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Aristotle and Kant on the Source of Value*

Christine M. Korsgaard

THREE KINDS OF VALUE THEORY

In this paper I discuss what I will call a “rationalist” account of the goodness of ends. I begin by contrasting the rationalist account to two others, “subjectivism” and “objectivism.” Subjectivism identifies good ends with or by reference to some psychological state. It includes the various forms of hedonism as well as theories according to which what is good is any object of interest or desire. Objectivism may be represented by the theory of G. E. Moore. According to Moore, to say that something is good as an end is to attribute a property, intrinsic goodness, to it. Intrinsic goodness is an objective, nonrelational property of the object, a value a thing has independently of anyone’s desires, interests, or pleasures.

The attraction of subjectivist views is that they acknowledge the connection of the good to human interests and desires. Most things that are good are good because of the interest human beings have in them, an interest that can be explained in terms of the physiological and psychological constitutions of human beings and the other conditions of human life. In Kantian language, we may say that just as means are “conditioned” goods because their value depends on the ends to which they are means, most of our ends are conditioned goods because their value depends on the conditions of human existence, and the needs and desires to which those conditions give rise. Objectivism reverses this relation between goodness and human interest. Instead of saying that what we are interested in is therefore good, the objectivist says that the goodness is in the object, and we ought therefore to be interested in it. This divorce of goodness from natural interest can make it seem too accidental that we are able to care about the things that are intrinsically good.

The advantage of objectivism is that it explains certain of our beliefs about the good that a subjectivist account cannot readily accommodate. We believe that people sometimes fail to care about what is good and sometimes have interests in or desires for things that are not good. Yet in subjectivist theories it seems as if anything one enjoys or desires is

* In writing this paper I have benefited from the comments of Richard Kraut and Holly Smith.

good at least *ceteris paribus*, and anything one does not enjoy or desire is not. A theory of intrinsic values allows us to make sense of beliefs such as that something may be good as an end even though a person gets no pleasure from it, or that a malicious pleasure may be intrinsically bad.

The rationalist theory may be seen as an attempt to combine these advantages. According to this view, an object or state of affairs is good if there is a sufficient practical reason for realizing it or bringing it about. The *prima facie* reason for it will be, as in subjectivist accounts, a reason springing from our nature, conditions, needs, and desires. The account must then provide a test for the sufficiency of this reason. Since not every such reason will turn out to be a sufficient one, not every interest or pleasure will establish the goodness of its object. The beliefs that motivate objectivism can be explained, but in a different way. The objectivist accounts for our failures of appropriate attachment to the good by cutting the tie between natural interest and the good in the first place. The rationalist accounts for these failures by appeal to the imperfect rationality of human beings. We sometimes fail to be motivated by reasons that are available to us and so do not want what is good. We sometimes are motivated by insufficient reasons and so want what is not good.

For the rationalist view what is required is some sort of test of the sufficiency of the reasons for the adoption of an end. It is important to emphasize that the three theories are being compared with respect to their assessments of single goods, or it will be hard to see what distinguishes the rationalist view. The subjectivist may of course say that a given pleasure—say, a malicious one—should not be brought about because of the pain that it causes to others. And an objectivist may say of some intrinsic good that it should not be realized because there are better things we can do. In these cases both the subjectivist and the objectivist may say that there is not a sufficient reason for the existence of some *prima facie* good. One may think of this as a *negative* test of sufficiency: the fact that something is pleasant or desired or intrinsically good is a sufficient reason for it as long as there is no extrinsic reason why not. By contrast, the rationalist account seeks a *positive* test of sufficiency and seeks this even for conditional goods taken singly. The rationalist thinks that if an object of pleasure or desire is only conditionally good in the first instance, then the fact that it does not interfere with other conditional goods is not sufficient to make it absolutely good.

This thought commits the rationalist to an extensive view of what practical reasoning consists in. Both the objectivist theory of intrinsic value and the subjectivist theories are characteristically associated with an empiricist view about the scope of practical reasoning: that it is primarily concerned with the means to preestablished ends.¹ Ends are marked out

1. Some intuitionists may view the intuitions used to ascertain the good as “rational.” But no procedures are envisioned, and there is nothing distinctively practical about these intuitions—they do not even motivate. So I am not counting this as a more extensive use of practical reason.

for us by something other than reasoning—our interests or their intrinsic value. If these ends are regarded as commensurable and the goal is to maximize the good, practical reasoning is all instrumental in form. If they are not commensurable, there will be another use for practical reasoning in combining and harmonizing various ends into the best compossible set. The rationalist is committed to a more extensive view of the scope of practical reason since the test of the sufficiency of reasons will be a way of rationally assessing ends. An end provides the justification of the means; the means are good if the end is good. If the end is only conditionally good, it in turn must be justified. Justification, like explanation, seems to give rise to an indefinite regress: for any reason offered, we can always ask why. If complete justification of an end is to be possible, something must bring this regress to a stop; there must be something about which it is impossible or unnecessary to ask why. This will be something unconditionally good. Since what is unconditionally good will serve as the condition of the value of other good things, it will be the source of value. Practical reason, then, has the noninstrumental tasks of establishing what is unconditionally good and, in light of that, establishing whether particular conditional goods stand in the right relation to it and so really are fully justified.

What is unconditionally good is like what is intrinsically good in that it is objectively valuable, but there is an important difference. Moore and other proponents of intrinsic values have thought that one cannot argue for them; they must be known through intuition. But you can argue about what is unconditionally valuable. The reason that there must be something that is unconditionally valuable is that there must be a source of value. Arguments about what is unconditionally valuable can proceed in terms of questions about what is suitable to be a source of value; only certain sorts of values are able to play this role.

In the rest of this paper I examine, or rather construct, such an argument. So far, the terms in which I have sketched the rationalist account are borrowed from Kant. In the next section, I argue that Aristotle's position on the superiority of the contemplative over the political life is also motivated by the rationalist conception of the good. Contemplation is the best activity because it can play the role of a source of value: it justifies other things. The effect of this way of looking at Aristotle's argument is to assign to contemplation the same role that Kant assigns to the good will. In the third section, I sketch the arguments Kant uses to establish that this role must be played by a good will. Finally, in the last section, I take up the question of why these two philosophers picked such different candidates for the source of value. What makes this interesting is not only the fact that they identify different things as unconditionally good, but that each philosopher comes close to denying that the other's candidate could be the source of value. Aristotle's argument implies that moral virtue could not be unconditionally good and so cannot be the source of value. Kant says explicitly that contemplation cannot.

ARISTOTLE: CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVITY AS THE SOURCE OF VALUE

In 1.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observes that there are three types of life thought to be happy: the life of enjoyment, the political life, and the life of contemplation. The life of enjoyment is a hedonistic life focused on conventional pleasures. The political life is the life of a statesperson. It may aim at despotic power, or be lived for the sake of winning public honors, but in its most proper form its aim is the exercise of moral virtue and political and practical wisdom in the governing of the state. The contemplative life, speaking generally, is the life of the philosopher or student of nature. But it is an important part of Aristotle's argument that the aim of this life is a quite particular activity. Contemplation, as Aristotle understands it, is not research or inquiry, but an activity that ensues on these: an activity that consists in understanding. We have understanding of something when we have grasped its essence—its nature, function, characteristic activity, and final purpose—and see how its other universal properties arise from its essence. The best objects of contemplation are God (the final purpose of the world) and the heavens. Aristotle also believes that what God does is to contemplate and that since God is the best thing, God must contemplate God. God is the activity of thinking on thinking and the aim of the contemplative life is to engage in this divine activity.²

Aristotle's own definition of happiness is that it is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, in accordance with excellence (1.7).³ In book 1, Aristotle tests this definition against some criteria which he believes any account of happiness or the good must meet. The good must be self-sufficient and final (1.7), it must consist in activity (1.5), and it must be pleasant (1.8). In book 10, Aristotle turns once more to the three kinds of life, to see which of them are happy. He does this by testing them against the criteria he used before—self-sufficiency, finality, pleasantness, and activity—as well as against his own definition from book 1. The result of this investigation is that the contemplative life is judged happiest, mainly on the grounds that contemplation is the only activity that is loved for itself alone (10.7). The political life is judged to

2. Readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics* often find a difficulty in understanding how contemplation as Aristotle describes it can be an activity on which to spend time and so just what activity he has in mind. Space constraints prevent my taking up this issue here. The brief description I have given is gleaned from the *Posterior Analytics*; *Metaphysics Lambda* 7 and 9; and *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7 and 10.7. Another issue I do not address directly here is the notorious one of how single-mindedly the contemplative life is lived. However, since I argue that Aristotle nowhere implies that contemplation is the only end, my account should remove some of the reasons for supposing that Aristotle envisions the contemplative person as devoting all of his time and resources to contemplation and regarding everything else as a means to it.

3. References to the *Nicomachean Ethics* are given in the text, with Bekker page and column where appropriate. *Aristotelis Opera*, ed. Immanuel Bekker, Berlin Academy (Berlin, 1831).

be happy “in a secondary degree” (10.8) and the life of enjoyment is dismissed on the grounds that relaxation is “not an end” (10.6). These claims are surprising, for Aristotle has already argued that morally virtuous actions *are* done for their own sake by a virtuous person, and that pleasant amusements are engaged in for their own sake and are ends, seems obvious.

In the next two sections, I examine the way two of Aristotle’s criteria—finality and activity—can be used to establish the unconditional value of contemplation. Aristotle is not denying that either morally virtuous actions or amusements are ends. What he is arguing is rather that contemplation is an end in a special sense. It is unconditionally good and serves as a source of value for these other ends.

Finality

One of Aristotle’s central arguments for the contemplative life rests on the claim that happiness must be a good that is final without qualification and that this is true only of contemplation, not of political activity. The argument depends on a proper understanding of the notion of finality. In book 1, Aristotle explains the notion this way:

Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. . . . Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. [1.7.1097a, p. 11]⁴

The most natural way to read this passage is this: (1) by ends which are chosen for the sake of something else Aristotle intends what we would call means; (2) by ends which are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of something else Aristotle intends things that are both means and ends; and (3) by what is final without qualification Aristotle intends something that is an end but never a means.

The difficulty with this reading, however, is that it makes what Aristotle says absurd. Why should something be more valuable (and more final clearly does mean more valuable to Aristotle) just because it is useless? It is instructive to compare the passage in the *Republic* where a similar threefold classification is made. In which of these classes do you place justice? asks Glaucon. And Socrates replies, “It belongs in the fairest

4. Passages quoted are from the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by W. D. Ross, revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson, World’s Classics ed. (Oxford, 1980). Page numbers refer to that edition.

class, that which a man who is to be happy must love both for its own sake and for the results.”⁵ This seems more like what we should expect once the threefold classification is made—that the middle class is “fairest.”

Aristotle points out that happiness is valuable in the way of things final without qualification, since “for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy” (1.7.1097a–b, p. 12). Soon after, Aristotle asserts that happiness must be self-sufficient in the sense that it cannot be increased by other goods. These remarks together have motivated some to take an “inclusive-end”⁶ view of what Aristotle means by final without qualification. If happiness is a higher-order end, a coherent and efficient plan for realizing one’s other ends, both remarks are explained. It cannot be increased by other goods because it by definition includes all that can be compossibly realized. And the threefold classification is now understood to be means, ends, and the higher-order inclusive end. Items in the middle category are both ends and means in the sense that they are valued both for their own sake and as constituents of the higher order end. On this reading, Aristotle thinks that ends are justified by membership in a best compossible set.

The difficulty with this way of reading the threefold classification is that in book 10 Aristotle puts the classification to work on the three kinds of life in a way that seems to fit the simple reading (means, ends plus means, ends only) better than the inclusive-end reading. For contemplative activity, which is clearly not an inclusive end, is ranked above “practical activities” because they are also useful: “This activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action” (10.7.1177b, p. 264). Thus we seem caught between a reading of the threefold classification which makes Aristotle wrong—the uselessness of contemplation is not a good reason for identifying it with happiness—and a reading which makes sense of the idea that what is final without qualification is best but which does not fit the use that Aristotle makes of the threefold classification in book 10.

If we suppose that Aristotle is giving a rationalist account of the good, his three categories are means, conditional ends, and unconditional

5. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 605.

6. The term is borrowed from W. F. R. Hardie’s “The Final Good in Aristotle’s *Ethics*,” *Philosophy* 40 (1965): 277–95; reprinted in *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. M. E. Moravcsik (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968). Hardie argues that Aristotle confuses a “dominant end” conception of the good which treats contemplation as the only end with an “inclusive end” conception. This view of Aristotle is the one I am opposing.

ends. Conditional ends, for Aristotle, are ends valued for their own sake, given that we are human beings living in human conditions—among friends, in the city, with a nature both animal and rational to cope with. They “befit our human estate” (10.8.1178a, p. 266). The unconditional end plays a different role: it is what makes it worth it to be a human being and to live in human conditions. Although I will argue that the passages about ends in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are consistent with this reading, nothing in that work so decisively favors it as these remarks from *Eudemian Ethics* 1.5:

After all, many things that happen are such as to induce people to abandon life—disease, extremes of pain, storms, for example; *so that it is evident that on account of those things at any rate, it would, given the choice, have been worth choosing not to be born in the first place. . . .* In general, if we put together all the things that everyone does or undergoes, but not voluntarily (because they are not done or undergone for their own sake), . . . *no one would choose in order to have them to be alive, rather than not.* Nor again would anyone who was not a complete slave prefer to live solely for the pleasure associated with nutrition and sex. . . .

They say that Anaxagoras, when someone raised just these puzzles and asked him *what it was for which a person would choose to be born rather than not*, answered that it would be in order to apprehend the heavens and the order in the whole universe.⁷

In this passage it is quite clear that whatever is to play the role of happiness must be something that makes human life worthy of choice.

If we suppose that Aristotle distinguishes between the unconditional ends for which we would choose life and conditional ends which we choose given that we are alive but for which we would not choose life, I believe we can arrive at a more natural reading of the puzzling things Aristotle says about ends whenever he discusses the three lives. It will be the mark of a conditional end that it is also a means. But this “also” is not merely conjunctive; rather, its being a “means” or constituent of a worthwhile life will be what makes it possible to choose it as an end. The fact that something plays a certain instrumental or constitutive role in human life makes it worthy of choice. Its instrumentality may be regarded as essential to what it is; this is true of artifacts which are made for certain purposes and for activities understood as instances of, say, “recreation” or “exercise.” When something which is essentially an instrumental or a constitutive activity is also interesting or beautiful or pleasant it may be chosen as an end under the condition of its utility.

I believe that this is how Aristotle regards amusements and conventional pleasures. When he is dismissing the life of amusements in 10.6, Aristotle says:

7. *Aristotle's Eudemian Ethics*, 1215b–1216a, trans. Michael Woods, Clarendon Aristotle Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 5–6. Emphases mine.

Happiness, therefore, does not lie in amusement; it would, indeed, be strange if the end were amusement, and one were to take trouble and suffer hardship all one's life in order to amuse oneself. For, in a word, everything that we choose we choose for the sake of something else—except happiness, which is an end. Now to exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish. But to amuse oneself in order that one may exert oneself, as Anacharsis puts it, seems right; for amusement is a sort of relaxation, and we need relaxation because we cannot work continuously. Relaxation, then, is not an end; for it is taken for the sake of activity. [10.6.11176b, p. 262]

We cannot plausibly think that Aristotle is declaring amusement to be a mere means. It is absurd to suppose that if you read detective stories in the evening in order to relax, you do it in the same instrumental spirit in which you go to the dentist for repairs on your teeth. Given that you are a human being, and so cannot work continuously, and are capable of taking pleasure in reading detective stories, you do it for its own sake—that is, for the pleasure of it. But you would not choose to be a human being or “to take trouble and suffer hardship all your life” in order to read detective stories. Amusements have a place in human life because human beings need relaxation. But that place is not the center; the happy person does not live for them.⁸

Now something like this point can also be made about the political life, but this requires some care. For the political life is not, like the life of amusements, a mistake. Virtuous actions are done by the virtuous person for their own sake. The political life fits Aristotle's definition and meets the criteria for a happy life. But while the political life can be final for the individual, in a sense it cannot be final for the city. What Aristotle says about pleasant amusements for the individual can be said about virtuous actions for the city: that they play a necessary role, but that role cannot be the center.

And happiness is thought to depend on leisure; for we are busy that we may have leisure, and make war that we may live in peace. Now the activity of the practical virtues is exhibited in political or

8. Anything pleasant can be an end, and the person who chooses the life of amusements, although she is making a mistake, is not making the same sort of mistake that the person who chooses the life of money-making is. Money is a mere means, so the person who makes an end of it has really inverted the values of things. (It is a mark of our agreement with Aristotle that we do not imagine the money-making life as really lived for the sake of money. We imagine money as playing the same role in this life that honor does in a common version of the political life: it is a sort of external sign of one's entrepreneurial virtue.) The person who chooses amusements is not mistaking a means for an end: he is mistaking a conditional end for an unconditional one. Aristotle suggests that he does not know anything better (10.6.1177b). Or, perhaps, if he is reflective, he has denied the existence of unconditional goods and therefore placed all goods and all pleasures on a level. This is why it is conventional to defend the life of amusements by reflections on the shortness and absurdity of human life.

military affairs, but the actions concerned with these seem to be un leisuredly. Warlike actions are completely so (for no one chooses to be at war, or provokes war, for the sake of being at war; anyone would seem absolutely murderous if he were to make enemies of his friends in order to bring about battle and slaughter); but the action of the statesman also is un leisuredly, and aims—beyond the political action itself—at despotic power and honours, or at all events happiness, for him and his fellow citizens—a happiness different from political action, and evidently sought as being different. [10.7.1177b, pp. 264–65]

Political activity aims at setting up a context in which people can be happy. The statesperson makes laws and establishes conditions in which the citizens can have a good life: a life that will not consist of making laws and establishing conditions but, rather, of something else. And this something else will therefore be a more final good, for it will be what gives political activity its point. If we take a broader interpretation of the political life and include in it other forms of community service, the point still holds. The doctor cures people so that they may have the health that makes a good life possible. Imagine that the *only* good life is the life of a doctor. Then if the doctor were successful and everyone were healthy, there would be no point to life. In general, morally virtuous activity of the sort characteristic of a political life aims at the establishment of conditions for a good life and therefore cannot itself be the only good life or the most final.

It is clear that Aristotle thinks that the exercise of the moral virtues in a morally motivated project can be the final good of an individual's life. One can center one's life around, say, justice in fighting for oppressed people or courage in a military life or political and practical wisdom in making laws for the city. For an individual such an activity is a final good, for the virtuous person does these things for their own sake. But this sort of life of the moral virtues is conditional in a particular way, namely, on something's being wrong or imperfect. Engaging in politics is choice-worthy because there are injustices to put right, and being a soldier is choice-worthy because there are wars to be fought, and being a doctor is choice-worthy because illness is a recurrent flaw in human life and so on. But it would be better if life did not have these limitations and defects. Imagine that it doesn't: some Solon has made laws that deliver us from poverty, injustice, and inequality; medical science has taught us all to be healthy through simple daily dietary and exercise routines, and so forth. What in these idyllic conditions will make life worth choosing? A certain amount of business must be done in order to provide goods and services for the citizens, but these must be *for* something. And we may imagine that the people have a lot of leisure. What will they do with it? Will they now devote themselves to conventional amusements? These have already been dismissed as insufficient to make life worth living. Will morally virtuous actions give their life meaning? They will still need the moral virtues in an

everyday way. They will need everyday justice to keep their promises and contracts and to return services. They will need the social graces of wit and friendliness in their dealings with one another. They will need temperance. But being just, friendly, and temperate in these ways cannot be the final goods or central activities of human life. Certainly, one would not choose a human life or choose to be a human being in order to keep one's promises and to exercise temperance. Even if one does do these things for their own sake, they are not final goods.

The value of the political life is conditioned by the limitations and defects of human life, just as the value of amusements is conditioned by the need for relaxation. Just as you would not choose to be a human being in order to do something that only makes sense because human beings need relaxation, so you could not choose to be a human being merely in order to overcome the defects and limitations of human life. Aristotle therefore looks for an activity that would make life worth living even if life had no defects and limitations to overcome—and so which makes them worth overcoming. This activity will be one whose value is unconditional. The mark of this will be that we do not gain anything apart from doing it.

It is to secure this unconditional character for happiness that Aristotle raises the question of how the gods spend their time. For the gods live a life that has no limitations and defects to overcome, and so the value of their activity cannot be in that way conditioned:

We assume the gods to be above all other beings blessed and happy; but what sort of actions must we assign to them? Acts of justice? Will not the gods seem absurd if they make contracts and return deposits, and so on? Acts of a brave man, then, confronting dangers and running risks because it is noble to do so? Or liberal acts? To whom will they give? It will be strange if they are really to have money or anything of the kind. And what would their temperate acts be? Is not such praise tasteless, since they have no bad appetites? If we were to run through them all, the circumstances of action would be found trivial and unworthy of gods. Still everyone supposes that they *live* and therefore that they are active; we cannot suppose them to sleep like Endymion. Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation? [10.8.1178b, pp. 267–68]

Without needs, fears, or bad appetites, a god could not make a life of overcoming limitations. What a god does must be something that is valuable just for the doing of it. If being human makes it possible to engage in such an activity, then there is a reason for being human: something that makes life worthy of choice. It is such an activity that Aristotle identifies as happiness and as the source of the value of the other ends of human life.

Activity

The distinction between conditional and unconditional ends as it functions in Aristotle can be illuminated by a distinction borrowed from Aristotle's metaphysics: that of process (*kinesis*) versus activity (*energeia*).⁹ A process gets something done or effects a change, and it has a natural termination point: when the thing is done or the change effected. An action (as opposed to an activity) is a kind of process. An activity is a doing for its own sake. It is not (qua activity) an attempt to get anything done because it is its own end. Aristotle gives us various criteria for distinguishing activities and processes. An activity, Aristotle says, is complete at every moment, so that we can apply to it the following criterion: at every moment one *Xs* and has *Xd*. A process can be done quickly or slowly; in a sense, an activity cannot. A process is done for the sake of its termination, for the sake of what one gets done; and an activity is done for its own sake. An example of a process is building a house. This is an attempt to get something done—to get a house built. It has a natural termination point—when the house is built. It is not complete at every moment: one cannot say that at every moment of building that one is building a house and one has built a house, because one cannot say one has built the house until it is over. One can build a house quickly or slowly. One does not build a house for its own sake; one does it in order to get the house. One of Aristotle's examples of an activity is seeing: at every moment one sees and has seen; one cannot see quickly or slowly; it is not an attempt to get something done, occupying a certain space of time and having a definite termination. Hence, seeing is the sort of thing that might be done for its own sake.

Confusion will be avoided if we keep in mind the following facts. First, the same physical movements will often be both process and activity, so that the difference is a matter of description. But this by no means trivializes the distinction, for the difference in description will be motivationally and rationally pertinent. Take walking. "Walking" is the name of a physical business, and one that can be involved in either processes or activities. Walking-to-the-bank is a process. It has a definite termination—arriving at the bank. It has a purpose outside of itself: being at the bank, so that I can make a transaction. It can be done quickly or slowly. I cannot say at every moment that I am walking-to-the-bank and that I have walked-to-the-bank: I can only say that I *have* walked-to-the-bank when I have arrived. Compare this to "taking-a-walk." Taking-a-walk is an

9. Aristotle's major discussions of this distinction are in *Metaphysics Theta* 6 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.3. I have learned from J. L. Ackrill's "Aristotle's Distinction between *Energeia* and *Kinesis*," in *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965). Ackrill's discussion of the case of walking led to my reflections on that example. My account of the relations between *energeia* and *kinesis* is constructive, however. My remarks about things that are both processes and activities and about processes that are taken up as activities are not based directly on what Aristotle says.

activity. It does not have, in itself, a definite termination. I can, of course, facilitate my walk-taking by setting myself a termination, but this is a device. If when I get there I decide to go further, I am still taking-a-walk. On the other hand, if I am walking-to-the-bank and when I get there, decide to go farther, I am no longer walking-to-the-bank but now am just taking-a-walk. It is true at every moment that I am taking-a-walk and I have been taking-a-walk and almost whenever I stop I will have taken-a-walk. Furthermore, I can walk quickly or slowly while taking-a-walk, but I cannot take-a-walk quickly or slowly. (If I schedule a walk daily and usually spend an hour at it, and today being pressed for time I only spend half an hour, I might say that I took my walk quickly today. But this is a rather special circumstance and requires an explanation such as I have given: you would only say that you took your walk quickly today to someone who knew of your usual schedule.) Taking-a-walk is not done merely for the sake of the end result, but for its own sake: it is a pleasure.¹⁰

The second thing to keep in mind is that performing a certain process can be an activity. The notion of activity, *energeia*, is closely associated with the notion of *ergon*, function. In one of its uses, a function is one's work. Thus, although building a house is itself a *kinesis* or process, performing this process is the *ergon*, and so the *energeia*, of an architect. House building is what she does. Let us suppose that she does not do it in a bored and grudging manner and just for the money, but that she loves it, exercises artistic taste and engineering skill, and derives satisfaction from constructing a dwelling perfectly suited to her clients' needs. She does not do it just for the sake of the house (although the house gives the activity its point), for as soon as she finishes one she starts another, and—this is an important mark of an activity—she seeks the occasions (within decent limitations) of house building.

There are several important points to make about this. First, an activity is, ontologically speaking, the only thing that is appropriate to play the role of a final good.¹¹ An action or process is not because an action or process is by its nature the sort of thing that is for the sake of something else, for the sake of the change affected or the product produced. If it aims at a product, the pertinent question is what it is good for. If it aims at producing a state or condition, the same question can be raised; life is activity, and being healthy or virtuous is pointless if one is going to sleep forever. Thus an activity, done for its own sake, is the appropriate

10. Of course you may be walking for the sake of exercise (of which walking is an instance) and exercising for the sake of health (to which walking is a means). Taking a walk is a conditional end: it is both useful and pleasant. And this is not a mere conjunction: the human need for exercise is what *makes* it pleasant.

11. Here it matters that for Aristotle pleasure is activity (or so close to activity that the two are indistinguishable), and unimpeded activity is pleasure (7.12–13; 10.4). Though pleasure taken generally is not the final good, the final good will necessarily be a pleasure.

sort of thing to be a final good, and to play the role of what ultimately justifies other things.¹²

As the case of the architect shows, however, this does not mean that something which is in itself a process cannot be an *individual's* final good. One can make a certain process one's activity. And this is in a sense what Aristotle envisions for the political life. For moral actions are in a sense processes: they have an aim outside themselves, and their occasions should not be created, though the political person seeks them. As long as there is occasion for them, however, they can be the activity of someone's life, just as architecture can, as long as there is a need for houses. But just as the architect's life and activity are only possible as long as someone—not necessarily the architect herself—needs and will enjoy the house, so the statesperson's life and activity are only possible as long as someone—the citizens—enjoy the benefits in the form of a different sort of happiness. And in general, for any activity that is also a process there will be this dependence: the possibility of its being an activity will depend upon someone's benefiting from the results of the process.

A process that is also an activity is a conditional end. Its being a process is what makes it conditional: it depends for its value on the value of its result or product. Its being an activity is what makes it an end. If it calls upon the resources of one's talents and virtues, exercises one's faculties, is pleasurable and impeded only by a (usually inoperative) factor of limited occasion or opportunity, then it can be the final good of someone's life. Of course most of the things that human beings do with themselves are of this nature. There are not very many "pure" activities—activities that are not also processes. But Aristotle thinks that there must be at least one. For the results of any process (including the ones people make activities of) must in turn be justified by the role that they play in some other activity. Every justification must refer eventually to an activity. This means that ultimately, if justification is to be complete, there must be a pure activity, one that is not also a process. Now this is what Aristotle thinks contemplation is: it is the purest of all activities. For contemplation is not research but the exercise of the understanding; it does not involve change¹³ or the overcoming of any limitation; its occasions are inherently unlimited. It is because contemplation is an activity that is not also a process that Aristotle identifies it as the most final good. The structure of justification requires that ultimately all value must be traced to a pure activity. Only a pure activity can be unconditionally good. Since Aristotle thinks that contemplation is the only such activity, he thinks that it is the source of value.

12. I have learned this from Warner Wick's "The Rat and the Squirrel, or the Rewards of Virtue," *Ethics* 82 (1971): 21–32.

13. Aristotle points out that contemplation is an activity that does not involve process at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.14. (The phrase is translated "activity of immobility.") Divine contemplation is also the purest activity for ontological reasons: it is immaterial and involves no potentiality.

KANT: THE GOOD WILL AS THE SOURCE OF VALUE

The *Grundlegung* opens with the claim that the only thing that can be found anywhere of unconditional value is a good will. As Kant envisions the structure of justification, the goodness of means is conditioned by the goodness of the ends which they serve; the goodness of those ends which are not morally obligatory is conditioned by their contribution to happiness, and the goodness of happiness is conditioned by the possession of a good will, which “seems to constitute the indispensable condition of being even worthy of happiness” (pp. 393/7).¹⁴ Since a good will is the only unconditionally good thing, everything else must ultimately trace its justification to this: virtues such as intelligence or calmness must be directed by it, happiness must be deserved by it, particular ends must be chosen in accordance with it. The good will is the source of value, and without it, nothing would have any real worth.

As we saw, Aristotle’s arguments that contemplation is the most final good can be construed as being based on the claim that only contemplation can serve as a source of value. To confer value on other things, and so to justify them completely, the final good must be something that makes human life worthy of choice and it must be a pure activity. Contemplation is the final good and source of value because it meets these conditions. In a similar fashion, Kant will argue that the good will is unconditionally good because it is the only thing able to be a source of value. In order to follow this argument, it is necessary to keep in mind that on Kant’s view a good will is a perfectly rational will. The argument is essentially that only human reason is in a position to confer value on the objects of human choice.

The point is made in both the *Grundlegung*, in the argument leading to the Formula of Humanity and in chapter 2 of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the *Grundlegung*, Kant begins from the fact that, if there is a Categorical Imperative, then there must be something of unconditional value. For, if there is a Categorical Imperative, then there are actions dictated by pure reason, and the ends of these actions will be completely justified. It must be possible to formulate the moral law in terms of whatever the source of this justification is. Kant argues that only our humanity, or rational nature, can play this role. The objects of inclination have only a conditioned value, he says, for their worth depends on the inclinations themselves (the things we desire are good because we desire them, not the reverse). The inclinations, however, cannot confer value on their objects, for they are not themselves unconditionally valuable. Kant says that since they are sources of needs it would be better to be rid of them altogether, but it is sufficient for his point that they are not

14. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington, in *Kant’s Ethical Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983). References will be in the text. The first page number is the standard reference to the Prussian Academy edition; the second is to the translation.

a sufficient condition for the goodness of their objects. The existence of an inclination is not enough to make its object good, for the inclination itself may be bad. Other things in nature are only means. But rational nature is an end in itself, for "in this way man necessarily thinks of his own existence; thus far it is a subjective principle of human actions. But in this way also does every other rational being think of his existence on the same rational ground that holds also for me; [note] and it is at the same time an objective principle, from which, as a supreme practical ground, all laws of the will must be able to be derived" (pp. 429/36). The note refers us to the third section: the argument is that we necessarily think of our own existence as able to confer value on our ends because we necessarily think of ourselves as autonomous and so of our ends as freely and rationally chosen. Nothing else justifies our ends and actions; it is our rational autonomy itself that does so. The argument is in a simple sense transcendental: we regard some of our ends as good, even though they are obviously conditional; there must be a condition of their goodness, a source of their value; we regard them as good whenever they are chosen with full rational autonomy; so full rational autonomy itself is the source of their value. Since this holds for other rational beings as well as myself, I cannot act against their rational autonomy without violating my own; and so it turns out to be a good will that is the source of all value.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that good is a rational concept. This means that if ends are to be good, they must be determined by reason, not merely inclination or pleasantness; if ends were determined by pleasantness, only means could be called "good" since only they would be determined by reason (pp. 62/64).¹⁵ It also means that "what we call good must be, in the judgment of every reasonable man, an object of the faculty of desire" (pp. 60/62–63). Thus the reasons for "calling" a thing good must be universalizable. The sufficiency of a reason is tested by its universalizability. Behind the assumption that if every rational being could acknowledge something to be good (the reason for it is universalizable) then it is indeed good (the reason for it is sufficient) is the idea that it is rational beings who determine what is good; rational nature confers value on the objects of its choices and is itself the source of all value.¹⁶

In Aristotle, the question of what the final good is has a metaphysical as well as an ethical significance: contemplation is the final purpose not only of human life but also of the world. Kant makes an argument that is similar but in a way reverses the order in which these points are

15. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1956). References will be in the text. The first page number refers to the Prussian Academy edition, the second to the translation.

16. These arguments are treated more thoroughly in my "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 169–95, and "Kant's Formula of Humanity," forthcoming in *Kant-Studien*.

established. The final purpose for human beings must also be regarded as the final purpose of the world. Since whatever is chosen with a good will is good, we can construct the ideal of a totality of all good things. In the *Grundlegung*, this is the Kingdom of Ends: “A whole both of rational beings as ends in themselves and also of the particular ends which each may set for himself” (pp. 433/89). In the *Critique of Practical Reason* it is the Highest Good, “the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason” (pp. 108/112), virtue and the happiness merited by it for every rational being. This turns out to be the final purpose of the world as well as the good for humanity.

Theoretical reason, like practical reason, seeks the unconditioned: it keeps asking why until explanation is complete. Such complete explanation cannot be given in terms of mechanical laws, for even if we could explain everything in nature in terms of some set of mechanical laws, there would be no answer to the question why the world is organized according to these laws rather than some other set. For unconditional explanation we would need a teleological system of the world, in which every event and thing could be explained, justified, and fully comprehended in terms of some final purpose, to the realization of which everything else would be organized. This final purpose would have to be something unconditionally good: something for the sake of which nature might have been created. Of course, according to Kant we cannot have a metaphysical or teleological system of the world with the status of knowledge. We can and should think of the world in this way, using teleological concepts as tools of reflection, but we can have no knowledge that there is a God who created the world for the sake of some end. The rational ideal of the full and unconditional explanation of things cannot be realized; it is beyond the limits of our finitude and sensible nature. Yet we can say what would realize the speculative ideal of reason. It would be knowledge of the world as a Kingdom of Ends: “Teleology considers nature as a kingdom of ends; morals regards a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature. In the first case the kingdom of ends is a theoretical idea for explaining what exists. In the latter it is a practical idea for bringing about what does not exist but can be made actual by our conduct, i.e., what can be actualized in accordance with this very idea” (pp. 436n./42n.).

The same ideal governs reason in theory and practice, that of a system of purposes. Such a system requires a final purpose. For practical reason, this is the good will. In the *Critique of Teleological Judgment* Kant argues that this is also the only possible candidate for the final purpose of a teleological system of nature. The only possible end of creation—if the world were known to be purposive creation—would be humanity under moral laws. Kant begins by identifying human life as the purpose of the teleological organization of nature. If nature exists to set the stage for human life, then we must seek the justification of nature in some value realized by human life:

Without men the whole creation would be mere waste, in vain, and without final purpose. But it is not in reference to man's cognitive faculty (theoretical reason) that the being of everything else in the world gets its worth; he is not there merely that there may be someone to *contemplate* the world. For if the contemplation of the world only afforded a representation of things without any final purpose, no worth could accrue to its being from the mere fact that it is known; we must presuppose for it a final purpose, in reference to which its contemplation itself has worth. Again it is not in reference to the feeling of pleasure or to the sum of pleasures that we think a final purpose of creation is given. . . . It is that worth which [man] alone can give to himself and which consists in what he does, how and according to what principles he acts. . . . That is, a good will is that whereby alone his being can have an absolute worth and in reference to which the being of the world can have a *final purpose*.¹⁷

Speculative and practical reason are linked in that their ultimate ideal, their conception of a rationally intelligible world, is of a system of purposes organized around free rational beings taken as the final purpose of the system, a Kingdom of Ends. But while speculative reason hopes vainly to discover or prove that this ideal of reason is already realized in the world, practical reason—or morality—is the attempt to impose this ideal on action and on the world insofar as action shapes the world. We cannot prove that the standards of reason are met by the world as it is in itself and independently of our own impositions. But there is no bar to our organizing our own lives, our actions, and our characters so that they will accord with the standards of reason. Morality replaces metaphysics as the highest expression of our rational nature. For Kant, this makes the good will, rather than contemplative activity, the source of value.

ARISTOTLE AND KANT ON THE SOURCE OF VALUE

Aristotle and Kant agree that there are many things that are worthy of choice as ends given that one is a human being with a certain physical and psychological constitution, and with certain needs and capacities for enjoyment as a result. They also agree that these are conditional goods and that rationality demands more. These values of a human life are only really worth pursuing if something makes a human life worth living. Both look for something that human beings can do that gives a point to being human. Both believe that practical reason at once demands a deeper justification for human existence and teaches us what will satisfy that demand. Furthermore, both are led to seek what is unconditionally good in the thought of what might be a final purpose for God, whose choices and activities are not determined by any limiting condition. Aristotle thinks that God contemplates, while Kant thinks that if God exists he

17. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, sec. 86, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), p. 293.

must be conceived as bringing into being the Highest Good or Kingdom of Ends.

The similarities make the differences more striking. Why exactly do the two philosophers disagree? We have already seen why Aristotle puts the political life in second place: moral actions are processes with results, and we gain apart from them; it is only because of this gain that it makes sense to devote your life to them. Indeed the life of the statesperson may in some respects be better than the life of the contemplator but only because “though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states” (1.2.1094b, p. 2). Thus for Aristotle, morality is not the final good because it has an object beyond itself. We might be tempted to oppose to this Kant’s remarks, in the opening of the *Grundlegung*, that the good will’s goodness is independent of what it effects or accomplishes, and his view that neither the actual success or our efforts, nor the purpose for which we act, but only the grounds on which we choose our actions and purposes, matter to moral worth. But Aristotle denies none of this. His virtuous person does virtuous actions for their own sake and for the sake of the noble, and because they are directed by right reason. It is also important that Kant does not dismiss considerations of what is to be achieved by morality as irrelevant. The doctrine of practical religious faith is motivated by the fact that the virtuous person needs to believe that the ends that morality sets before her may be achieved through her efforts. The moral law makes the highest good our end and is threatened if the highest good is impossible to attain. This is not because of our private interest in our own happiness, but because the motivating thought of morality is the thought that autonomy means that one can make a difference—one is not just part of the causal chain but may help to bring about the highest good. Both philosophers believe that a good person does moral actions for their own sake—neither thinks this means it is unimportant whether they achieve the ends they aim at.

Kant has two kinds of argument against the unconditional value of contemplation. One is presented in the quotation from the *Critique of Judgement* given above. The world must have a final purpose in order to be worth contemplating, so contemplation cannot be that final purpose. The reply that Aristotle could give might seem convoluted. We contemplate God; yet God is also a contemplator—and what God contemplates is God, for God is thinking on thinking. Thus to the charge that contemplation cannot be the final purpose because the world needs a final purpose in order to be worth contemplating, the answer would be both that the world has a final purpose and is worth contemplating, and that contemplation is that final purpose. The conception may be alien to us, but the main idea is still clear: Aristotle thinks that we can participate in the final purpose of the world through contemplative activity.

And contemplation in this sense is not strictly speaking possible on Kant’s view. For it involves a grasp of the teleological order of things

and a participation in it through knowledge, through the theoretical faculty. But for Kant, scientific knowledge associated with this kind of understanding does not exist; teleological thinking is not knowledge, and such grounding as it has lies in practical religious faith and so in ethics. We cannot, through theoretical thinking, participate in the final purpose of the world. We can only do this in practice.

Kant's other argument against contemplation is found in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. There, Kant explicitly says that the pleasures of understanding are on a footing with the physical pleasures: "For the possibility of these pleasures, too, presupposes, as the first condition of our delight, the existence in us of a corresponding feeling" (pp. 24/23). The capacity to enjoy the activities of understanding is as much the result of our constitution as the capacity to enjoy physical pleasures; and it is this capacity that makes both possible ends. Neither one, as Kant conceives it, could be assigned to God. Part of the problem here comes from an issue not taken up in this paper: Kant associates pleasure with passivity, with being affected, and this divorces it firmly both from autonomy and from divinity: pleasure goes with being susceptible to causes. Aristotle, by contrast, associates pleasure with activity and even supposes God to be in a state of pleasure.¹⁸ Plato and Aristotle distinguish between pure or true pleasures, the activities of healthy faculties engaged in for their own sake and not provoked by the "pain" of needs and appetites; while Kant says explicitly that every inclination gives rise to a need, and this is his ground for saying that "the value of any object obtainable by our action is always conditioned." Yet Kant and Aristotle agree in placing unconditional value on activities that are unprovoked by needs and therefore done for their own sake unconditionally. This important characteristic is shared by autonomously chosen actions as conceived by Kant as well as contemplation and the pleasures of perception as conceived by Aristotle.

By combining these two objections we can see why Kant cannot agree with Aristotle about the unconditional value of contemplation. For Kant, reason's standards are our standards and we do not know whether the world as it is in itself meets them. What we know is that it is only intelligible *to us* if it does. One of the things that this means is that we cannot say that even contemplation is in Aristotle's sense a perfect activity. Like a physical pleasure, it satisfies a need of ours; this makes it a conditional end, and it may be nothing more. To reach the unconditioned in a world where reason itself may be a purely human thing we must regard humanity as unconditionally valuable. Even if Kant fully accepted the Aristotelian metaphysical vision of a world striving for a kind of divine activity as its final purpose, it would retain for him the status of a human creation, its value arising from the way in which it meets human demands and standards. Even the activities that seem most perfect to us, because we gain nothing

18. See *Metaphysics Lambda* 7.1072b and *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.14.1154b for the view that God is in a condition of pleasure.

apart from them and are able to take them as giving point and meaning to our lives, must actually get their value from our valuing them.

The difference between Kant and Aristotle on this point has its roots not directly in ethics—anyway, not in a different view of practical reasoning—but in their stance toward metaphysics. Aristotle and Kant disagree not so much on what it would take to bring value into the world as on what is available for the purpose. The impossibility of a teleological metaphysics and the limitation of theoretical knowledge to a mechanical account places the good squarely in the human realm. The good cannot be contemplated but only created by our efforts. What initially looks like a sort of moralism on Kant's part is really the consequence of his humanism. The only value there is is that which human beings give to their own lives. We must be the source of value.