Chapter Four: Good and Right as Reasons for Action

1. *The good and the right*

A commitment to fairness can prevent one from enjoying the things one loves for their own sakes as often and as fully as one could enjoy them. Anyone intelligent and resourceful enough to exploit situations in which unfair dealing will help them to enjoy the things they love would be foolish to commit themselves to fairness.

That, at least, is the upshot of an argument we have been pursuing.

Parallel arguments can be constructed for commitments to kindness, honesty, decency, respect and the general wellbeing of people (and other animals).

Our argument for this thesis, that commitment to fairness is foolish from the perspective of maximizing one's enjoyment of what one loves for its own sake, is still incomplete. We have been concerned so far almost exclusively with whether a commitment to fairness based on an appreciation of the usefulness of fairness can ever be wise. We have barely considered the question whether it is wise (or foolish) to have a commitment to fairness that expresses a love of fairness for its own sake.

We did criticize an argument meant to show that no one values fairness for its own sake. But even if we are right that that argument is flawed and that it is possible to value fairness for its own sake, that it is *possible* does not suggest that it is *advisable*. We won't take up the problem of the wisdom or foolishness of commitment to fairness based in love of fairness until Chapter Fourteen.

We've examined an argument that commitment to fairness as an instrument is foolish and we've discussed a few objections to that argument and to its conclusion. The most significant objections are that few or none of us have the presence of mind to succeed in life without a commitment to fairness, that a good way to acquire and maintain the reputation for being fair is to commit to fairness, that our consciences make our unfair dealings painful and debilitating to us, and that friendship is incompatible with being prepared to treat friends unfairly.

We haven't yet thought about the idea that fairness is good or produces good states of affairs while unfairness is bad. We haven't yet thought about the idea that treating people fairly is simply the right thing to do and it's simply wrong to treat people unfairly.

Both ideas, the one about good and bad and the one about right and wrong, can suggest criticisms of the thesis that commitment to fairness is foolish.

One criticism is that something's being good or right is a strong reason to honour that thing. It's being good or right is a strong reason to honour it whatever other reasons one might have, even reasons not to honour it that appeal to what would make one's life appear in one's eyes to be a life to prize. If one doesn't care about fairness, says this criticism, one is making a mistake, a serious mistake, even if one has no reason to care about fairness from the perspective of enjoying what one loves for its own sake.

Those are the ideas we will develop in this chapter. We will attempt to see whether from within the concepts of good and right we can find strong reason to commit ourselves to fairness (or to kindness, honesty, decency, respect or the general wellbeing of people (and other animals)).

First of all, though, we need to understand what something's being good or right might amount to. Let's begin with the concept of good.

2. *Good and bad*

When we talk about good or bad knives, we have a tolerably clear sense of what we mean or, at least, it's easy to ask someone who says of a knife that it's a good one just what he means. This knife is a good knife in that it can be used without much effort to cut things (or to stab them, or whatever). Something is a good thing if it lends itself to some purpose and serves that purpose well, perhaps better than do most things that lend themselves to it. If one has that purpose, it's useful to have at hand things that serve that purpose well. If your purpose is to cut things, it's useful to have a good knife or two at hand.

That a knife is a good knife is not something over and above the knife's serving a purpose efficiently. That is, we don't argue that a knife is a good knife by reasoning from its ability to serve a purpose efficiently. It's goodness just is its serving that purpose efficiently. We could say that calling a knife "good" is simply a way of summarizing our appreciation of just how easy and efficient it is to use.

A particular knife could be both a good knife and a bad toy. Its being a good knife consists in its being easy and efficient to use to cut certain things; its being a bad toy consists in its being able to cause distress should someone play around with it. Its being a good knife might be just why it's a bad toy. There is no contradiction in calling one and the same object both good and bad, then. It's a good knife but a bad toy.

We also have a tolerably clear sense of what we and others mean when we or they say of a day or a sunset that it's a good day or a good sunset. Days and sunsets aren't often used by us (though each of them could be) and so their goodness wouldn't always be the same as their ease and efficiency of use. We're saying instead that the day or sunset is pleasant or enjoyable or moving (in some way we like).

Again, that a day or a sunset is a good one is not an additional property on top of its pleasantness or its ability to cause us to have feelings we like to have. That a day is pleasant is not a reason to think it is good; rather, we call it "good" to summarize or express our liking of it. And a day can be both good and bad. The day was good by virtue of the weather, bad by virtue of the awful news that reached us on it.

In English, though, and in many other languages, "good" in some contexts has a peculiar meaning, one that is not at all tolerably plain, at least not tolerably plain to many of us. Some of us sometimes say of a person that she is good, or of a piece of music or work of art that it is good, or that happiness or prosperity or fairness or God is good. What are we saying when we say of such things that they are good?

Sometimes we mean about people and works of art or individual states of affairs or types of states of affairs just what we mean about knives or sunsets when we call them "good." We mean that they are easy to use for some purpose and serve that purpose well or that they afford us experiences that we enjoy or otherwise favour. But sometimes some people mean something different. Sometimes they mean that the work of art or the state of affairs has in addition to all its other properties the property of being good.

By virtue of having that property, the property goodness, the thing is to be esteemed. One who fails to esteem something good is making a sort of mistake, as one who thinks a shoe in a dark corner is a mouse is making a mistake, or as one who experiences a sudden splash of cold water as hot and pulls back from it is. Failing to esteem something good is like an error in perception. Or, perhaps, it is an error in judgement following a perception.

The claim that something is good in this new sense of "good" is not an expression or summation of the thing's usefulness or of our liking it. Its goodness is in addition to its usefulness or its ability to move us. That it is useful might function as a premise in an argument to its goodness. It is good because it is useful, but its goodness is not the same as its usefulness. We say that it is good and, perhaps, we like it, but our liking it is an appropriate response to its goodness; we don't say it is good to express our liking of it. Understanding it to be good but failing to like it is get wrong our affective response.

The idea is that some things are good, that goodness is a property intrinsic to them, that we can register in belief the goodness of a good thing, and that failing to acknowledge a good thing's goodness by esteeming the thing is to make a mistake, to get something about the world wrong.

Now, many people reject these contentions. They hold, rather, that nothing is either good or bad in itself in the sense at issue. We will consider their arguments soon. Right now, let us assume that some things are good and that their goodness is a property in addition to all their other properties (though the property of being good might depend or supervene on that thing's other properties). We'll assume all this in order to see whether the fact, supposing it to be a fact, that fairness is good, that fairness possesses intrinsically the property of goodness, gives a person a reason to be committed to fairness.

3. *Fairness might be both good and bad*

If I say that it's good to be fair and I say that it's good to be kind, you might think it will be easy to catch me in a contradiction. For suppose that the fair thing to do when the children compete and one child wins, another child places second, two tie for third, and a fifth child comes in last is to award the top prize to the one who came in first. No competitor cheated, the track put no one at a disadvantage, conditions were the same for all five, and everyone entered the competition freely and understood the prize structure. If it's good to be fair and the fair thing to do is to award the winner the top prize, then it is good to award the winner with the top prize.

One of the children who tied for third, though, is lonely and sad and he tried his very best. He wants to be successful but he never seems to manage it, at least not as well as any of the other children. He begins to cry as the prizes are wheeled out. Let's suppose the kind and considerate thing to do is to award him the top prize. We can even assume that the other children, kind and

generous as they are, want him to be awarded the top prize (and not only because they don't want to put up with his crying). The kind thing to do is to award the top prize to the child in need of bucking up and warm feelings; it's good to be kind; and, so, it is good to award the top prize to that particular third-place competitor.

That it's good to award the top prize to a third-place competitor would seem to imply that it's bad to award it to the first-place competitor instead. And so it's both good to award the top prize to the first-place competitor and bad to award it to the first-place competitor. Likewise, it is both good and bad to award it to a particular third-place competitor. It appears, then, that it is both good and not good to award top prize to the winning child and both good and not good to award top prize to the third-place child.

But nothing can both have and lack the one same property at the same time. (Nothing can be both made of bricks and not made of bricks at one and the same time; nothing can at one and the same time both possess and lack the property of being wet or of being red all over.)

The answer here is to say that things are good and bad only insofar as they have good- and bad-making features. Fairness is good, we are assuming, and so is kindness; thus, unfairness is bad and so is unkindness. Awarding the top prize to the winner is good, then, insofar as it is fair and fairness is good. Awarding the top prize to the winner is also bad, though, insofar as it is unkind (to one of the third-place competitors) and unkindness is bad. Awarding the top prize to the first-place competitor is both good (it's fair) and bad (it's unkind).

If I awarded the top prize to the weeping third placer, I would be doing good, insofar as I was being kind, and doing bad, insofar as I was being unfair.

Now those who think that fairness really is good, that all fair acts possess a degree of the property of goodness, and who think that kindness really is good, that all kind acts possess a degree of the property of goodness, might not be content to stop here, with the idea that individual things are good and bad only insofar as they have certain good- and bad-making properties. They might be committed to saying that although my giving the top prize to the winner was good insofar as giving it to the winner was the fair thing to do, giving it to the winner was to do something overall bad.

They might want to think that in the case at hand, it would have been better overall to be kind than to be fair. The good thing to do in the case, good by itself, not merely good insofar as something, was the kind thing. Kindness outweighed or was more important than fairness given all the facts of the situation. (Or the other way. Fairness was the supreme value to honour in the situation, even at the cost of being unkind to a child.)

To review: Some people think that some or other states of affairs in the world are good insofar as they possess good properties, such as fairness or kindness or happiness. They would think as well, of course, that these states of affairs could also be bad insofar as they possess bad properties. They think at least, then, that some properties or qualities or characteristics are good and others are bad (maybe most are neutral, neither good nor bad). But will they also think that concrete individual things can be good or bad?

If they are inclined to think that some good features are better than other good features, or that the good and bad features in a state of affairs combine to form a total degree of goodness, then they are inclined to think that not only is awarding the winner top prize good insofar as it is fair but that awarding the winner top prize is good (simply good, the best thing). Awarding the winner top prize is best, they would contend, because fairness is better than kindness (though both are good) or because, in the situation at hand, fairness is more important than or outweighs kindness.

Other philosophers, we should be aware, say that nothing at all is good or bad. That awarding the winner top prize is fair is a reason for those who value fairness to award the winner top prize and that awarding a third-place finisher top prize is kind is a reason for those who value kindness to award a third-place finisher top prize. A person who values both fairness and kindness will have a reason to award the winner top prize and a reason not to award the winner top prize. There's no good or bad (or better) about it. When a person has a reason for doing something and a reason for not doing it, all he can do is to consult his values to determine which, in the situation, he prefers, fairness or kindness.

4. *Its goodness as a reason for acting*

Let us now add, as part of our thought experiment, that fairness is good, that it is good to be fair. We believe that fairness is good and we believe truly, for fairness *is* good (we are supposing). Can this true belief support a commitment to be fair?

All told, then, we are supposing 1) that we accept that a commitment to fairness will prevent us from enjoying as much as we could the things we value for their own sakes, 2) that fairness is not among the things we value for their own sakes, at least not right now, 3) that we believe that fairness is good, and 4) that fairness really is good. What we want to know is whether, given what we are supposing, we have strong reason to commit ourselves to fairness.

Does our belief that fairness is good give us a reason to be fair? Not all by itself it doesn't, we might respond. By itself it is a belief (even if a true one). Beliefs are about how the world is. Because they are about how the world is, they are not motives to do anything. But a reason a person might have to do something must include a motive. Since a belief is not motivating, a belief cannot all by itself be a reason to do something.

Reasons to do something would seem to be belief-desire pairs. That you believe there's orange juice in the fridge does not by itself move you to get off the couch. That you believe there's orange juice in the fridge and you want (desire, would like) some orange juice, though, can get you off the couch and walking toward the fridge. Your reason for going to the fridge to get orange juice has two elements to it: your desire for orange juice and your belief that there's orange juice in the fridge.

A reason to do something has as its components a desire and a belief together. The desire motives you and the belief guides you. Your desire to watch the next episode of *The Queen's Gambit* will leave you agitated but inactive unless you have a belief how to watch the next episode of *The Queen's Gambit*; your belief how to watch the next episode of the *The Queen's Gambit* might please you if you like knowing things, but it won't issue in behaviour meant to help you to watch the next episode of *The Queen's Gambit* unless you desire to watch the next episode.

Desires (wants, likings) motivate but do not guide; beliefs guide but do not motivate. Without motivation, no action and without guidance, no action. For anything you do intentionally, you wanted something and you thought you had a likely (or, at least, possible) route to it.

Now, that you want to get some sleep and believe that by going to bed you will get some sleep might not lead you to bed to get some sleep. It is true that you have a desire (to get some sleep) and a belief how to satisfy that desire (go to bed), and it is true that a belief-desire pair such as you have is a reason to go to bed. You do, then, have a reason to go to bed. But you might at the same time have a reason to do something incompatible with going to bed. You might want to find out what your friend intends to do tomorrow and believe that by talking with her you could find out. But you cannot both talk with your friend and go to bed to sleep at the same time. If you want more to find out what your friend intends to do tomorrow than to get some sleep, you won't go to bed, even though you have a reason to go to bed.

You believe that fairness is good but a belief by itself cannot lead to an action. For your belief that fairness is good to become part of a reason to do the fair thing, then, it needs to be brought into contact with something you desire or want or like. If you want to promote goodness or want that goodness increase, then your belief that fairness is good might trigger you to do the fair thing. Fairness is good, I want that goodness increase, and thereby I have a reason to do the fair thing.

Our question was whether the belief that fairness is good gives one a reason to be fair. No, it doesn't, not all by itself, for a reason to do something is a belief-desire pair and the belief that fairness is good is merely a belief, not a belief-desire pair. Your belief that fairness is good gives you a reason to be fair, then, only if you also want to be good or want to increase the goodness in the world or that you like goodness.

(But is it true that no beliefs are motivating? If you think that the belief that fairness is good can all by itself motivate a person who holds that belief to honour fairness in their actions, then you may hold that the belief that fairness is good does all by itself give a person a reason to honour fairness in their actions. You would, though, be rejecting the view that a reason to do something must be a belief-desire pair.)

Your commitment to fairness, we are imagining, rests on your belief that fairness is good, but it can rest on that belief only if that belief is paired with the desire to be or to do good (if it's true that a belief cannot be a reason to do something except in conjunction with a desire). What about that desire, then: is it wise or foolish to desire to be or to do good?

Our task was to see whether the belief that fairness is good could provide us with a reason for being fair that doesn't have to do with our enjoyment of the things that we love. Our conclusion so far is simply that if the belief that fairness is good provides us with a reason to be fair, it does so because we want to be good (or we desire to be good or we would like to be good).

5. *Its being right as a reason for acting*

People, objects, states of affairs, we have been supposing, can be good. Let us say that each state of affairs is good to some degree or not good. If it is not good, it might be neutral (neither good nor bad) or it might be bad to some degree.

The term "good" seems to apply to states of affairs, not to actions. Actions, it seems, lend themselves to be characterized as right or wrong (or neutral). Bestowing the top prize on the sensitive third-place finisher is an action and it might be the right thing to do. It would be the right thing to do if two conditions are met. First, that it's right to be kind. Given that it's right to be kind, giving the third-place finisher top prize is right insofar as doing so is kind. Second, that the rightness of being kind in this case outweighs or otherwise takes precedence over the wrongness of being unfair.

Suppose we believe that giving the top prize to the sensitive third-place competitor is the unique right thing to do in this case, the truly right thing overall to do. Does our belief give us a reason to give that competitor the top prize? Again, that belief is just a belief, so it cannot be the whole of our reason. We need to have a motivation for doing the right thing. That is, we have a reason to give the third-place competitor the top prize when we believe doing so is the right thing to do and we want (desire, would like) to do the right thing.

(But is the thesis that all reasons to do things are belief-desire pairs true, as we are supposing? Do you have an argument that Sally's belief that Xing is the right thing to do can, all by itself, be for Sally a reason to X?)

If we are wise to be committed to doing the right thing, we need to determine the wisdom of wanting to do the right thing.

6. *Good and right as empty*

Sally believes that giving the top prize to the winner is the fair thing to do and that the fair thing to do is (in these circumstances) the overall right thing to do. Since Sally wants to do the overall right thing in the case, Sally has a reason to give the winner the top prize.

Sally believes that giving the top prize to the winner will best serve fairness and that best serving fairness (in these circumstances) will best serve the good. Since Sally wants that things in this case be good to the highest degree, Sally has a reason to give the top prize to the winner.

Notice that both the belief that the fair thing to do would promote the good and the belief that the fair thing to do is the right thing to do are extra steps Sally does not need to take in order to do the fair thing. Sally's belief that rewarding the winner is fair is enough, so long as Sally wants to be fair. Sally does not have to believe that rewarding the winner is the best thing to do or the right thing to do in order to reward the winner. Sally can reward the winner out of a commitment to fairness alone. Sally doesn't have to have any belief at all about the goodness or rightness of fairness.

Sally believes it fair to reward the winner but kind to reward the sensitive third placer. She wants to be fair and she wants to be kind, so she has a reason to reward the winner with the prize and a reason to reward the sensitive third placer with the prize. She understands there is only one prize

and so she knows that she cannot award a prize (or the same prize) to both the winner and the sensitive third placer. Sally's commitment to fairness is stronger than her commitment to kindness, though, and she gives the prize to the winner. She gave the prize to the winner, then, because she wanted more to be fair than to be kind or more that the event be marked by fairness than by kindness.

Notice that nowhere in Sally's thought need appear the idea that fairness or kindness is good or that it's right to be fair or to be kind. Nowhere in her thoughts need appear the idea that fairness (in the case at hand) is better or more important than kindness. Sally need have no thoughts at all about goodness or rightness.