

AN ATHEIST'S VALUES ON BEING A GOOD PERSON

Richard Robinson, *An Atheist's Values*, 1964.

Richard Robinson in this well written and once popular book is clear that secular values are needed and can be justified without God and indeed should be. He did not like the term humanist but did accept being labelled as a liberal. Robinson was a true atheist and nothing in his work can be said to have smuggled in Christian values. For example, he rejects love of neighbour in favour of making a choice not to make others more miserable than what they are or can be. So he is not about good directly. He cautions that good is always flawed and has the power to go wrong. He wants us to give ourselves the gift of living in reality not some illusion.

Robinson showed in his book that it is hard to know if something is really that good for if we call something good we end up being unable to prove it or be that sure. That was just good he was talking about but what about good as in what people do? That is different. He gives a good reason why we must put truth first for goodness is hard to implement in a world of lies when you don't know what you are working against.

QUOTE: "Every statement by its nature invites general acceptance or rejection. If we declare it false, we imply that all men should reject it. If we declare it true, we imply that all men should accept it. That is the primary function of the words 'true' and 'false'. They indicate the adoption and rejection of statements."

QUOTE: What things are good? ... What sort of question is it, then? ... The answer lies in the word 'practical'. It is a practical question, that is, a question of practice, of action, of what to do. To wonder whether a thing is good is to wonder what to do with regard to it, as whether to pursue it, to praise it, to preserve it. To conclude that it is good is not to reach a belief as to its qualities and peculiarities, but rather to reach an attitude towards it, an evaluation of it, and a decision how to behave with regard to it...to call a thing good is not to describe it, or register it as possessing a certain property, but to appraise it, or reaffirm one's appraisal of it.

QUOTE: "The view, that the question What things are good? is one of choice rather than one of objective fact, arouses various objections, among which are the following.

1. It is sometimes objected that the view is wicked. To hold it, and to deny that there is such a thing as an objective property of goodness, is thought to be wrong in itself. Thus Professor H. J. Paton defined the good man precisely as 'one who acts on the supposition that there is an unconditioned and objective moral standard holding for all men in virtue of their rationality as human beings' (*The Moral Law*, p. 7). From this it follows that he who does not act on the supposition of an objective standard is by definition not a good man.

2. Secondly, it is often felt that the subjective view is intensely depressing. If there is no objective good to pursue, then, some people think, all our choices are pointless and futile, and therefore life itself is futile. Whatever we choose, we might just as well have chosen something else.

3. Thirdly, it is often thought that the subjective view has the depressing consequence that we shall never reach agreement about the good and the bad, because there is no objective fact to control our thoughts and bring them into agreement, while there is a strong force tending to make us disagree, namely the private and exclusive interest of each one of us. The prospect of eternal disagreement is depressing in itself; and it is likely to lead to desperate and endless fighting, because men feel so strongly about the good and the bad.

Let us consider these three objections. The first of them, namely that the subjective view is as such wicked, is to be rejected as false. The good man is not to be defined as he who believes some complicated and learned proposition, whether this is Professor Paton's Kantian proposition, or the Athanasian creed, or any other. It has been a recurring temptation of theologians and moralists to place human goodness in the act of believing some sophisticated proposition beyond the comprehension of most people. Yet it has always been obvious that a good person may be incapable even of understanding these creeds, while, on the other hand, some who believed them have been wicked men and acted horribly. It is perfectly plain that the good man is not this. The good man is he who displays the virtues. That is to say, the good man is he who is brave, temperate, just, wise, benevolent, and so on. Of course! What could be more obvious?

The other two objections are both to be dismissed as irrelevant. They both urge that the subjective view is depressing, as if that were relevant to the question whether it is true. But whether a view is depressing or not has, evidently, nothing to do with whether it is true. And that is the end of that.

COMMENT: But if good is practical and the truth about good is depressing and considering how degrading depression is then good is just a form of mild evil or grey - a mix of good and evil - we need for the alternative is worse.

Robinson is wrong in the following, "It is common experience that in deliberative bodies, where practical choices have to be made, those who see the matter as one of objective right and wrong are much more likely to remain in disagreement with each other than those who see it as a question of compromising between different people's wishes."

Surely to say that it is objectively true we should not have objective ideas about right and wrong is just another problem? It depends but it is the case that once people start saying right is not fact based and neither is wrong they soon eat up devouring each other in discord.

A problem does happen if people go beyond saying principles such as love and justice are what is really true and uses this as an excuse for saying their idea of what is right in some situation is just right and there is no debate. You may regard abortion as totally wrong but allow it when the foetus has no brain for that is not abortion for there is no potential human life.

The wise give good reasons for their actions and this does not need to be complicated. They have to know why and though they may be influenced by subjective causes such as feelings and bias it cannot be entirely subjective. We should not use the subjectivity involved in somebody's moral perceptions and actions as an excuse for saying morality is just about subjective things.

QUOTE: "People sometimes renounce the effort to give a reason for their choice. They feel that they could only say part of it, and that to represent a part of it as the reason would be to misrepresent the choice. Hence choice often looks like intuition, that is, like something totally unreasoned. It often looks like intuition even to the wise chooser himself, who has really reviewed a great deal of matter in making it. Good choice is all-considering; and the all-considering sometimes looks like the nothing-considering."

COMMENT: It is said that choice without self-sacrifice and self-giving is just a form of barbarism and selfishness. In other words, choice is okay but is not a license to avoidably hurt others.

Choice is made for good thought out sincere reasons but intuition and bias get mixed in. You want to choose not be biased by unconscious pressures imposed by yourself and your wider community. Something you think is you could be bias. So how much of a choice really is choice? Some choices are not choices at all. Intuition is not a reason but a hunch pretending to be a reason. If you have reasons what if intuition is giving you the reasons meaning you are taking its word for it that these are the reasons? Anyway no reason is that certain for you can have the wrong reasons. You may mistake what intuition is telling you to do for a reason for doing it. You get the feeling your marriage is over and you think the reason you are divorcing is that your marriage is over. You are confusing a reason with an intuition. An intuition is often inspired by what you want to believe and how you want to dress up a desire as a reason. This shows the sinister side of all choices even good ones.

Choice to be choice has to be free from pressure and lies and manipulation. Choice is going to sometimes lead to barbarism for we do not live in a society or a religion that really has that much respect for your choice.

QUOTE: "Every good thing is connected to many bad things. There hardly is such a thing as an 'innocent' pleasure. There hardly is a pain unrelated to any good. At any rate all great goods, all goods that count a lot in men's lives, are great evils too. What do you consider a great good? Religion? Political equality? Love? The good will? Each of these has done terrible harm. Any person who sets up some one good as a perfectly safe end, who thinks that this end justifies any means and any consequences, like Madame de Maintenon thinking that religion justifies the killing of Protestant Christians, is a grave danger to the world. How then can it be wise to set up any goods for oneself at all if they are all evils too? How can it be prudent to offer any answer to the question What things are good? if all things do harm? Since all great goods are greatly harmful sometimes, it seems foolish to affirm them and set them up as objects of enthusiasm and pursuit."

COMMENT: It shows that we have to go for the goods that have the less chance of backfiring. It shows that we have to be wary of good people and of many goods. And its only time shows if a good is really as good as you thought it would be.

We may have an explanation for why every human being could do good of a certain type and won't. The rich person fears going out to feed the poor in case he will be attacked or robbed or fears that he is not giving the poor the chance to stand on their own two feet.

Robinson says that the alternative to having goods that can do harm and often do is having no goods at all so we should aim for the goods anyway. That is actually a realistic approach but is very negative. Its not very joyful. Human nature has that attitude though it is not necessarily aware of it which explains ingratitude and why it is so rife. It explains why we live in a world with a low mood.

QUOTE: "There seems to be something wrong about the very idea of a list of goods. Such a list must, it seems, be endless and it must co-ordinate things that are not on the same level. Freedom, equality, reason, beauty, love, truth, morality, worship, justice, life, pleasure, happiness, democracy, virtue, power, progress, art, importance -- it seems that this can never come to an end, and that anyhow it destroys a certain differentiation and articulation of factors and aspects in the good. We must admit, I think, that there is something essentially inadequate about a list or creed of great goods. We must admit that there can be no systematic list, because goods are on different levels and in different dimensions, and no complete list, because we do not want our ideal to be finished. A list of great goods, therefore, can only be a list of those things which at the time seem most important or specially engage the author's devotion; and such is the present course."

COMMENT: A list can cause problems for what is best now keeps changing. He should say that reason, the power to analyse and assess any situation to your best ability, is the top good and the one that should assess the others. What use is a promising marriage that is not thought out properly?

Robinson mentions the doctrine of some that when considering how you must have means to an end or goal some say only the goal is good or matters. Other say only the means matters (pragmatism). He warns it is terrible to call the end or the means worthless in that way. Both are important.

He mentions the difference between something being just good or good in itself and the alternative something being good just because of what it leads to or comes with it.

I would remind you that an act may indeed bring other things with it but sometimes the other things are not brought with it but just come with it. Study leads to better performance in exams. Study does not necessarily have anything to do with confidence but confidence can come with it. This makes it very hard to tell if something really is good in itself for we cannot even be sure if other things are telling us it is good.

Those who judge an act by the results say an act could be bad or natural but the end result makes it good. Their rivals say the good results only happen if you at least meant well and the act probably was good in spite of yourself. The good comes because the act was good.

"Moore in Principia Ethica adopted the distinction between being good in itself and being good as a means to something else, and expressed it as the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goodness (pp. 21-27). He regarded the search for the good as the search for intrinsic goodness only. It is an error, he wrote, p. 187, to suppose that 'what seems absolutely necessary here and now, for the existence of anything good ... is therefore good in itself.'"

I could mention that this by definition shows there is no God. The concept is inherently mistaken and irrational. What is good for making us feel safer or like somebody we can pray to or get guidance from is not thereby made inherently good. So God is bad for it is an attempt to fake inherent goodness. It does not matter what your intention is. You are the enemy of good.

Robinson says that if you take equality as an example, it does not matter if person x says it is good only because of what it leads to and if person y says it is good in itself and is not about what it will result in. This is why he thinks those philosophies of means and ends are mistaken. They try to make it one or the other. For Robinson, the moral and good person says, "Equality or justice attract me to you so I love you." It is not, "Is justice right for God says so or something makes it right?"

At this point what if we talk about x saying prayer to God is good in itself and y who says it is good for the results seem to be confidence and a sense of repentance from evil. Robinson says that equality with its imperfection is still a good enough good to justify people working for it and if they think it is inherently good or only a way to good that does not matter. You cannot put prayer on a superior level or equal level to equality. It poses as a great good that asks the creator of all to be present in a situation. It poses as the thing that should exist if say there is a choice between prayer and equality and one has to be eliminated. So prayer is evil. It is not necessary the way bread is or equality is.

Robinson writes, "Nine tenths of our actual reasons for thinking a thing good are its consequences, those who say they are looking for ends, and decline to consider consequences, find very few things good. They impoverish the world. They come out with a disappointingly small set of things worth having or doing. Thus G. E. Moore, who is perhaps the most resolute excluder of all consequences and all 'extrinsic' goodness, comes to the strange conclusions that virtue is not much of a good, and that in fact only two things are very good, the perception of beauty and personal affection. To insist on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic is to be in danger of emptying life of interest and satisfaction. It is a great pity to be reduced to saying that, for example, 'the individual personality of man alone has intrinsic and ultimate worth' (Ernest Barker, Reflections on Government, pp. 15-16). It is a great pity to say of anything that it is the only ultimate good."

At this point, we can be sure that those who say God is a fact and his moral rules are facts about morality are covering up that they only care about consequences as much as anybody else does. They deceitfully want to pretend to know what is right and wrong while all the while taking advantage of a less imprisoning view.

“It is a great mistake to say 'So and so is merely a means; therefore it has no fundamental value. We do, in fact, value profoundly a number of things which, when we examine them, we seem to be valuing purely for their results. Political goods like democracy are notable examples. Our whole recommendation of them may consist in pointing out that they are means to other goods. Yet we consider them also very great goods in themselves. They engage our emotions profoundly. And it is sometimes good that they should do so. It is sometimes an error to try to loosen our affection for them by saying that they are mere means, or merely extrinsic goods. In my recital of goods I shall therefore not reject anything on the ground that it is merely extrinsic, and I shall frequently recommend things by their consequences.’”

Robinson writes, “To this discussion of ends and means I will append some comment on the common phrase 'the end justifies the means'. It is a common gambit in argument to suggest that your opponent is implying the doctrine that the end justifies the means, and to infer from this that he is wrong, because this doctrine is odious. This gambit is always bad and should never be used. The doctrine that the end justifies the means is not odious; it is meaningless. What end? And what means? It is obviously true that some ends justify some means; for example, if you want to smoke a cigarette, that justifies you in making a spill out of yesterday's newspaper and setting it alight. It is obviously false that all ends justify all means; for example, if you want to smoke a cigarette, that does not justify you in making a spill out of a five-pound note and setting it alight. Sometimes the proposed means is justified and sometimes it is not. We have to judge separately for each given case whether it is justified. The blanket condemnation of an opponent, on the ground that he has allowed the end to justify the means, is therefore absurd. One might as well issue a blanket condemnation of eating, because people sometimes eat when they ought not to.”

He writes, "An end is not always something which we intend to effect by means of some cause. It can be anything which we intend, whether we require some means in order to produce it, or can produce it directly without any means. Your intention and end may be to light a fire, in which case you will have to look for some means, such as a match. But it may also be to sing, in which case you will not have to look for any means; you will just sing. Thus ends and means are not correlative. Every means is the means to some end; but not every end is the effect of some means." This makes it hard to aim for a real good end. Intention is not that practical. You can poison somebody and they go to hospital and in the process of saving them a tumour is found that would not otherwise have been found and the person ends up better off than if you had never poisoned them. So you are using a means to an end but the wrong end is the one that ends up happening. You can save a baby and that baby grows up to be a mass murderer. You may say you cannot know what the baby will be but you do know what he can be. We cannot be smug and say there is no bad side to the good we do and we would be pretending if we said that.

Most people want good and evil to be about a command, "Thou shalt not do evil." When they talk about good that is what good means, "Thou shalt not do evil". Robinson says this command is not practical for it does not tell us what evil is. It cannot tell us if it can be avoided either. It is made harder by the fact that as Robinson says, "Every means is the means to some end; but not every end is the effect of some means."

We should end with the following, “Wise choice proceeds upon principles. Placing an action under a principle relates it to all the other possible actions flowing from that principle. Practical principles include moral laws, maxims of prudence, statements of standards, and the individual's private rules. Practical principles are themselves choices. That is, to have one and act on it is to have adopted and be carrying out a general choice.”