Being and goodness

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BEING AND GOODNESS

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Abstract

Being and Goodness, DAVID S. ODERBERG

The article defends the scholastic principle of the convertibility of being and goodness. First, it identifies the non-moral sense of 'good' as the fulfilment of appetite, where appetites are the natural tendencies of objects, whether living or non-living, to or away from certain end states. The good, in its primary meaning, applies to all cases in which some appetite is fulfilled. The article then analyses a central case of inorganic fulfilment – the case of instantiation – in particular, being a good example of some geometrical kind. It argues that the goodness in a case of instantiation, where there is a standard to be met, is an irreducible kind of goodness. Next, the article argues that continuation in existence is also a kind of fulfilment of appetite possessed by all enduring things. The primary counterexample involves radioactive decay: the article deflects this counterexample by showing that it does not undermine the idea that every enduring object has a tendency to continue in existence. Once we appreciate the place of appetite fulfilment across the natural world, we are more easily able to understand organic fulfilment – goodness *for* a thing. Without a kind-neutral concept of goodness that applies to all being, organic goodness is far more difficult to account for. – Correspondence to: d.s.oderberg@reading.ac.uk.

1. INTRODUCTION

The old scholastic principle of the 'convertibility' of being and goodness strikes

nearly all moderns as either barely comprehensible or plain false. 'Convertible' is a term of

art meaning 'interchangeable' in respect of predication, where the predicates can be

exchanged salva veritate albeit not salva sensu: their referents are, as the maxim goes, really

the same albeit conceptually different.[1]

The principle seems at first blush absurd. Did the scholastics literally mean that

every being is good? Is that supposed to include a cancer, a malaria parasite, an earthquake

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that kills millions? If every being is good, then no being is bad – but how can that be? To the

contemporary philosophical mind, such bafflement is understandable. It derives from the

systematic dismantling of the scholastic edifice that took place over a millennium.

With the loss of the basic concepts out of which that edifice was built, the space created by

those concepts faded out of existence as well. The convertibility principle, like virtually all

the other scholastic principles (not all, since some do survive and thrive in analytic

philosophy), could not persist in a post-scholastic space wholly alien to it.

Nevertheless, the convertibility principle can be defended. Not only is it meaningful

when rightly understood, but it is eminently plausible. In what follows I will outline how that

defence should proceed.

2. THE GOOD IN THE REAL: APPETITES AND FULFILMENT

The defence must begin with a fundamental *non-moral* sense of 'good'. This

immediately deflects the confusion that somehow the principle is that every being is morally

good, or has moral worth or value. Now there is nothing unusual in the thought that there is a

non-moral sense of 'good', moreover one in terms of which the moral sense of 'good' can be

explained. Consequentialists analyse rightness (and wrongness) in terms of whether an action

promotes, directly or indirectly, good outcomes or states of affairs. Ethical egoism holds that

the rightness of a person's acts is defined in terms of the promotion of what is good for that

person. There are many non-moral senses of 'good', two of the main ones being 'pleasurable'

and 'useful'. There is, however, another sense of 'good', one that is the core of the

convertibility principle. It is captured by the idea of *perfection*, where this term is taken in its

etymological sense of 'completion' or 'fulfilment', with correlative connotations such as 'improve' or 'bring to the highest available standard'.

The idea that the central sense of 'good' in ethics is essential involves perfection as a kind of completion or fulfilment was a commonplace among scholastic philosophers and their neo-scholastic representatives.[2] We find, of course, liberal use of the term 'perfection' in Descartes, where he applies it not just to God as a whole but to His particular properties, and not just to God but to creatures as well.[3] Where Descartes asserted that existence is a perfection, contemporary philosophers follow Kant in denying that existence is a property or predicate.[4] The older usage, precariously preserved into the early modern period, sees perfection as what used to be called an *increase in the fullness of being*, a bringing to fulfilment or completion of some disposition, power, or tendency of an object – in scholastic terminology, the actualization of some potentiality (or potency) of a thing.[5] And this, at least according to the scholastics, albeit less clearly in Aristotle himself, is precisely what they called *good* in the broadest, fundamental sense.

Before mystification sets in immediately, further distinctions have to be made. By completion I do not mean that an object has all the features it could have, or performs all the operations it could perform. A person might say, 'Having visited Niagara Falls, my life is complete', meaning he has no more significant desires to satisfy; but mostly when we talk about completion we refer to quite specific tasks, like completing a test or cleaning the kitchen. It is this narrow sense I have in mind – that an object is completed when one of its potencies is actualized, say by manifesting a disposition.

Next, by fulfilment I do not mean any connotation of subjective desire, sense of happiness or well being, or anything essentially to do with uses such as 'Now we are married

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I feel fulfilled' or 'Getting that job fulfilled her heart's desire', and the like. For such senses

of fulfilment I will use the rare but extant term 'epithymetic', meaning (at least partly by

hijack) 'characterized by or relating to desire (including emotion)'. [5] When it comes to

humans and some animals, of course, epithymetic fulfilment is an important part of fulfilment

simpliciter. But fulfilment simpliciter (just plain fulfilment) is my concern in this lecture, and

it does not – so I claim – have epithymetic fulfilment as an essential constituent; nor does it

have cognition or awareness of any kind as essential elements.

With that understood, I will use the term 'appetite' in connection with fulfilment.

Understood classically, appetites are simply tendencies or dispositions of objects to or away

from certain end states.[6] Aquinas, for example, speaks of objects that have no knowledge but

still have a 'natural appetite' whereby they 'tend' or are 'inclined' to certain ends.[7] Only

certain kinds of appetite – sensitive and rational, as the scholastic terminology has it –

involve cognition or at least some kind of apprehension. The fulfilment of a natural appetite,

that is, a disposition or tendency in the nature of an object, does not entail any striving,

trying, wanting, or anything else that comes under the general term 'conation'. Particles of

opposite charges attract; salt dissolves in water; snowflakes tend to grow six branches; stars

burn out: these are all examples of natural appetites – tendencies of objects to certain kinds of

behaviour. More precisely, as is usually suggested by the wording, we can describe the

tendency itself or what the tendency results in, or both. A proton has the tendency to attract

electrons even in the absence of electrons. When it is attracting an electron, it is exercising its

tendency, or manifesting its disposition – to use the more familiar expression. To say that salt

dissolves in water is to speak ambiguously of what salt tends to do whether it is in water or

not and of what it actually does in water, which is the manifested end state of the disposition.

It makes no sense to speak of a disposition or tendency without a corresponding manifestation or end state. Note that the end state – or final state, as I will sometimes say – need not be something static, such as the presence of ice or the occurrence of some temperature. It might be an event or a process, such as dissolution.

3. THE GOOD IN THE REAL: INSTANTIATION

With all of this terminological and conceptual stage-setting in place, I want to bring into focus the central claim – that 'good', not it its formal meaning, applies to all cases in which some appetite is fulfilled. The corollary of this truth is that everything that is real is good, since everything that is real involves the fulfilment of an appetite. More precisely, a thing is good *to the extent that* it involves fulfilment of an appetite, and *because* of this.

The idea that good can somehow creep in here seems at first preposterous. The foremost reason for thinking this is that goodness is an evaluative concept, and there is nothing evaluative in the fulfilment of an appetite simply as such. To be sure, certain appetites – those in the organic world – are such that their fulfilment is good, but this is precisely because they are certain species of appetites – vegetative in the case of plants, sensitive in the case of animals, and rational in the case of humans. When a plant's appetite for water is satisfied, that is good for it. When an animal's appetite for exercise is fulfilled, that is good for it. When a person's appetite for knowledge is satisfied, that too is good for her. Yes, it will be said, certain tendencies in living beings, when fulfilled, are good. But how can this remotely apply to the non-living world without involving an illicit teleologisation of that for which there is no such thing as a telos?

Recall that I have not used the terms 'purpose' or 'telos' thus far. They could be used consistently with the position I defend, but both terms have a such a deep-seated connotation of deliberation or intention that use of them in this context of qualification would obfuscate rather than clarify. Indeed, the term 'intention' itself has been transformed from the scholastic 'intendit' as used by Aquinas to the essentially psychological meaning we now exclusively give it. It is hard to break out of the psychologisation of fulfilment by appealing to terms that connote yet more psychology. Similarly, it is hard to break out of the organicisation of fulfilment (to employ a barbarism) by employing terms now used exclusively in the description of living things.[8]

To get clear on inorganic fulfilment, then, we have to bracket off any thinking that applies to the world of living things. Goodness, I submit, is not ipso facto sidelined. To see why, let us look at the simple idea of instantiation.[9] You are walking with your child through the forest and come across a rough triangular shape naturally etched into the bark of a tree. You might say, 'That's a good example of a triangle'. Now, you are not trying to teach the child how to *draw* a triangle; suppose he already knows how to do that. So there is no question of the triangle's being good for the purpose of teaching the child how to draw one. A fortiori you are not trying to teach the child how to *recognize* a triangle, since if he can draw one he can recognize one. You are just making an observation: this is a pretty good instance of a triangle. There need not be any purpose in the observation beyond that of communicating some information (and remarking, perhaps, on the wonders of natural simulacra): but *that* can't be the purpose for which you apply the term 'good', as though the triangle is a good one for the purpose of making the observation that the triangle is a good one. So in what way is the triangle good? It is simply a *good instance* of that abstract shape.

Does this essentially involve evaluation? Of course: you are evaluating the triangle for its approximation to the abstract shape, for how well it *fits* that shape. The 'well' and the 'fit' go hand in hand: you evidently could offer the abstract shape without doing so well (or badly). But there is nothing psychological in the evaluation itself, even though the process of making an evaluation is psychological. An objection will be raised immediately: the triangle is evaluated as good for a naturally-occurring one – as far as the triangles nature produces are concerned. But this need not be. It might be so accurate that it would have been good no matter how produced – even by the best technology available. It might be an extremely good example of a triangle. But don't you have to have *some* hypothetical purpose in mind? When you say the triangle is good, you might mean that if the child *did* want to know what a triangle looked like, that's what you could show him. Or that the triangle is good for a whole range of possible purposes – instruction, gross measurement, calibration, and so on – but if pressed you would agree it was not good for, say, atomic-scale measurement or precise prediction of some planetary alignment.

It is not clear to me how an object can be actually good for a counterfactual but non-actual purpose; surely it is only counterfactually good for a counterfactual purpose? In other words, if you wanted to teach the child what triangles looked like, the one in the tree would be a good example to show him. But that doesn't make it a good triangle. The critic may retort 'exactly so' – that's the point. If that is the point, though, then the critic, to be consistent, ought to deny that there is a triangle etched into the tree *at all*. For if he accepts that there is a triangle, he must accept that the shape satisfies certain criteria. If he accepts this, he must accept that these criteria are satisfied more or less exactly. But that is just what 'good' and 'bad' mean here – that the shape satisfies the criteria for being a triangle more or

less closely, more or less *well*. So the critic should deny that the shape actually satisfies any criteria; so he should deny outright that the shape is a triangle. But then, by parity of reasoning, he should deny it is a member of any species of the genus *polygon*. Yet nothing can be a member of a genus without being a member of some species of that genus. So he must deny he sees a polygon at all. In the vernacular, he must deny he sees a shape. And that is incredible.

Might the critic insist, rather, that an object can be actually good for a merely counterfactual purpose? There are at least two problems with this view. One concerns the content of the counterfactual. Suppose the critic says:

(C) Triangle T is good$_F$ $=_{df}$ if you wanted to do F, it would be good to use T.

This will not do, since 'good' appears in the definiens. That 'good$_F$', i.e. 'good relative to some function F' (such as teaching a child what triangles look like) is defined in terms of an unindexed 'good' does not help; indeed, it only makes the analysis more mysterious, since what does the unindexed 'good' mean? Suppose one says that it means something like 'advisable'. But doesn't 'advisable' in this context just mean 'good to do'? So the critic will not make much progress there. Moreover, it might *not* be advisable to use T: maybe T is at the top of a very high tree beyond the sight of a small child; maybe the tree is about to collapse; perhaps, if you were to try to teach the child about triangles using T, an evil demon inflicted temporary blindness on you both. The latter sort of case makes trouble for any definition employing purely non-evaluative terms, such as one stating that the probability of learning to recognize triangles given that one is exposed to the shape in the tree is higher than if one is not. There is a sense in which the evil demon scenario makes it the case that the tree exemplar is not good for teaching anyone about triangles, but not a sense that has anything to

do with the geometrical properties of that exemplar. We are familiar with the problems of counterfactual analyses in general, and rectifying them is a cottage industry in metaphysics and semantics. We have many purposes, naturally, though I leave it to my critic the burden onto the critic to show how such an analysis would work.

More important, however, is the problem that a counterfactual analysis such as (C) gets the order of explanation the wrong way around. It's not that the triangle is actually good in virtue of its being good to use to teach a child how to recognize triangles. Rather, it's good to use the triangle to teach the child how to recognize triangles in virtue of its being a *good triangle* pure and simple. This object has to meet the criteria of triangularity to some appropriate degree before it can be good for *any* purpose, hypothetical or actual, that involves triangles qua triangles. But 'appropriate' *cannot* mean, say, 'for the purpose of teaching a child how to recognize triangles' because then all we would be saying – if our purpose is to teach children how to recognize triangles – is that the object has to meet the criteria of triangularity to the degree necessary for the purpose of teaching children about triangles before it can be good for teaching children how to recognize triangles. Or, to put it succinctly, if you want to teach a child how to recognize triangles, you had better use triangles! I cannot deny that this is a most wholesome and necessary strategy, but it does not tell me whether I should use that particular shape etched into that particular tree. The shape had better be a good triangle before I can confidently decide it is good to use for my educational purpose.[10]

4. THE GOOD IN THE REAL: EXISTENCE

I have spent a lot of time on good instantiation simply to dispel the idea that goodness in the non-living world can only obtain in virtue of purpose. It is not essential to my case that this particular kind of goodness be found everywhere, even though not much reflection is needed to see that good instantiation is indeed found everywhere. Note that my example was the instantiation of an abstract object. Abstract objects themselves are neither good nor bad. So I am confining this primary sense of goodness to the world of the concrete, or at least to those things that are not wholly abstract. Nor is every concrete instantiation of an abstract object good or bad, since there can be no good or bad instances where there is no room for approximation, for instance in the case of numbers or equations. It is hard to see how there can be such a thing as a good pair of apples[11] or a good concrete example of Pythagoras's Theorem as far as instantiation is concerned.[12] It is also, for that matter, hard to see how there can be such a thing as a good electron or a good water molecule. There is an important project in working out how far good instantiation does apply in the concrete world, but not one I can pursue here.

One thing to note about instantiation is that, contrary to what might be supposed, it is a kind of tendency. Although I am generally using 'tendency' and 'disposition' interchangeably, as indicated earlier, we can with propriety say that our tree-etched triangle tends to triangularity. We would normally say that it tends to look like a triangle – without implying any actual movement, behaviour, or manifestation of a disposition. But we also say that a curve tends towards an axis without implying anything about movement. In the case of the triangle, 'tends' means just 'approximates' or 'fits to a certain degree'.

In the more general, indeed ubiquitous, case I now want to consider, tendency is again not to be thought of dynamically, but it is still an example of goodness. What I have in

mind is simple continuation of existence in the concrete world. Existing things tend to

continue to exist. By continuing to exist, they satisfy their tendency, and that is good pure and

simple. How can there be a tendency to be ...? ... existence involves a final

state that results from a stimulus. We think of tendencies and dispositions as defined by

stimulus-manifestation conditions: if salt is immersed in water, it dissolves; if a metal is

heated, it expands; and so on. What 'dynamic' means here is that if something is done to the

object, it behaves in a certain way. Now it may be that continuation in existence is dynamic

in a different sense. The sense is not conative, as the more common term 'persistence' might

suggest, which is why I will use the more neutral expression 'continuation in/of existence'.

Rather, it might just be that continuation in existence essentially involves continual changes

in an object as it reacts to its environment. But even if continuation in existence is dynamic in

this specific sense, we cannot debar it from being a tendency on the ground that tendencies

can only manifest as the result of a stimulus: why could it not be that some tendencies are so

basic to a thing that they manifest not only for as long as the thing exists but *because* it

exists? Clearly there are some properties – generic spatio-temporal ones spring immediately

to mind – that concrete objects have for as long as they exist and because they exist. Why

shouldn't some of those properties also be the manifestation of certain tendencies without

there being a relevant stimulus and the correlative behaviour in response to it?

     We seem to have an immediate problem, though, if we take continuation in

existence to be such a property – one that holds for as long as the object exists and precisely

because it exists. We appear to be mired in a circle: how can we say that objects have a

tendency to continue to exist because they exist, when the reverse must be true – that they

exist because they have a tendency to continue to exist? We have to clarify further in order to

escape the apparent circle. To say that an object has the tendency to continue to exist because it exists is loose talk. Precisely, if it has such a tendency, it will be for the same reason that it has any other essential property—because it exists *as a concrete object*. Since the tendency to continue to exist is, as I claim, common to all concrete objects, we should not be surprised that they have it because of the kind to which they all belong, namely, *concrete object*. So concrete objects have the tendency to continue to exist because they exist as concrete objects. Moreover, they do not exist as concrete objects because they have the tendency to continue to exist. The question why they exist as concrete objects looks like a request for a fundamental metaphysical analysis and here we might appeal, if we are Aristotelians, to the form-matter structure of concrete objects. But whatever we are looking for with such a question, the answer cannot be an appeal to some property or other of the object. To be sure, it is logically impossible for a thing to have the tendency to continue to exist without existing in the first place, but that does not mean its mere existence explains the tendency. So we do not have any explanatory or other circle here.

What, then, explains the tendency? First I have to justify the claim that there is indeed such a tendency. The obvious reaction to such a claim is to assert that continuation in existence is just a brute fact. As Bede Rundle puts it: 'no form of causation, divine or otherwise, is in general required to ensure persistence in being. […] [M]any things in the universe, as indeed the universe itself, do not have to fight for their survival, but, in the absence of forces which would bring them to an end, their continuation from moment to moment is in no need of explanation.'[13] A couple of points about this particular passage: first, I am not going to discuss the role, if there is one, of divine causation, which is tangential to present concerns. Secondly, the term 'causation' has to be handled with care. Rundle's

tendentious way of putting his point makes it seem that an explanation of continuance in existence appeals to some other object or property that causes, in some mechanical or efficient sense, the continued existence of the object. And we do not need to subscribe to that. By appeal to the nature of concrete objects as concrete, if anything what we appeal to is *formal* causation: it is because objects are thus-and-so that they continue in existence. Thirdly, the term 'fight for their survival' is distractingly – and equally tendentiously – conative: something can have a tendency to continue in existence without fighting to do so.

The main question is whether continuation in existence can be taken as a brute fact: can we happily stop at the thought that concrete objects continue to exist in the absence of forces that would destroy them? It is not an analytic truth that Rundle is asserting. He is not claiming that objects continue to exist until they cease to exist. He mentions *forces*, and is right to do so. It is not as though objects cease to exist under such a variety of circumstances that we cannot, even in principle, find anything common to them. They cease to exist when and only when forces act upon them. Why should we accept that as brute any more than if it were the case that all objects ceased to exist when and only when in the vicinity of objects twice their size? Isn't there an interesting phenomenon here for which we need to account? Concrete objects are liable to destruction by the application of forces. This does not mean they have the tendency to cease to exist *rather than* the tendency to continue to exist: on the contrary, their tendency to cease to exist when subject to certain forces depends ontologically on the tendency to continue to exist in the absence of those forces. Nothing can cease to exist in certain conditions unless it already continues to exist prior to those conditions. But if a thing has a *tendency* to cease to exist in certain conditions – a specific disposition activated

by a relatively limited kind and range of stimuli – then it must have a tendency to *continue* to exist absent those stimuli.

Suppose water-soluble salt had a tendency to dissolve in water, but a tendency not to dissolve in the absence of water; it just happens, as a brute fact, that in the absence of water it does not dissolve. This would hardly make sense, since the explanation of its dissolution in water in terms of the breaking of sodium chloride's ionic bonds appeals to the very phenomena that also explain why salt does not dissolve in the absence of water – the ionic bonds themselves, which in the absence of water are maintained. Similarly, the explanation of the ceasing to exist of some object – say, the evaporation of a puddle of water by the application of heat – appeals to the very same phenomena that explain why a puddle of water does not evaporate in the absence of heat – the amount of kinetic energy in the molecules.

Now it need not be the case that the explanation of some object's ceasing to exist in certain conditions must appeal to *all* of the phenomena that explain its continuing to exist in the absence of those conditions: it might appeal only to some phenomena *necessary* but not sufficient for continuance in existence. For a simplistic example that gives the idea, the tendency of some object to continue in existence might be explained in terms of both its intermolecular forces and some particular geometric property of those molecules, each necessary and both jointly sufficient for the object's continuance in existence. But an account of its ceasing to exist might appeal only to the disruption of the intermolecular forces. Still, I would propose as a general truth that no account of ceasing to exist can fail to appeal to at least *some* of what also explains why a thing continues to exist. So the tendency to cease to exist must be explained, to some extent, in terms of the tendency to continue to exist. The former presupposes the latter.

Now the obvious apparent counterexamples to this claimed tendency to continue in existence involve phenomena such as radioactive decay and others that require a quantum-theoretical explanation. Radioactive decay, in particular, seems to refute any such general tendency. If it does so, it means that decay demonstrates a tendency to ceasing to exist in the absence of any tendency to continue. We can, however, resist the alleged counterexample. Radioactivity is, at least according to quantum mechanics, essentially stochastic: it is impossible in principle to predict of any radioactive isotope that it will decay at some particular time. If you knew everything you could about the isotope and its environment, you could only ever give the probability of its decay at some time or other, as provided by the known half-life of any sample of such isotopes. It is, however, no part of my thesis that the tendency to continue to exist is a 'sure-fire' disposition, to use terminology noted earlier. Such a tendency can be possessed without its being necessary, as a matter of ontology, that the possessor exist (or not) at any particular time following its coming into existence. Indeterminism at the quantum level is not inconsistent with the tendency. Even if indeterminism were true across the board, i.e. even at the macroscopic level, this would not exclude the tendency to continue to exist.

Maybe the objection from probability still has some life in it: for if an object has a greater than 50% probability of ceasing to exist at every time in its existence, does that not exclude any tendency to continue? But nothing can have a greater than 50% probability of ceasing to exist at *every* time in its existence; indeed nothing can have any probability *at all* of ceasing to exist at *every* time in its existence. The whole idea of a probability of ceasing to exist is of a probability of ceasing to exist at *some time in the future*. Consider radioactivity. Tritium, for example, has a half life of 12.32 years. Given a sample of tritium, after 12.32

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years 50% of the nuclei will have decayed into helium-3 nuclei. At any time before 12.32

years, the decay probability of any given tritium atom must be *less* than 50%. The same goes

for all radioactive isotopes that have such finite, non-zero half-lives. We can put half-lives

aside and just consider a single object O: why couldn't it have a greater than 50% chance of

ceasing to exist at every time in its existence? Well, what is that supposed to mean? You

cannot say something like: take N possible worlds (for some suitably relevant class of worlds

and large N) in which O exists at some time T; in more than 50% of those worlds, O does not

exist at T – a manifest contradiction, which is precisely why there are no zero half-lives

either, nor any probability of any object's not existing at every time during its existence. But

we can make sense of the non-zero half-life of a single tritium nucleus in similar terms: take

N possible worlds in which the nucleus exists at the beginning of each world, and each world

lasts at least 12.32 years; in 50% of those worlds, the nucleus will have decayed into helium-

3 at the end of 12.32 years.

So on pain of incoherence we have to say that any probability of ceasing to exist at

some time in an object's existence must be preceded by a lower probability of ceasing to

exist, i.e. a higher probability of existing, at some earlier time, approaching a probability of 1

for the time at which the object does exist. Example: I am attached to a radioactive isotope

with a half-life H. The isotope is configured such that if it decays, a bomb goes off and blows

me to smithereens. Since the probability of the explosion at H is 50%, at any time less than H

it will be less than 50%, i.e. ceteris paribus there is a more than 50% chance I will be alive at

any time less than H. The 'ceteris paribus' does not hide anything nasty: even if you rig the

scenario such that multiple potential causes of my extinction are operative before H, there

must still be a time before those causes are set up such that, whatever the probability of my

dying at some time at which the whole scenario is in effect, the probability is less, again

approaching a probability of 1 at the time I exist.

Forget particular trains. Imagine approaching a train. It's 99% likely it will flatten

me at time T. Before T, when the train is further away, the probability must be less than 99%.

Go back far enough, to before I was even near the track and the train was still in the station,

and the probability of my death is reduced dramatically. The fact is, everything is going to go

out of existence at some time – the probability of that is 100%. But we cannot even make

sense of the thought without presupposing the tendency of things to exist before whatever it

is that destroys them increases the probability of ceasing to exist to over 50%.

So the appeal to radioactivity must involve another train of thought, to the effect that

radioactive isotopes are *intrinsically unstable* – it is of their essence to decay.[14] So whilst the

probability of their existing before the relevant half-life expires is indeed greater than 50%,

that does not entail their having any tendency to exist; it's just a fact about them that the

probability obtains. But their tendency, now conceived non-probabilistically, is quite simply

to decay. They are inherently unstable – built to expire, as it were. In reply, I note simply that

everything is built to expire: the second law of thermodynamics guarantees it. Whatever

internal stability anything has is bound to be overcome, in the end, by the forces of

corruption. Radioactive isotopes are not metaphysically special as far as that goes.

Nevertheless, the objector persists, isn't it significant that such isotopes have an

intrinsic tendency to decay? True, most things are overcome by forces of corruption applied

from outside, but unstable nuclei are all but impervious to outside forces (apart from high-

energy nuclear bombardment). Even if one can hold that many objects have an intrinsic

tendency to continue in existence, which tendency is ultimately overcome by outside forces,

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radioactive nuclei need no outside forces to cause their decay; indeed, QM insists on it.

Decay has no cause so conceived. It's just the nature of the nuclei to decay. In reply, it was no part of my original claim that decay is actually always due to the application of forces *external* to the object. Alpha decay is generally accepted as involving the overcoming of the strong nuclear force by the electromagnetic force; beta decay involves the overcoming of the strong force by the weak force;[16] both involve internal interactions such that a force that tends to destroy the particle overcomes one that tends to keep it together. In gamma decay, the forces are indeed applied from outside – high-energy bombardment in the case of induced nuclear fission and collision in the case of fusion, though the mechanism of spontaneous fission is more like that of alpha decay. So whatever tendency to corruption a radioisotope may have, it still presupposes, ontologically, a tendency to stability and cohesion that must be overcome, whether internally or externally, for the corruption to occur.

5. CONCLUSION

If what I have argued is correct, then every concrete object is good in virtue of its appetites – including its appetite for continued existence. Goodness, then, stretches across the organic and inorganic worlds: it is one of the wholly general properties of concrete being (along with the quiddity and unity of beings, among the other 'transcendental ideas'[17]). One might wonder: even if this controversial thesis is true, why does it matter? Why can we not begin an analysis of goodness with the organic world or some part thereof, where concepts such as life, growth and development, flourishing, sickness, and what we might call 'goodness-for' have a grip? Whatever appetites salt fulfils when it dissolves in water, it is assuredly not good *for* it to do so, whereas when a living being fulfils an appetite, that is good

for it. If our ultimate aim is understanding goodness in human beings, ought we not to begin

either directly with human beings or else, following Foot (2001), with the 'natural goodness'

to be found in the organism?

The brief response to this understandable puzzlement is that to do so would be

effectively to identify goodness *with* goodness-for: there is no goodness other than what is

good for some (living) being (or group of such beings). The problem with this approach is

that it treats goodness-for as a simple concept, at least inasmuch as what is good in goodness-

for cannot be understood without the 'forness', as we might put it. Yet if we are to ground

goodness-for in some phenomenon that is responsible for it – whether it be (and on this we

can for present purposes remain wholly neutral) pleasure, the satisfaction of desires or

preferences, the meeting of needs, or something else – we must appeal to a formal appetite-

fulfilment structure that constitutes goodness simpliciter. When something obtains that is

good for an entity, some kind of fulfilment occurs: it is the good, in this broadest sense,

whose obtaining is also good *for* certain more specific kinds of thing, namely living beings

(and their sub-kinds).

Yet once we identify an underlying, kind-neutral goodness that consists in the

fulfilment of an appetite, we should see that it applies across the board, to both the living and

the non-living. Once we bracket off the 'forness' in goodness-for, what is left is

metaphysically no different to what we find in the inorganic realm – the fulfilment of

appetites or, in alternative terms, the actualization of potencies. It is in this precise but wholly

general sense that what salt does when it dissolves in water is metaphysically no different to

what a cat does when it eats food or what a person does when they get married. Once we

grasp this phenomenon, the place of goodness in the living world – particularly in the human

world which should be the ultimate target for any study of the good – is much easier to

appreciate and to analyse. There are many mysteries in the way living things function, not

least the special kind of causation (if they exist, what Plato called) 'immanent

causation'.[18] That they act purposively in ways that are good *for* them is something of a

stumbling block for attempts to explain the origin of life from non-life, at least as far as the

available hypotheses are concerned. Yet even if we are forced to accept that the 'forness' of

goodness-for is a phenomenon that emerges with, and is co-extensive with, the world of

living things, we should resist (and are by no means compelled to conclude) that the

goodness of goodness-for is to be similarly characterized. This would make an intolerable

mystery of one of the broadest of metaphysical concepts. To regard it as gaining a foothold

only at the level of the organic would be as odd as claiming the same to apply to equally

broad and topic-neutral concepts such as truth and unity. Strange to contemporary

philosophical ears as it may sound, the location of primary, non-moral goodness at a level so

basic it straddles both the living and the non-living is a more accurate *naturalism* than

anything that currently goes by that name.

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NOTES

[1] The convertibility principle is found, for instance, in Alexander of Hales and St Albert the Great. Its most famous formulation is in St Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* (hereafter *ST*) I q.5 a.1 (Aquinas 1920, pp. 52-4). See further Aertsen (1985).

[2] As well as Aquinas, see Duns Scotus, *Treatise on God as First Principle* (*De Primo Principio*): English at http://www.ewtn.com/library/THEOLOGY/GODASFIR.HTM;

Latin at https://archive.org/stream/operaomnia03dunsuoft#page/210/mode/2up) [last accessed 23 Jan. 2014]; also Cronin (1930), pp.134, 214 and passim; Mercier (1916), p. 212ff.

[3] See, e.g., *Meditations* (1641: 'perfectiones', 1647: 'perfections'), with Meditation 5 (Ariew and Cress 2006, p.35) being a good example; *Principles of Philosophy* I.23, I.37 (Cottingham et al. 1985, pp. 200-1, 205).

[4] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A599/B627 (Guyer and Wood 1998, p.567).

[5] See, e.g., Glenn (1948): 188ff., reflecting the way Aquinas speaks of perfection in *ST* I q.4 (1920, p.45ff.) and elsewhere. Hence I am using 'perfection' gerundially, like 'perfecting', rather than as a pure noun denoting the *outcome* or state resulting from perfecting, let alone to denote a state that is absolute and does not result from any perfecting (e.g. divine perfection).

[6] I will use 'tendency' and 'disposition' interchangeably, though more detailed analysis of the topic would make it advisable to reserve 'tendency' for dispositions that are probabilistic, as opposed to deterministic or so-called 'sure-fire' dispositions: see for example McKitrick (2009): 190-1.

[7] *De Veritate* q.22 a.1 (Aquinas 1954; 'appetit' and 'tendit' in the Latin).

[8] Think of terms such as 'flourish' and 'develop'.

[9] The example that follows comes from Feser (2009), pp. 33-4, which I have modified and expanded.

[10] What if our purpose has nothing to do with teaching children how to recognize triangles? Suppose we want to use the shape in the tree to make a mathematical calculation. Then 'appropriate' still *cannot mean* 'for the purpose of teaching children to recognize triangles', for we would end up saying that the shape in the tree has to be good for the purpose of teaching children how to recognize triangles before it can be used to make a mathematical calculation. While this *might* be true in some cases, in the vast majority it will be false. The same goes for any substitutions doing duty for appropriateness and some ulterior purpose: either what we end up saying about the triangle is a useless truism or it will almost certainly be false.

[11] As opposed to a pair of good apples.

[12] The latter may be in question if we are concerned with a concrete instance of a right-angled triangle; but the goodness question will be about the triangle, not the theorem. If the triangle is good, there is no room for the instantiation of the theorem not being good.

[13] Rundle (2004), p.93.

[14] This applies only to alpha and beta decay; gamma decay does not involve transmutation.

[15] See for a simple explanation http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/hframe.html [last accessed 22 Jan. 2014]. For a more complex one, see Krane (1998), p. 174 and ch. 8.

[16] See further Krane (1998), pp. 174-5 and ch. 9.

[17] Aquinas, *De Veritate* q.1 a.1, Aquinas (1954).

[18] See Oderberg (2013).

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