CHAPTER 1

Good and Bad in Aristotle

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1. Aristotle has a theory of being in general and a parallel theory of goodness. The question I want to try to answer is, does he have such a theory of badness? Is there, to put it this way, anything positive to be included under the rubric, "Aristotle's theory of the bad," that isn't simply a reflection of his theory of the good? Let's start, then, with being and the good. Here is the famous text linking the two:

> Good is said of things in as many ways as being. For it is said of things in the category of what-it-is (for example, the god and the understanding), in that of quality (the virtues), in that of quantity (the moderate amount), in that of relation (the useful), in that of time (the opportune moment), in that of place (a livable dwelling), and so on. Thus it is clear that it will not be some common universal – that is, a "one." For then it would not be said of things in all the categories but only in one. (*NE* I 6 1096^{a}23–29)

One idea in this text, as we know, is that beings in categories other than that of what-it-is, or substance (*ousia*) depend for their being or existence on things in the latter category. Thus to be a quality is to be a qualification of a substance, and for a quality to exist is for a substance to exist that has it. That, so to speak, is the unifying idea, the one that makes possible a unified theory of being – a science of being qua being – despite the fact that being is said in as many different ways as there are categories (*Met.* V 2).

2. The good in the category of substance is *ho theos kai ho nous*, where the *kai* is pretty certainly epexegetic or explanatory – the god, *that is*, the understanding. For Aristotle's primary god, as we learn in *Metaphysics* XII 9, is an understanding that, as a *noêsis noêseôs noêsis*, has itself as its sole focus (1074^{b}34–35).[1] It is in XII 10, however, that we learn what

[1] Aristotle recognizes the existence of a number of different divine beings or gods, among which he distinguishes a primary god, referred to as *ho theos* ("the god"), which is the one under discussion here.

is especially relevant to our topic, which is that there is no bad in the category of substance. Here is the argument:

> Also, for the other thinkers there must be some contrary to theoretical wisdom and the most estimable science; but not for us. For nothing is contrary to the primary thing, since all contrary things have matter, and such things are potential. The contrary state, ignorance, is directed toward the contrary, but to the primary thing nothing is contrary.[2] (1075^{b}20–24)

The primary thing referred to is the primary god, which is why theoretical wisdom, as the science of this god, who is the most estimable being, is the most estimable science (*Met.* I 2 983^{a}4–11),[3] and why, since this god has no contrary, it has none. For sciences get their esteem and their uniqueness from that of their subject matter (VI 1 1026^{a}21–22).

The reason in turn why the primary god has no contrary is that all contrary things have matter, whereas this god has no matter, since he is pure actuality; whereas matter is potentiality (*Met.* VIII 6 1045^{a}23–24). And the reason that all contrary things have matter is in a nutshell this: contraries differ maximally in the same genus (X 4 1055^{a}27–28), and a genus is in relevant ways like matter (VII 12 1038^{a}6–8). Thus if the primary thing has a contrary, it must have matter. But matter, to repeat, is potentiality not actuality, and what is active is prior to what is potential (XII 6 1071^{b}17–22). Therefore the primary thing cannot both be primary and have a contrary.

Another way to tell this story is at once simpler and more revelatory. Contraries are things that substantial underlying subjects can change from and to (*Met.* XI 11 1067^{b}12–1068^{a}7, XII 1 1069^{b}3–5). Good and bad are contraries. Therefore, there must be a substantial subject S that can change from good to bad, and vice versa. But if good is itself a substance, as the primary god is supposed to be, obviously it cannot be S, since, as essentially good, it cannot change from good to bad. For parallel reason the bad cannot be S either. So either good and bad are not contraries or *neither can be the primary thing*.

Let's focus on the italicized disjunct. S is neither essentially good nor essentially bad. Hence, as we might put it, the world in which S exists is somehow neutral with respect to badness and goodness. Why? Well, the primary thing is, in Aristotle's view, the primary god. And his primacy is in

[2] On the final sentence, see *Met.* IX 10 1052^{a}1–4.

[3] The core sense of *timios* ("estimable") is captured in the remark that ordinary people "commonly say of those they find especially estimable and especially love that they 'come first' " (*Cat.* 12 14^{b}5–7). Something is thus objectively *timios* when – like starting-points and causes – it "comes first by nature" (14^{b}3–5).

part due to his being the primary cause and starting-point – the ultimate immovable or unmoved mover of everything (*Met.* XII 7). So S must also have such a status. But if that is so, the goodness or badness of things cannot stem ultimately from S. Instead, it must stem from our pair of contraries – contraries that, as derivative from or dependent on S, are not S itself. But if that is so, then, since contraries are in conflict with one another, and tend to destroy each other (XI 10 $1066^{b}28$–31), the goodness or badness of the world would depend on which of the pair, good and bad, predominated, and not on S itself.

To heighten the drama, let S be the bad, rather than, as Aristotle assumes, the good. Then it would seem that the world in which S exists as primary cause and starting-point would be in some sense a bad world. Anyway, it would be a world, it seems, in which we could not just assume, as Aristotle does, that nature does nothing pointlessly or in vain, or that things arranged in accord with nature are in the best condition (e.g., *NE* I 9 $1099^{b}21$–22).

3. Let us come at the topic in another way. The primary god is not just the god par excellence, he is also the being par excellence:

> What is intrinsically intelligible is the one column [of opposites],[4] and in this substance is primary, and in *this* the simple one and an activity – oneness and simplicity are not the same, since unity signifies a measure, whereas simplicity signifies that the thing itself is a certain way.[5] But the noble, too, and what is choiceworthy because of itself are in the same column, and what is primary is always best or analogous to the best. (*Met.* XII 7 $1072^{a}30$–$^{b}1$)

That, to re-repeat, is why theology is the primary science – the science of being qua being (*Met.* VI 1 $1026^{a}18$–32). Suppose, then, that there was a bad in the same category, what sort of substantial being could it be? No doubt, you see the answer. It would have to be the contrary of being par

[4] The two columns of opposites are columns of starting-points, which, as such, are objects of understanding (*NE* VI 6 $1141^{a}7$–8). One of them, however, because it consists of lacks (*Met.* XI 9 $1066^{a}14$–16), is not intrinsically intelligible (IX 2 $1046^{b}10$–12).

[5] *Met.* XII 6 $1071^{b}20$–22 recognizes the existence of a number of substances that are activities, among which it is here claimed the simple one is primary. The basis for the claim is not specified, but one way to cash it out is in terms of the sort of movement that the understanding of it and desire for it causes: "It is best of all for everything to attain the ultimate end, or if not that, it is always better the closer it is to the best [= the real good]. And this is why the earth does not move at all, whereas the heavenly bodies close to it have few movements, since they do not reach the final end, but come as close to attaining it as their share of the most divine starting-point permits. The primary heaven, however, attains it immediately by means of a single movement. Those intermediate between the primary heaven and the last one, by contrast, do attain it, but by means of several movements" (*Cael.* II 12 $292^{b}17$–25).

excellence, which is, of course, *non-being* par excellence – absolute non-being. And that, in fact, is what another Aristotelian doctrine requires. For what it tells us is that for every pair of contraries F and G, either F is the lack of G or G is the lack of F: "it is evident that one of the contraries is said of things as a lack" (X 4 $1055^{b}26$–27). So either the good (the primary god) would have to be the lack of the bad, or the bad would have to be the lack of the good. So if the good is indeed being par excellence, then the bad would have to be its lack. And that would seem to be what had no being whatsoever.[6]

(It is perhaps worth retiring to the relative safety of a parenthesis to notice why we can't turn the tables on Aristotle and identify the good with non-being and the bad with its lack. For suppose we said with the Rabbi that best of all is not to be, what could Aristotle possibly say in reply? Well, what he would say is: "Best of all for whom?" For on his view, there is no absolute intrinsic good – meaning by that a good that is not a good for anyone. For even *the* good is good for someone, namely, for the god whose good it is and he is – for as *noêsis noêseôs noêsis*, he is at once the good and one for whom it is a good. This, I take it, is the meaning of the laconic sentence in *DA* III 7, which says, "What is unrelated to action too, namely, the true and the false, is in the same genus as the good and the bad, but they differ in that the first is unconditional, the second relative to someone (*tini*)" ($431^{b}10$–11). And *the* good is good *for us* too, naturally, which is why: "We should not, however, in accord with the makers of proverbs, 'think human things, since you are human' or 'think mortal things, since you are mortal,' but, rather, we should as far as possible immortalize, and do everything to live in accord with the element in us that is most excellent" (*NE* X 7 $1177^{b}31$–34).)

A different argument for the same conclusion is given in *Metaphysics* IX 9:

> [1] And it is necessary in the case of the bad things, too, for the end and the activity to be worse than the capacity. For the same thing is capable of both contraries. It is clear, therefore, that the bad does not exist beyond the things. For the bad is posterior in nature to the capacity. [2] Neither, therefore, in the things that there are from the start nor in the eternal things is there anything bad or in error or corrupted (for corruption is also something bad). ($1051^{a}15$–21)

[6] Cf. "The deviation from the best and most divine constitution must of necessity be the worst … So tyranny, because it is the worst, is furthest removed from being a constitution" (*Pol.* IV 3 $1289^{a}39$–$^{b}3$). See Chapter 4.

In [1], "the bad things" are bad capacities, which, like excellent ones, make their possessor capable of A *and capable of the contrary of A*. So the activation is worse than the capacity, since unlike the capacity, it is always bad. The bad does not lie in the bad capacity, then, but in the things that result when it is activated, and so is not something beyond these things. It follows that there is no eternal starting-point of the bad as there is for the good (as at XII 10 $1075^{b}6$–7). [2] *Metaphysics* IX 8 argues that activity is prior to potentiality in account, time, and substance (or nature) – meaning not that every potentiality or capacity is posterior in these ways to the activation or activity of it, but rather that some activities are prior to any potentialities. In particular, then, the things that are there from the start (the sublunary elements) and the eternal things (the heaven and its contents and the prime mover), which are all actual, are prior to the bad capacities, and so to the bad itself, which, as the activation of those capacities, is posterior to them. Notice that a parallel argument does not work so readily in the case of the good. For if some activities must be prior to any capacities, then it is arguably the good ones, not the bad ones, that can play this role. For, as we saw, one member of a pair of contraries is always the lack of the other. But "it is possible to err in many ways, for the bad belongs to what is without a limit, as the Pythagoreans portrayed it, and the good to what is definite), whereas there is only one way to be correct" (*NE* II 6 $1106^{b}28$–31). It seems, then, that the bad must be defined as the lack of the good not the other way around. As a result, the good is prior in definition to the bad, giving it the ontological edge it needs.

4. Yet another route through the same territory also pays dividends. Aristotle's good in the category of substance is a living being (*Met*. XII 7 $1072^{b}26$–30), who like all such beings has his activity teleologically explained by the good:

> For it is the most natural function in those living things that are complete and not disabled or spontaneously generated, to produce another like itself – an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant – in order that they may partake in the eternal and divine insofar as they can. For all desire that, and it is for the sake of it that they do whatever they do by nature. (*DA* II 4 $415^{a}26$–$^{b}2$)

Thus in contemplating himself, the primary god achieves the good and is happy (*Met*. XII 9 $1074^{b}33$–35). By parity of reasoning, it seems, if there were a bad in the category of substance, it would have to be a living being who contemplated himself. Without prejudice, call him "Satan." The

result is that some sort of Manichaeism would be true, since there would be, as coeval substances, the primary god (God) and Satan. For, special creationist doctrines aside, how could one possibly come from the other?

Now Milton's Satan famously states, "evil be thou my good" (*Paradise Lost* IV.110). And he knows that this means that he will be driven out from the bliss of Paradise and condemned to utter woe in the abhorred deep of Hell (II.86–87), and that God is not more almighty to resist his might than wise to frustrate all his plots and wiles (192–93). The question is, how are we to make sense of Satan's famous slogan – his maxim, so to speak? Keeping it simple, we have to say that he prefers freedom to what he thinks of as slavery to God's will and commandments: "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (I.263), he says. It is a strikingly Kantian idea – I mean, that freedom of some sort is better than happiness. It introduces a kind of value – moral value, as Kant thinks of it – that seems entirely distinct from eudaimonistic value, which is the only sort, in the end, that Aristotle has room for. That is why "the political philosopher … is the architectonic craftsman of the end to which we look in calling each thing unconditionally bad or good" (*NE* VII 11 $1152^{b}1$–3).

In Aristotle's scheme of things, then, this idea seems to be an inaccessible one, since in his eudaimonistic world Satan could aim at freedom only if he thought that true happiness – the starting-point of all practical thought – lay therein. And he could do that only if he did not have the virtues of character but rather the corresponding vices, since "vice is ruinous of the starting-point" (*NE* VI 5 $1140^{b}19$–20), whereas "virtue teaches correct belief" about it (VII 8 $1151^{a}19$).

5. But why exactly is that? Why must the vicious person's conception of happiness be incorrect? To feel the pressure of the question at its fullest, it is useful to focus on self-control and the lack of it, because it is easy to see what from the eudaimonistic point of view is wrong with them, namely, that each involves the frustration of some of the agent's desires.

The *enkratês* or self-controlled person, to start with him, satisfies his virtue-allied rational wish (*boulêsis*) at the cost of frustrating his appetites, while the person who lacks self-control – the *akratês* – satisfies his appetites at the cost of frustrating his rational wish. The vicious person, however, is not like that. Like the virtuous one, apparently, his appetites – though vicious – are in accord with his wish, since his wish is for a happiness whose conception they have shaped and determined. This is part of the reason why "lack of self-control and vice are wholly different in kind, since

vice escapes its possessor's notice, whereas lack of self-control does not escape it" (*NE* VII 8 1150^{b}35–36). On the inside, then, vice and virtue seem to be on a par, since in each wish and appetite seem to be in total harmony. In what way, then, is the vicious person worse off than the virtuous one?

What Aristotle has to say on this question is odd enough to merit extensive quotation:

> Besides, depraved people seek others with whom to spend their days but flee from themselves, since when they are by themselves they remember many repellent things and expect others like them in the future, whereas when they are with others they forget these. And since they have nothing lovable, they feel none of the things that are fitted to friendship toward themselves. Neither, then, do people like this enjoy or suffer together with themselves. For their soul is torn by faction, and one element in it, because of its depravity, suffers at being held back from certain things, whereas the other is pleased, and so one pulls this way and the other that, as if tearing him asunder. And even if it is not possible to be pained and pleased at the same time, still after a bit he is pained that he was pleased and he wishes that these things had not become pleasant to him. For base people are full of regret. (*NE* IX 4 1166^{b}13–25)

It is as if, in writing this, he had confused the vicious person with the self-controlled one. I mean, why would the vicious person find the vicious things he had done repellent? Why would he not love himself for doing them? Why would he be internally torn by faction? Why would he be full of regret? Why, for that matter, could he not be friends with other vicious people like himself?

It is important to remember at this juncture that a vicious person need not be an out-and-out psychopath or sociopath; apparently, he may just be someone who thinks, for example, that the life of appetitive indulgence is the best one, or the life of political or military honor or glory (*NE* I 5). Or perhaps a better way to say this is that there are degrees of viciousness and along with them degrees of virtue, or degrees of closeness to it.[7] We see this clearly in the *Politics*. For there, as in the *Ethics*, while there is only one best political constitution (*politeia*), since there is only one (an aristocracy of virtue) in which the virtues of a good human being and those of a good citizen coincide (*Pol.* IV 7 1293^{b}3–6), there are other correct ones (polity and kingship), and even in the most incorrect ones, there is at least a vestige of virtue to be found: "The various forms of friendship and justice are found to a small extent even in tyrannies, then, whereas in democracies

[7] As compellingly argued in Kontos 2014.

they are found to a greater extent, since in the case of those who are equal, the things they have in common are many" (*NE* VIII 11 1161^{b}8–10).[8]

The best way to explain this variation in virtue across political constitutions is by reflecting on three facts: First, it is "by pursuing happiness in different ways and by different means" that "each group of people produces different ways of life and different constitutions" (*Pol.* VII 8 1328^{a}41–^{b}2). Second, "people seem (which is not unreasonable) to get their suppositions about the good – that is, happiness – from their lives. For ordinary people, the most vulgar ones, suppose it to be pleasure … Sophisticated people, on the other hand, and doers of action, deliberately choose honor, since it is pretty much the end of the political life … The third life is the contemplative one" (*NE* I 1095^{b}14–1096^{a}4). Third, "it is evident that a city is among the things that exist by nature, that a human is by nature a political animal, and that anyone who is without a city, not by luck but by nature, is either a wretch or else better than human, and, like the one Homer condemns, he is 'clanless, lawless, and homeless.' For someone with such a nature has at the same time an appetite for war, like an isolated piece in a game of checkers." (*Pol.* I 2 1253^{a}1–7) Thus if we think that happiness consists in gratifying our appetites, we will, because "the impulse toward this sort of community exists by nature in everyone" (*Pol.* I 2 1253^{a}29–30), be led eventually to discover the idea of a *polis* – a city governed by a constitution and laws – and one moreover whose constitution and laws further our happiness as we (mistakenly in this case) conceive it.

To take the next step we need to reflect on the fact that the values embodied in these laws, and so the behavior encouraged as virtuous by them, is in the first instance behavior that is beneficial *to others*: "The greatest virtues must be those that are most useful to others, and because of this, just people and courageous ones are honored most of all; for courage is useful to others in war, justice both in war and peace" (*Rh.* I 9 1366^{b}3–7). To the extent that habituation and education, which should ideally be both public and suited to the constitution (*NE* X 9 1180^{a}29–30), are successful in inculcating these virtues, to that extent the community should enjoy the harmony of shared ways of life and ends. What, then, is wrong with such a community? Well, one thing that might be wrong with it is this: the virtues that other people want an individual to have might not be ones it is good for him (and to him) to have. Good for others, yes; good for

[8] A remark to be properly brought into contact with the following one: "But we say that these constitutions are wholly in error, and that it is not correct to speak of one kind of oligarchy as better than another, but as less bad" (*Pol.* IV 2 1289^{b}10–11).

him (and to him), no. So we will want to be sure that the appetites that get gratified in this community (on the assumption that appetite gratification is what happiness consists in) include the individual's own. Let's suppose they are. *Now* is there anything wrong with the community – any grounds for thinking that it is in some way ethically bad?

One response is that there is nothing wrong with it. Other communities may with equal success have different goals and inculcate different virtues (or different versions of the same virtues) to further them and their achievement by those who have them, but that's the end of the story. Another response is that even if gratifying his appetites is happiness to and for an agent, psychological facts about him will make that no better than a temporary and unstable situation. Eventually, his other non-appetitive desires and wishes – his love for honor, for example, or to understand himself and his world – will seep through, undercutting his happiness, unseating his contentment with his lot. (That's part of Plato's response to Glaucon's challenge.) Another problem may be with the surrounding world, which makes appetitive happiness, like the mass consumerism of so-called liberal democracies, an untenable long-term goal: the universe may be intolerant of such communities, especially if they proliferate. We might respond that an individual need not care about a future that does not include him. If so, we will have to restrict our notion of how long the long-term needs to be if it is to satisfy the constraints that our psychologies impose on what our happiness can credibly be. But it is just as likely that facts about our psychologies may do quite a bit of that work for us, since many of the ends, goals, and projects that are internal to them seem to require a future much longer than any individual's own – that of his children and grandchildren, for example, or that is required to realize the projects that have given his life its meaning.[9] Authors want their books to be read, and to go on being read.

When Aristotle discusses the self-sufficiency that he takes to be a mark of happiness he acknowledges this:

> By "self-sufficient," however, we mean not self-sufficient for someone who is alone, living a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and friends and fellow citizens generally, since a human being is by nature political. Of these, some defining mark must be found, since, if we extend the list to ancestors and descendants and to friends' friends, it will go on without limit. But we must investigate this on another occasion. In any case, we posit that what is self-sufficient is what, on its own, makes a life choiceworthy and lacking in nothing, and this, we think, is what happiness is like. (*NE* I 7 $1097^{b}8$–16)

[9] Two excellent recent explorations of this idea are Lear 2006 and Scheffler 2013.

His thought trails off into a promissory note, as perhaps ours must do. But ours must surely also confront the fact that what is true now may not be true when, in the distant future, the sun's imminent supernova, or the universe's imminent collapse into a black hole, puts an absolute end to at any rate our *long* term, and with it to our hopes – the afterlife aside.

As a next step, then, let's correct for both potentially destabilizing factors, and require that our community be one in which stable, long-term happiness be available to all those with psychologies reasonably like ours in the world as it is, or can be made to be by feasible technologies. There would be good reason to think that the virtues inculcated by the laws of this community are the genuine human virtues, and that the end they promote is real happiness. Relative to it, in consequence, we could define other states of character as genuine vices, genuine ethical badness, or evil. What is unclear – a point to which we shall return – is that it could be any longer guaranteed to be a community that took appetite satisfaction to constitute happiness.

That point aside, the community we have imagined does allow us to talk about vice and evil in a meaningful way that is quite obviously Aristotelian *in spirit.* For what it makes apparent is that vice must be a sort of failure of an individual to be virtuous, whether on the part of our imagined society which, through neglect or whatever, has failed to make him so, or on his own, perhaps because of natural defects. Again, Aristotle is aware of this:

> But surely people become good or excellent because of three things. These three are nature, habit, and reason. For one must be born, first of all, a human being, and not one of the other animals. Similarly, one's body and soul must be of a certain quality. But in the case of some qualities, being born with them is of no benefit, because habits make them change. For some qualities, because of their nature, play a double game, going toward the worse or toward the better because of one's habits. But, whereas the other animals mostly live by nature alone, while to a small extent some also do so by habit, the human being lives by reason as well. For the human being alone has reason. So these must harmonize with each other. For people do many actions contrary to their habits and their nature because of reason, if they are persuaded that some other way is better. (*Pol.* VII 13 $1332^{a}39$–$^{b}8$)

But whereas Aristotle himself thinks of nature in general as already good, so that things in accord with it inherit or can inherit their goodness from it, we are thinking of nature simply as setting defeasible limits to the realization of goodness in the shape of a humanly happy world.