cause of anything else that exists. This is the philosophical description of what, in theology, is called creation. Anything besides God is therefore a creature. Now one of the things about creatures is that they are good, or at least some of them are. The goodness of creatures is therefore, somehow, due to God, as effects are due to their cause.

God's ideas

But the mere introduction of God as the Good and creator of creatures in their creaturely goodness will not supply all on its own what is lacking in either neo-Aristotelianism or Mooreanism. For one thing, introducing an absolutely good being that causes all creatures' existence does not go far enough to lift neo-Aristotelianism out of its comparative poverty. Suppose that God creates a neo-Aristotelian universe in which each creature is good to the extent that it lives up to its nature. Then we have the goodness of humans, and the goodness of dogs, and the goodness of bees. And it is hard to see how these three goodnesses could be one and the same goodness. God's causing their existence does not generate a way of comparing their goodnesses; we have been saying that God is the Good, not that God is all the goodnesses. So, in a neo-Aristotelian universe, it is not obvious how God, insofar as God is absolutely good, could be properly connected to the relative goodness of all good creatures so as to make them comparable to each other, even if God were causally responsible for the existence of those creatures.

Similarly, introducing God into the Moorean picture will not, by itself, bestow descriptive richness on such an account. Imagine God creates creatures that resemble God to varying degrees in God's absolute goodness (Adams 1999). Arguably, we do not need relative goodness to make either inter- or intra-species evaluative judgements so long as we

know how closely each member of a species resembles God. Vindicating the judgements that are part and parcel of ordinary moral practice, however, ends up being more difficult than we might expect without kind-relative goodness: if God is fearsome and full of wrath, and my explosive anger makes me fearsome to my children and employees, I thereby resemble God in respect of my fearsomeness but surely, I am not thereby good. Bare-bones theistic Mooreanism does not offer the sort of rich content that makes sense of ordinary ways of thinking about goodness proper to a species.

This is where we think the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory saves the day, though we must wade into deep metaphysical waters to see how. This theory, as its name suggests, supposes that God thinks and has ideas. God, we suppose, can think about what to create, and perhaps even whether to create. In fact, God's act of creation, on the scholastic view, is much more like the causality of a carpenter than the causality of fire. Fire heats because it is hot, and given heatable things in its proximity, it just heats them. But a carpenter makes things out of wood intentionally; it is up to her which wooden thing she makes. Her carpentry, if suitably advanced, gives her the ability to make any number of things, given the appropriate materials, based on ideas of things she can make. We think it is a little bit like this with God. True: unlike the carpenter, God does not need materials to make creatures; God has power to make things *ex nihilo*, to use the traditional expression. Also unlike the human carpenter, God knows what God can make through self-knowledge. By hypothesis, anything that exists other than God, exists because of God. But when God makes other things, God does so carpenter-like, that is, by having some ideas about what to make. God doesn't go abroad and learn about what can be made by divine carpentry. Instead, for whatever can be made, God knows about it, and knows how to make it, simply by knowing all about God.

God as imitable

Divine ideas theorists offer several accounts of how God can know all about what can be made just by knowing all about God. Here we'll focus on just one of these ways, which comes from Aquinas.[7] Aquinas reasoned that in knowing all about God, God thereby knows all the ways in which God can be imitated. God's idea of a type of possible creature – that is, a type of creature of which God might make instances – just is God's idea of a way in which God can be imitated. Divine ideas of different types of possible creatures are distinguished from one another just because God can be imitated in different ways. Thus, the bee is one way of imitating God, the dog is another, and the human another.

Now there is nothing about God that is not good. If God is simple, then God is identical with goodness: God is, as we have said, the Good Itself. But even if you don't endorse simplicity, some perfect-being reasoning lets us see that there is nothing about God that is not good. Start with the thought that, all else being equal, A is better than B if everything that can be good in A is good, whereas not everything that can be good in B is good. An unsurpassably good being would be such that everything about it that can be good, is good. Moreover, all else being equal, A is better than B if everything about A *can* be good, whereas not everything about B *can* be good. Then, a perfect being would be such that everything about it *can* be good. Putting these two conclusions together, an unsurpassably good being would be such that everything about it *can* be good, and everything about it *is* good. A perfect being, simple or not, is good all through. God, simple or not, is good all through.

Now, one plausible thing to say about imitations is that they can be better and worse qua imitation of *x*. A is better than B as an imitation of *x* just in case A imitates *x* more closely than B does. For example, every two years a competition called Critical Assessment of Protein Structure Prediction (CASP) is held in which contestants predict

the shape of complex proteins using the human DNA sequence coding for the proteins. They are graded by the accuracy of their predictions as compared to the shapes found using standard experimental methods using Global Distance Test, which is meant to be an objective measure of accuracy. In 2020, the DeepMind team submitted predictions generated by an algorithm trained using deep learning and an attention algorithm, and won with a median Global Distance Test score of 92.4, boasting a score 25 points above other competitors' predictions for the most challenging protein structures (Service 2021). The best protein prediction is the one whose shape, relative to all the other predicted shapes, most closely imitates the shape of the real protein. Types of creatures are like protein predicted shapes: some are better imitations of God than others from the context class of creatures. God is the Good. So being a better imitation of God than another imitation, just is to be better – more nearly resemble the absolutely good – than that other.

Descriptive and comparative richness

Here is what the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory lets us say. On this account, we say that a particular bee is relatively good insofar as it possesses the sorts of features specified by God's idea of the bee, and a particular human is relatively good insofar as it possesses the sorts of features specified by God's idea of human. In this respect the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory retains all the descriptive richness of neo-Aristotelianism. We also say that one bee is better than another insofar as the one possesses more of the relevant apiary features which are specified by God's idea of bee, and we say the same for humans, *mutatis mutandis* – and in this respect the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory retains neo-Aristotelianism's plausible account of *intra*-species judgements as well as evaluative judgements that seem to take for granted the context class in view of which we mean that something is good in its own kind. When I am sick and oozing with a tasty gravy-like substance, I am not thereby good in the sense of being a good human, because the divine idea of human does not involve being tasty to eat.

But we can *also* say that a human is better than a bee, unlike bare-bones theistic Aristotelianism. For God's idea of the human and God's idea of the bee are good in the sense that both approximate absolute goodness by a certain imitation of it. And so if the divine idea of the human more closely imitates God than the divine idea of the bee, we may say that it is better for me to be a human than a bee since the divine idea of the human is better than the divine idea of the bee.

We now have a metaphysical picture of inter-species goodness that can explain what it is about humans that can vindicate the intuition that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, or that a human child is more valuable than a young bee. I may say with confidence that my daughter's kind of goodness partakes in absolute goodness more than the bee's kind of goodness ever could.[8] There remain thorny issues in moral epistemology here, which we discuss in the next section. For now, suffice it to say that the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory has the comparative richness of Mooreanism along with the descriptive richness of neo-Aristotelianism.

Challenges

Extraordinary specimens

A theory countenancing both absolute and relative goodness using the metaphysics of divine ideas invites its own set of challenges. We aim to address what we take to be the most obvious of these. The first is the problem of *extraordinary specimens*, such as Reepicheep and the other Talking Beasts of Narnia, or Balaam's unnamed ass in the Bible. Balaam, a prophet, travels on a she-ass to deliver a divine curse to Israel and in

doing so angers God. God sends an angel to block Balaam's way. His ass sees the angel, but he doesn't, and beats the ass. Suddenly, the ass speaks to Balaam: 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' (Numbers 22:28 ESV). The most natural way to read this supernatural tale is that Balaam's ass really is an ass and really had the ability to talk, and the ass is extraordinary not just because she could talk but because *she is an ass who could talk.*

An objection could then be formulated in the following way: the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory predicts that an ass resembles God as well it can, and is therefore as good as it can be, precisely by living a fully actualized asinine life. Balaam's ass, insofar as she can talk, exhibits a good-making feature that is not among asinine excellences. But it certainly seems that being able to talk makes her better than her merely asinine fellows, all else being equal. And it even seems that being able to talk makes her better even than Balaam himself: after all, both can talk, but the ass has a robust sense of justice while Balaam is unjust, arrogant, and obstinate.

The gist of the objection generalizes to any specimen of a kind of creature which is extraordinary for its kind, especially when that in virtue of which it is extraordinary seems to make it more God-like than its fellow co-specimens.[9] Therefore extraordinary specimens give some reason to think that the characteristic excellences of kinds are neither the cap on intra-species relative goodness, nor the grounds of inter-species absolute goodness, as our theory predicts.

There are several ways to respond to the problem of extraordinary specimens. In offering three responses we remain neutral about what's going on in any particular instance of extraordinariness, but offer all three as theoretical moves to make within the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory.

The first is the *trans-species* response. Perhaps Balaam's ass underwent a change of species when she acquired the ability to speak. Then the question for her is not whether in speaking she is being a good ass, but whether she is being a good F, where F is her new species. Suppose she changes from the species ass to the species talking ass, where the excellences characteristic of the talking asses are simply the ability to talk plus all the excellences of asses that are compatible with the ability to talk. On our scholastic view of God, God speaks. Plausibly, then, talking asses imitate God more closely than asses and are therefore better. So by gaining the ability to talk, Balaam's ass is neither a good nor a bad ass, because she has stopped being an ass; instead she's a talking ass, and from the biblical story she seems to be a very good talking ass with a robust sense of justice. Suppose instead that she changes from the species ass to the species human. Then by gaining the ability to talk, she is neither a good or bad ass, but she is rather badly off as a human, since her body prevents her from realizing so many of the excellences characteristic of human nature (Baker 2019a). Generalizing, the trans-species response says that cases of extraordinary specimens are really cases of trans-speciesism, where one thing changes its species. There cannot be a problem of extraordinary specimens if there aren't any.

The second sort of response keeps Balaam's ass merely an ass. This *mere feature* response distinguishes good (or bad) features from good-making (or bad-making) features. Something might be a good feature (like talking), because God has it, but not make any particular talker better than other members of its kind, because it is not a divine feature that is included in God's idea of that creature. This is what we could say about Balaam's ass: by gaining the ability to talk she does not become a better ass than her co-specimens, or become a better human or person than Balaam, or become a good or bad specimen of any other kind. She is just as good an ass as she was before she gained the ability to talk. Nevertheless, the ability to talk really is good, and *in this case* it really was good for Balaam's ass that she talked – since it prevented further abuse – even if she might have

prevented further abuse in some species-characteristic way, such as ass-kicking. But it's not at all clear that the ability to talk would be good for her over the course of her whole life, given the great frustration involved in belonging fully neither to the donkey nor to the human worlds. More generally, the mere feature response says that a good feature is a good-making feature of a thing just in case it actualizes or promotes the actualization of the excellences characteristic of the thing's species. But a good feature could in fact be bad overall for the thing which has it, or it could be neither good nor bad for the thing which has it.[10] Thus, distinguishing good from good-making features in this way would neutralize the concerns either that an extraordinary F could be an excellent thing without also being an excellent F, or that an excellent F could be a better thing than an excellent G, where G is a species corresponding to a divine idea which is a better imitation of God than the divine idea corresponding to the species F.

The third sort of response is the *species latitude* response. Here we want to say that extraordinary specimens may in fact *reveal* characteristic excellences of a species that are simply rarely exemplified. Saints and other exemplary human beings are extraordinary, but plausibly their extraordinariness can be explained as a specially developed human excellence. The talking beasts of Narnia may not be different species from their non-talking counterparts (in the era of Prince Caspian) but rather exhibit what those non-talking counterparts could be if they had not been subjected to the Telmarine humans. This response falls into line with the contemporary neo-Aristotelian view that something statistically extraordinary may be characteristic of a kind. It may be abnormal, statistically, for any one acorn to develop into an oak tree, yet oak tree development is a characteristic excellence of an acorn. Similarly, if an octopus engages in a social relationship with another creature and thrives, this might just reveal that octopi are not, as we thought, solitary creatures but just picky about their companions.

Divine ideas and moral epistemology

The other challenge for the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory of goodness is a worry about the moral epistemology to follow. We have remained virtually silent about the nature of God or anything substantive about creation which would tell us how to decide whether any of the inter-species judgements we make are indeed correct, still less how to settle disputes about contested inter-species judgements. In this respect, the theory as described here might not have a leg up on Moorean accounts of goodness after all.

In reply, the moral epistemological challenge is more about completeness of the theory as developed here than about comparative richness. Moorean theories of absolute goodness have little to nothing to say about exemplars of absolute goodness or fundamental intrinsic value, and this comes from a commitment that nothing or nearly nothing meaningful *can be said*.[11] That is very different from the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory.

The divine ideas framework emerges in a medieval philosophical and theological tradition which, far from being staunchly committed to the claim that we can say nothing about God, the absolute good, maintains that much can be said about God. Divine revelation provides one avenue for learning about God, philosophical theology another, reflection on creation, biology, and metaphysics itself yet another. The defender of Divine Ideas Imitation Theory can pick from among various moral epistemologies on offer to supply both a descriptively rich account of what the absolute good is like and a view of how we acquire knowledge of the good.

The Divine Ideas Imitation Theory renders itself vulnerable to the theology paired with it for better or for worse. In some cases, that theology will provide the basis for substantive judgements about the goodness of one species as compared to another, of some capacities as issuing in activities that are 'more divine' than the activities proper to others. A

bad theology will spoil substantive inter-species judgements. But a good theology will furnish the Divine Ideas Imitation Theorist with much more to say about the goodness of various kinds. And it may be that we learn, through good theology, that our extant categories for judging goodness have wrongly sidelined aspects actually quite central to God (e.g. love, holiness) in favour of aspects less central to God (e.g. omnirationality). Or, suppose we adopt a moral epistemology according to which we learn about God when we engage with God's created order in a certain mode – with openness, wonder, humility. This could both justify some subset of our evaluative judgements and explain away objectionable inter-species comparisons we have made historically. Such an epistemology might offer debunking-style arguments for inter-species evaluative judgements that reflect arrogance and cognitive bias towards our own species, or people like us, or an impulsive desire for mastery over nature rather than appreciation of it. In any case, we can take the objection to shed light on a feature, rather than a bug, of the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory, namely that it calls for deeper, open-minded inquiry into the nature of the absolutely good being.

Conclusion

Our challenge has been to deliver a theory of the good which is both descriptively and comparatively rich. Divine Ideas Imitation Theory gets the best of theories that are comparatively rich by identifying the Good with a God who has ideas we can describe. Judgements, such as that dogs are better than dahlias, or that people are better than bees, are, if correct, correct because the divine idea of the dog is a closer imitation of God than the divine idea of the dahlia, and so on. It gets the best of theories that are descriptively rich by yielding thick accounts of what it is to be good, relative to a kind. Judgements, such as that Guinness is a better dog than Fido, are correct, if they are correct, because Guinness has more of the relevant features specified by the divine idea of the dog than Fido has.

The Divine Ideas Imitation Theory manages to harmonize the descriptively and comparatively rich notes of Moorean and neo-Aristotelian theories by identifying divine ideas of types of creatures with ideas of ways in which God can be imitated. Every concrete particular, therefore, imitates God in some way. But, importantly, concrete particulars come in kinds; so the godlikeness of any particular thing is, on the theory, to be mediated by the kind of thing to which it belongs. Thus, the theory explains why a human being who attempts to do all and only things characteristic of apiary excellence fails to be a good bee and fails to be a good human. It also explains why, if a human really is better than a bee, we are correct to be ready to squash even the best bee in order to save the life of even the worst human.

We have said almost nothing about God or about the Divine Ideas Imitation Theory of Goodness to settle the moral epistemology adjacent to this metaphysics of goodness. How do we know when our inter-species judgements are correct, and how do we settle disputes about contested inter-species judgements? In this respect the theory on offer in this article does not add to the comparative richness of many Moorean theories; it's just equally rich. But if we are right, the best strategy is to diversify, rather than to bank all one's theoretical assets in descriptive or comparative judgements alone.

Notes

1. While in this article we focus exclusively on realist theories of goodness, note that the constructivists have been in search for a theory that performs well on both these metrics. And in a recent article, Mankowitz

(2023) advances an argument from linguistic data that supports goodness being ambiguous between its relative and absolute uses; insofar as we want our theory to vindicate the linguistic data, then it would do well to offer an explanation of why uses of good *simpliciter* and relative goodness both seem intelligible. A prime example of a constructivist attempt to countenance both absolute goodness and goodness for a person (a species of relative goodness) can be seen in Korsgaard (2013).

2. Moore's Unanalysability Thesis ends up being rejected by certain of his followers, such as Broad and Ewing, in favour of a reductive account of goodness as whatever is the fitting object of a pro-attitude. And, of course, this led to a major split in ethics between those who adopted Moore's non-reductivism and those who preferred reductive fitting attitudes accounts. For discussion of the roots of Unanalysability in Moore and how the claim has been taken up, see Olson (2015) and Hurka (2021). See also Almotahari and Hosein (2015, n. 6).

3. Without an intuitionist moral epistemology like Moore's, this does seem like the most promising fix for the Platonist.

4. Although see Baker (2017) for an interpretation on which Aristotle does countenance absolute goodness and not just attributive, or relative, goodness.

5. But as we mentioned above, Mankowitz's (2023) argument suggests that linguistic data supports ambiguity in the term 'good' and the importance of an absolute as well as a relative meaning.

6. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.6.4 (in Aquinas 1947).

7. *Summa Theologiae* Ia.15.2 (in Aquinas 1947). Two additional divine ideas theories include Anselm's, which holds that God has creaturely ideas by knowing all about how God could be understood in a partial or limited way (*Monologion* 31); and Duns Scotus's (2008), which holds that God has creaturely ideas by knowing all about distinct aspects of God's own nature (*Reportatio* I-A.36.1.1-2.77). These two views accord with Aquinas's imitation theory, because they both concede that God's creaturely ideas really do imitate God. Aquinas's theory is distinctive, however, inasmuch as it takes God's creaturely ideas to be nothing but ideas of how God can be imitated.

Aquinas, Scotus, and Anselm were Christians, but the divine ideas theory itself is not peculiar to Christianity. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (first century BC) is the most famous early proponent of a divine ideas theory, and the Islamic philosopher al Farabi (ninth century AD) adopted neo-Platonic version of a divine ideas theory (Fakhry 1965, 476). It is important to emphasize here, however, that there is nothing particularly *religious* about a theory of divine ideas. We know little about the religious views of middle Platonists such as Eudorus of Alexandria, Antiochus of Ascalon, and Marcus Terentius Varro, but they were all divine ideas theorists and Philo himself almost certainly was influenced by one or more of these second-century BC philosophers (Dillon 2019, 39–45).

8. In an earlier version of this article we were tempted to say that the comparative values of the bee and human would straight away justify killing the bee to save a human. Some readers may think vindicating such reasons for action directly via comparative values is a major feature of the view. But we want to leave open the possibility that one's reasons for action can be affected – whether strengthened or attenuated or undercut – by factors other than the comparative value of some bee and some human. For instance, if it belongs to the divine idea of human that humans imitate God by being caretakers of other creatures on the earth, then perhaps humans have reasons to avoid killing bees except in cases where there are no other options for self-defence (or the saving of one's child). But the difference in value alone will not explain what the reason is a reason to do; we need to fill in the substantive account of the standard of human goodness as well, such that we know how humans ought to treat creatures whose natures are ideas of God that less closely approximate God.

9. Murphy raises this sort of problem as an objection against Foot's and Thompson's Aristotelian view of natural defect. His example of an extraordinary specimen, Franklin the turtle, 'is able to pick up the pace' and so defies the Aristotelian categorical 'the turtle is a slow walker' (Franklin 2012, 51).

10. Here we think of Elizabeth Barnes's distinction between local and global harms and benefits; a feature can be a local harm while making a good difference to one's life overall (Barnes 2009).

11. Though see Zagzebski (2004).

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