

AN ATHEIST SEARCHES FOR GOOD AS IN PROPERTY OF GOODNESS

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.

THE SEARCH FOR THE PROPERTY GOODNESS

Robinson insists: “the question What is the good? is false, and must be not answered but rewritten. How can we rewrite Plato's question so as to eliminate the falsehood it implied, while retaining as much as possible of its spirit and intention?”

At this point I assert that the idea of God says that whether the answer is yes its God or it is not or does not matter the question must be asked. It is implicitly asked when you consider giving any devotion to God. But the question is rubbish which shows that God or even considering faith is rubbish.

Robinson: “The first rewriting that comes to mind is: What is the supreme good?, or What is the best thing?” So this is not about the good but about the best of many goods. Nobody asks that unless they see God as a possible even if unlikely answer.

Robinson says with Mill that since the start of philosophy people seem no nearer to being unanimous on the subject.

That nobody can answer proves that God is not a necessity for meaning in life or goodness and politics and schools and parents have a lot to answer for for promoting the God idea.

Anyway Robinson says, “This rewriting will not do any better than the original question. Though it no longer implies the obvious falsehood that there is only one good thing, it now implies something not at all obviously true, namely that there is some one thing that is better than all other things. This is not necessarily so. There may be no best thing, either because three things are all equally good and each better than any fourth thing, or because what is best in the universe changes from time to time. Even if there is a best thing, it may be so little better than a host of other good things as to deserve no more attention than any of them. The phrases summum bonum and 'supreme good' are dubious in the same way as the recent phrase 'maximizing total welfare'. It seems probable that there always could be a higher degree of welfare than there is, and always could be a greater good than there is. Anyhow, we hope and believe that it is always possible to have greater goods than we have; and we want all goods, not merely one of them even if it is the best.”

At this point it is clear that asking what the best or most important good is does not necessarily lead to God or religion. When God cannot be the answer to what is the best how can he be the answer to what is the good?

I see that if God is the only true good then faith in this good in a sense is as good. The beautiful picture is important in itself but only becomes important to me if I have beautiful eyesight too! Faith in God then is as much God as God which is why it is so dangerous. It's a God alongside God and as Jesus said God and mammon can't both be gods to you then the need for a God alongside God is really showing you have made your choice – it's really the other god you want!

One might say, “It is obvious that if there is a God then he should have the power to be bigger than our faith and help us and connect with us equally with or without it. We can have a relationship with an unknown God.” That is not a relationship. Its only in your head that it is! Liberal religion including liberal Christianity keeps promoting this rubbish which has proved to be just as nasty as clear belief in a specific monotheistic God. Liberals are just fundamentalists in their own way.

Robinson then explores the notion that the best good is the good that is the standard for all other goods. This I must mention is closer to the idea of God as being the supreme or sole or ultimate moral standard. It is not too close though which again shows God is dispensable.

He says, "This second rewriting will not do either. It is good to have particular standards for particular purposes. For example, it is a good thing to have standards for eating-apples. But it would not do to take the standard for eating-apples and turn it into a standard for apples in general. We may reject an apple for eating and yet accept it as good for cooking. We insist on using both standards -- the eating standard and the cooking standard. Nor can one say that, if we put the two together, the eating plus the cooking standard, then we have the standard for apples; because we also insist on keeping always open the possibility of adopting yet more standards in the future, perhaps one for cider apples and another one for apples to decorate the house, and always the possibility of yet another some day. But if the good were a standard it would be a standard for everything. That is what would be meant by calling it the standard. Hence it would involve rejecting now for all time to come everything that did not conform to itself. To answer the question what the good is, in this sense, would be to legislate now for every valuation we are ever to make. That would be foolish, and we intend not to do it. We intend to leave ourselves free to adopt new standards of goodness in the future as events suggest them to us. If we adopted a standard good, we should be rejecting all future novelty and creativeness of the highest sort. We have seen too much already of new kinds of good thing being despised because they did not conform to adopted standards, and we want no more of it. Thus we cannot accept Plato's question in this form either, though I shall later adopt another sort of standard."

He rejects the "religious version" of the question, "Nor can we accept, thirdly, the religious version of Plato's question, as meaning What is the end for man? or What is the purpose of life? There is no one purpose that all of us ought to adopt. A multiplicity of different ways of living may be good, some of them not yet imagined by anybody. People who tell us that the end of human life is so and so are in effect commanding us to do that, choosing our ends for us. But they have no right to do so."

I would add that this worries about the human need for meaning. But a genuinely religious question worries only about what God wants us to mean? If its all about God then he will make us need only him. That is not a human meaning though it is humans who have it. Its another way of God making it all about him.

Experience shows that we have many purposes so we should suppose that those who go on about a religious goal and purpose as if it had to be only religious and only one are just lying.

Robinson writes, "It would be wrong for a father to say to his child: 'I begot you in order to have support when I am past work; therefore you ought to support me.' It would be equally wrong for a god to say to his creature: 'I created you in order to do so and so; therefore you ought to do so and so.' If you procreate a child to get a nurse for your old age, or a plaything, or a defender of the State, your intention does not oblige your child to seek the end you had in mind. Similarly, if a god created us human beings for some end which he had in mind, his act does not morally oblige us to pursue that end. No person, human or divine, has a right to prescribe another person's ends."

Robinson shows that the idea of God is inherently evil and evil in its results. The followers are as bad as God for saying, "God made you and gave you all you have so you must live and act as if he needs you. He does not but that is not the point. It only right to devote yourself. It is the principle."

Next, "I come now to a fourth rewriting of Plato's question, namely: What things are good? In this form the question at last seems to presuppose nothing false. It presupposes now only that there are some things and that some of them might possibly be good; and this we are confident enough is true."

But,

"On the other hand, this is a disappointing change at first, because the question in losing its falsehood seems also to have lost its thrill. The mystery and holiness of the good have vanished."

So it's a secular matter and religion has nothing to say. Making it anything else is only making the problem of good worse. If people struggle with good because they want magic, that is what they want in mystery and holiness, then they want good on their terms. They don't want to let good be good. It is about their version of good.

It can be said that it does not matter what good is supposed to be only that we still think we know when we see it and that is all that matters. Nobody largely goes too far wrong though errors happen. Some people see hedonism as beautiful! If we cannot see God but we see good then that shows we should not make one equal to the other. Be good not godly! We also see how imperfect good is. That probably is the reason we don't want to admit seeing it and want God and other gimmicks to tell us that full unadulterated good is in fact out there.

Because you can be wrong about what is just good and nothing really is just good you might want to ask like Robinson does if you can know if something is just good and if you can then how?

Just looking helps a lot but is not definite.

Evidence is good but evidence cannot show that something is just good.

Looking and evidence are good but they cannot help us see if something is just good. If something is just good then its goodness is not certain and can be doubted when it will not respond to good tests. Real good respects and thrives on other goods such as those tests. The test of intuition is what we are going to look at next and it is the worst test and does not deserve respect.

DO YOU KNOW IF SOMETHING REALLY IS JUST GOOD (IE GOOD IN ITSELF)?

Robinson brings up G. E. Moore in his famous Principia Ethica that nothing is OBVIOUSLY good in itself. "He wrote that 'no relevant evidence whatever can be adduced' (P.E. viii). He was referring to the question, What kind of things ought to exist for their own sakes?; but he regarded that as equivalent to the question, What kind of things are good in themselves? He held that there can be evidence that a thing is good as a means to something else, because there can be evidence whether it does produce that other thing; but there can be no evidence that it is good in itself. And this certainly seems to be correct. You cannot infer the goodness of a thing from laws of nature, because laws of nature do not mention goodness. Goodness is not a property that we see or hear or smell or taste in the course of observing the world and acquiring evidence."

So we cannot directly know if God or faith in God or compassion or fresh drinking water are ever good in themselves. Evidence is no help.

Moore suggested though we can tell indirectly if something is just good or intrinsically good. He suggested the method of isolation. Robinson writes, "The method of isolation is thus a sort of experiment in imagination. In order to test whether a thing is intrinsically good, one imagines the universe as consisting in nothing but that thing, existing quite alone, and then asks oneself whether it is good. In order to test whether one thing is intrinsically better than another, one imagines first a universe consisting solely of the one, and then a universe consisting solely of the other, and compares them. Moore's famous comparison of the two worlds, one very beautiful and one very ugly, and neither of them containing any sentient being, is, I suppose, an example of the method, though it occurs before he has described it (pp. 83-84). Thus the method can tell us, he thought, whether beauty is good in itself."

Robinson says, "It is clearly a method for obtaining reliable intuitions, intuition being knowledge obtained without inference. It is not a way of inferring that a thing is good in itself, but a way of getting oneself into a position to see that it is good in itself. It is a method for producing sharp mental vision, just as opening one's eyes and adjusting the light are methods for producing sharp physical vision."

But is it any good in practice? It might be good but of no practical use in our lives. We cannot live around the principle of isolation. "To choose goods for whose warrant we had only the method of isolation would be unreasonable. There is nothing to prevent it from pronouncing good something that we all abhor." I would add that the problem here is a practical one – if a person seems convinced the method shows that killing babies is good there is nothing you can do or say. Yet when you think about it is there really any other way to do it? You can only hope most people will intuit like you that murdering babies is wrong. Goodness is not an antidote to fear but linked to fear. No matter what, the principle shows you are trying to find the good. That is better than simply taking anything for granted. Better to test and get it wrong than not to test at all.

When you realise that God means a being that has no parts and which is so different from any existing thing you cannot see anything appealing about him. You cannot use his justice and love as a help for they are too abstract. The intuition then should show that God is not good in itself as a suggestion and if God is real he is still not good in himself. Moreover in Christian belief, God is that which you have to have a relationship with for if you don't you twist yourself so that you will spend eternity away from him lost. So there are two sides. To affirm Hell is to affirm God in this scheme.

If we need intuition then in the way the principle says, then though we cannot and do not have the time to use the time, we are just using another form of intuition.

The principle is God in the sense that it is better than God and judges even God!

CONTRADICTION?

How can I say that good is really grey and that is shown by how it evades goods such as evidence and sensing? Intuiting can be left out for it is too prone to misperception to rely on.

The answer is you know what you need for good and that is good. But you never hit the goal too well. Take good as in good action. 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.

CONCLUSION

Robinson, “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.'” Good may be real but we see it through a fog which is why we should not turn our ideas about good into ideas about God. Instead of making an idol from ashes and dirt we make one from blurry ideas of good that may be just our ideas and somebody else may see through the fog better. Good is a problem not in itself but with us and our embrace of it for evidence cannot show us for certain what is good. Evidence cannot tell us and intuition cannot do it either.

