Introduction

If we try to think of wholly good persons, then many of the examples that spring to mind will very likely be of people that are good in a naïve rather than a philosophically informed way. Taking some fictional examples we might for instance think of people like Jane Bennet in Pride and Prejudice, Sonia Marmeladov in Crime and Punishment, Prince Myshkin in The Idiot, or Melanie Wilkes in Gone with the Wind. Individuals like these are of course to a large extent characterised by their benevolent inclinations, but there is also something more: a tender and generous innocence. They are humble in their views of themselves and, perhaps more importantly, they also tend to interpret other people charitably, understanding bad actions as the fruits of misunderstandings or occasional lapses of judgment rather than as the products of any inherent immoral motivations. These persons have a form of character that might be referred to as ‘naïvely benevolent’ and while their moral goodness is quite striking to the reader of the works in which they are featured, what is even more striking is the absence of this kind of character type from the writings of moral philosophers.

Now, some might of course question the value of taking one’s cue from literary examples. But there are a number of reasons for doing so. To begin with, ‘real-life’ persons are always more difficult to assess since we seldom have the kind of access to their psyches that would enable us to make any kind of qualified judgment. Furthermore, given that ethical theorising must always take its cue from common sense, there are surely worse ways to draw on common sense than by taking seriously character portraits painted by such perceptive authors like Dostoyevsky and Austen. Of course, the characters mentioned above are hardly among their more interesting creations, yet we should probably not expect anything else. Simone Weil was probably right when she wrote that ‘Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating’ (Weil, 1977, p. 382). The naïvely benevolent person is a harmonious figure and the kind of tender beauty that lies in the harmonious is, however exquisite it can be, rarely as intellectually exciting as the disharmonious. The disharmonious might however not always be as stimulating to be around as it is to behold from a distance. Thus, while we qua readers certainly might find Scarlett O’Hara more sparkling than Melanie Wilkes, and Elizabeth Bennet more intriguing than her sister, such literary preferences hardly invalidate the claim that naïve benevolence is what moral goodness is about.

And yet moral philosophers have been prone to paint a somewhat different picture, namely one that accords much greater worth to the self-conscious exercise of reason. Such an approach is perhaps above all associated with Kant, but played an important role already in Aristotle’s ethics. Since the Kantian and Aristotelian approaches are the major ethical theories which, in opposition to standard forms of utilitarianism, place a direct moral importance on the kind of mentality from which our actions spring, this means that the standard philosophical understanding of moral goodness diverges quite clearly from the literary conception of human goodness that I have given some examples of here. In this essay I will try to conceptualise and argue for this ideal of naïve benevolence in a way that, while not modelled on any specific literary persona, will make room for understanding the above-mentioned characters as moral exemplars, thereby also taking a first step in an argument that the ideal of naïve benevolence is superior to traditional conceptualisations of moral goodness.

Reflexivity and Human Goodness

While there might quite clearly be many non-human animals that behave towards us in all kinds of beneficent ways, we would not say of any of them that they are capable of moral goodness. The reason for this is pretty straightforward: to be capable of moral agency, and thus, a fortiori, of moral goodness, one must be self-conscious in the sense that one is aware of oneself as a self among other selves. This reflexivity of the human mind is involved in at least two abilities that are both of profound importance for the ethical. The first is that we have the ability to step back and reason about what we ought to do rather than simply just behave in whichever way our inclinations push us. The second is that we have the ability to feel with other people in a way that involves an understanding of the other and not just a mere mindless mimicking of their feelings.

Few people would want to deny the moral relevance of either of these abilities, but even if we grant that both are important there is still a question about which is the most important. Those who emphasise the first one might be called rationalists and those who emphasise the second one might be called sentimentalists. Within each of these categories one might formulate ideals of human goodness, but such accounts will differ in tone. As already hinted at, Aristotle and Kant should probably both be understood as presenting rationalist visions of human goodness. With regard to Kant, this classification is quite straightforward since he so clearly articulates a picture of the moral life as the struggle of practical reason against ever-recalcitrant inclinations. However, in this struggle also lies the possibility of a uniquely human grandeur; as beings of reason we can rise above our basically animal inclinations and lay down our own laws. Kant’s view on virtue is, accordingly, that it consists in ‘the power to master one’s inclinations when they rebel against the law’ (Kant, 1991, p. 383’). This does not mean that he is oblivious to the affective side, such as benevolence, but its importance is still of a strictly derivative

---

1 Page numbers in my references to Kant are given according to the pagination in the Prussian Academy edition of Kant’s works.
kind. If we turn to Aristotle he is perhaps somewhat more difficult to classify since according to him the virtues essentially involve affective elements, but one should keep in mind that his vision of virtue is still one of being governed by reason. In the Aristotelian picture, we are such that we can be drawn to extremes by our inclinations and the ethical struggle is to achieve a balance between them. Aristotle certainly has a ‘thicker’ conception of practical reason than Kant, but both writers still present accounts of morality centred on the rule of reason.

Rationalists like Kant and Aristotle are surely correct in pointing to the reflexive nature of the human mind, but as has already been suggested, reflexivity involves more than opening up the possibility of being ruled by reason. For instance, as human beings we alone are able to take pleasure in the suffering of others. There are creatures that might take pleasure in behaving in ways that cause suffering, but since they are not reflexive in the sense that we are, they cannot take pleasure in knowing that the other feels in a certain way. Being reflexive is something that enables us to change our perception of the world in a way that is not inherently self-centred in the manner of an animal. It allows a kind of character that is built on the recognition of the other as another, equally real self. One possible position is thus the one taken by Colin McGinn (1997, Ch. 4), namely that moral goodness is centred around the trait of taking pleasure in the pleasure of others and that evil is centred around the trait of taking pleasure in the suffering of others. Although the conception of goodness that I will present here has more elements to it than McGinn’s, the heart of it is very much in line with his position.

As already noted, this kind of sentimentalist vision of human goodness has on the whole not been prevalent among moral philosophers although, as my literary examples show, it is still a picture that has a footing in common sense moral discourse. In the history of moral philosophy it is probably a few thinkers in the utilitarian tradition, proto-utilitarians like Cumberland, Leibniz, Hutcheson, and Hume, that come closest to embracing such a position. Still, the inherent tendency in utilitarian thought is to move away from an emphasis on moral goodness to one on moral rightness, and what I am trying to do here can be understood as articulating a sentimentalist picture of moral goodness that takes the benevolence so prized by the proto-utilitarians and puts it together with the kind of naivety that is characteristic of the literary conception of moral goodness. I will have more to say about both naïve benevolence and the universal benevolence of proto-utilitarianism (and why the former is a more attractive ideal), but first a few words about the two prime adherents of the rationalist picture, Aristotle and Kant.

Aristotle and Kant on Evil

Given that one presents an account of moral goodness one will also, at least implicitly, provide a picture of what is involved in failing to be morally good. What this means is that even if it is goodness that is of primary interest to us, a satisfactory theory about goodness should also have reasonable implications about what it means to fail to be good. This matter is driven to its extreme when we consider the most radical form of moral failure - evil. It is at this point that rationalist theories most clearly reveal their weakness. While sentimentalist theories will understand evil as centred round malevolence, rationalist ones will typically have to resort to understanding evil as consisting of some kind of fundamental failure of reason. While it might certainly be the case that many evil persons often reason quite badly, it does seem a bit optimistic to simply assume that evil essentially has to do with a failure of reason. As Simon Blackburn has aptly put it, this hope of understanding moral corruption in terms of bad reasoning is ‘the permanent chimaera, the holy grail of moral philosophy’ and that it ‘must be an occupational hazard of professional thinkers to want to reduce all the vices to this one’ (Blackburn, 1984, p. 222). The failure of rationalist theorists to give a satisfactory account of evil reveals that there is something fundamentally wrong about how they understand the moral spectrum, the two poles of which are goodness and evil. As we shall see, both Aristotle and Kant fall prey to this line of objection.

If we begin with Aristotle the major problem with his approach is the idea of virtue as lying at a mean between two extremes. This is objectionable since we generally see the truly good person as an extreme individual, not one who has achieved the kind of balanced inclinations Aristotle seems to have in mind. Our view would seem to be one of a moral spectrum where goodness resides at one end and evil on the other, a view that is very different from Aristotle’s. It is hard to accept that extreme stinginess and extreme generosity are both bad and, what is more, bad in the same sense. Although Aristotle does state that certain extremes are worse as errors than others because the mean lies farther from them (NE 1109a, ll. 30-35), this does nothing to establish a difference in kind between different extremes. And even if Aristotle should definitely not be read as advocating the position that our responses should always be lukewarm, the general bent of his theory is still towards an ideal of a poised temperament. Thus, if an Aristotelian is to have a concept of extreme badness at all, then it seems that this would be applicable to people who generally act in extremely self-sacrificing ways as well as people who are extremely self-absorbed and uncaring. This is just not acceptable.

What about Kant then? Even though we should certainly not, like Schiller and some other critics, attribute to Kant the absurd view that the mere having of a benevolent inclination is something that subtracts moral worth from our behaviour, any benevolent inclination is still something that

---

2 As is recognized even by commentators sympathetic to Kant; see for instance Marcia Baron (1995, Ch. 6) and Christine Korsgaard (1996).

3 See Iris Murdoch (1970, Ch. 3) for the view that this kind of change in our way of seeing the world is what becoming moral is about.

4 As a eudaimonist Aristotle understands the virtues as constitutive parts of human happiness. This does mean that it is somewhat unfair to demand of him a theory of goodness and evil taken in a strictly moral sense. But if Aristotelianism is to be acceptable in a modern context, it must be compatible with our moral intuitions. It can therefore still be compared with other theories about goodness and evil – it is just that the objections that arise from such comparisons are not objections to Aristotelianism as such, only to Aristotelianism as a theory that is supposed to make sense of morality as we understand it today.
belongs to the phenomenal side of our nature, and as such it cannot be a genuine source of goodness. Kant’s view is that at root it is the form of one’s maxims that determines whether the will is good or evil. While there is certainly something appealing in the Kantian ideal of not making an exception of oneself, his view is still utterly implausible as an account of good and evil. Take the following statement: ‘The will is absolutely good if it cannot be evil – that is, if its maxim, when made into a universal law, can never be in conflict with itself’ (Kant, 1964, p. 437). Now, maxims which fail this test might very well be evil in some cases, but on the whole this kind of analysis does not make sense of such a phenomenon as evil. There are so many ways in which people can make exceptions of themselves without it seeming even remotely evil to us. Take for instance the following maxim: ‘Give gifts to others, but accept no gifts from them’. This is clearly non-universalisable, but evil?

In tying evil to something formal, Kant paints a picture of it that is bloodless and abstract. This might work for goodness, which does have something aerial and intangible about it, but evil has a brutal and flagrant character that is sulphurous in its concreteness and, given this, is unlikely to be best understood strictly in terms of form rather than matter. Now, the problem with Kant’s theory is not only that it does not correctly place the source of evil, it is also an account that does not provide us with a spectrum ranging from purest goodness to utter evil. The universalisability test is not capable of distinguishing between the trivial and the significant. It provides us simply with two basic categories: the universalisable and the non-universalisable. In the category of the non-universalisable, we will find maxims of both misdemeanour and atrocity, with nothing to tell them apart in terms of moral worth. Generally, we find that a person who is a devoted torturer is much more reprehensible than someone who is a devoted liar. Both are morally faulty, but there is something about the torturer that places him in an altogether different league than the liar. However, Kant’s theory is unable to make such distinctions. In the final analysis, the only thing that really matters to Kant is the bare form of our maxims. This is an either-or model of moral failure or success, whereas a model that ties good and evil to sentiment will be able to explain why goodness and evil come in degrees.

Of course, both Kant and Aristotle are highly sophisticated thinkers, presenting us with rich theories that might be interpreted and/or modified in numerous ways, so my brief comments here can be nowhere near the last word on the matter. Still, hopefully I have exposed some tendencies in their theories, tendencies with which the charitable interpreter will certainly have to struggle. We might of course choose to pursue such a struggle, but before doing so we might also first want to see what alternatives there could be. Historically, the main one has been to understand goodness and evil as consisting in sentiments such as benevolence and malevolence.

Benevolence and the Utilitarian Tradition

Given that one rejects Kantianism and Aristotelianism as accounts of human goodness and evil, and given that the ground for such a rejection is that the emphasis they place on reason makes them unable to provide a satisfactory account of evil, then the literary conception of human goodness is strengthened. But even if we accept that goodness should be understood as involving benevolence there is still another way of conceptualising this, namely in terms of the ‘universal benevolence’ of proto-utilitarianism.

If we look at the history of utilitarianism, then it is clear that at its early stages, for instance in Cumberland and Leibniz, what we have is an ethic grounded in the moral goodness of a certain character trait, love or benevolence, rather than in a criterion of moral rightness. Thus, utilitarianism should be seen as having grown from one strand in Christian thought, the ethic of love of the New Testament (as opposed to the ethic of law of the Old Testament which can be seen as one of the sources of Kantianism). It should however be noted that agape is not human love, it is the unconditional love given by God, and it should therefore be no surprise if there are problems with taking it as a human ideal without rethinking what it would have to mean in a human context. In fact, the decisive step in the formation of utilitarianism as a doctrine clearly distinct from Christian agapism, a step which can be understood as a move from a focus on moral goodness to one on moral rightness, should probably be seen precisely as an attempt at rethinking agape in a human context. Since the benevolent person wants to achieve good outcomes it might seem reasonable to conclude that good outcomes must be what essentially matters. Given that we take this step, why should we continue to think that a moral theory must take a detour into the mind of the benevolent person, when it can provide a criterion of rightness simply based on the goodness of outcomes? We can act in a perfectly moral way by acting as if we were benevolent, or loving, persons. However, even if this standard utilitarian position does have its roots in the genuine insight that moral goodness is essentially about benevolence, this particular way of rethinking agape has at least three important drawbacks.

First, one of the main reasons that we are drawn to benevolence in the first place is because of its warmth; the genuinely benevolent person has a kindly generous mind that strikes us as beautiful. The idea that ‘if benevolence is good, then universal benevolence must be better’ simply does not work. The move to an ideal of universal benevolence or beneficence is usually understood as a move to an ideal of maximising the good. This means that exceptional moral agents must live up to an ideal of efficiency, which in turn will open the door to an element of cool calculation and a readiness for ruthlessness (you must break eggs to make an omelette) that perverts what lies behind the radiance of the

5 For this kind of criticism of Kant, see Schopenhauer (1995, p. 155). Unfortunately, contemporary Kantians have tended to focus mainly on the need to answer the classical objections made by Hegel and Schiller against Kant and this kind of Schopenhauerian objection has been unduly neglected.

6 For an illuminating account of the way proto-utilitarianism grew from a strand in Christian ethics, see Jerome Schneewind (1998), in which Chapter 6 deals with Cumberland and Chapter 12 with Leibniz. Both of these thinkers argued, in opposition to the voluntarists, that we are part of the same moral community as God and that our moral perfection must therefore lie in developing the universal benevolence of the perfect moral agent, God. For a briefer version, see Schneewind (1995).

7 For a discussion of the parallel between agapism and utilitarianism, see William Frankena (1964).
plainly benevolent person. Such a person is highly sensitive about the means she uses in her pursuits, even when those pursuits are motivated by her benevolence. Perhaps God or some other ultimate moral deliberator, like the ‘ideal observer’ often alluded to in modern moral philosophy, might be conceived of as capable of combining warmth with efficiency, but human beings are incapable of such a combination and if we have to choose one of them as the core around which to build an ideal of human goodness it should be warmth rather than efficiency. Thus, if ἀγαπη is to be rethought within a human framework, it seems fair to conclude that utilitarians head off in the wrong direction in their attempt at doing so.

Second, true benevolence involves a self-other asymmetry which the bona fide utilitarian approach does not. What this means is that utilitarianism can sometimes endorse highly selfish and unloving behaviour. If, for instance, we have two persons where one enjoys debasing the other, and where the satisfaction gained by the person doing the debasing is greater than the suffering of the person being debased, then the former has a moral obligation to debase the latter. Such a conclusion is surely preposterous, yet it is a result of a kind that utilitarianism will yield far too often in situations where only two persons are involved. This kind of issue is not a problem for beings like God or the ideal observer since they are not finite agents leading lives in the world of other finite agents and are, accordingly, not parties to our issues of distributing goods between ourselves; our losses are never their gains.

Third, in their persistent focus on outcomes, utilitarians tend, often quite consciously, to conflate two features one action might have: that of its performance being fortunate to others and that of it having a certain moral status. However, moral status surely has to do primarily with how the action is done, not with what happens. It is in the manner of performance that there lies a deep connection to human agency: mere production of good outcomes can take place through simple natural events. Thus, in focusing so strictly on productiveness of outcomes, the utilitarian will lack an answer to what the relevant difference is between an action (which can have a moral status) and a mere event (which cannot have a moral status). From the point of view of the universe, there simply is no morally relevant difference between a good outcome being produced by some merely natural occurrence or by a moral agent. Even Kantians, with their rationalist picture of morality, realise that in the latter case there can be a further feature, moral goodness, which when it is present does, to borrow a phrase from Kant, ‘shine like a jewel’ (Kant, 1964, p. 394).

It might perhaps be proposed that utilitarianism is not at all inconsistent with an approach that conceptualises goodness as naïve benevolence. Like one recent utilitarian writer, Julia Driver (Driver, 1989), one might argue that since our common sense understanding of the virtuous person involves a naïvety that cannot be made sense of within an Aristotelian framework, we might have to turn to some other theory in order to defend our common sense picture of the virtuous person. She suggests that this other theory is utilitarianism and the idea is that this kind of character is justified as virtuous because it is generally productive of good outcomes. But is this line of argument at all reasonable as an approach to the virtues? According to this type of utilitarian understanding of virtue, possession of the appropriate character is not really a source of moral worth, just something instrumentally valuable. This means that the goodness of specific character traits is always contingent upon the circumstances in which a person is placed. There might very well be circumstances in which cruelty is productive of good outcomes and then cruelty would be a moral virtue. Since our common sense understanding of the virtuous person is much less sensitive to contingencies than this, utilitarianism does not seem to be the place to look for a philosophical account of that picture. The proper response would rather seem to be to take this picture of moral goodness as having a more fundamental status.

Goodness and Naïvety

Given that we accept that a moral theory should assign a non-derivative importance to the notion of moral goodness, that there is such a thing as true goodness (and not just the kind of goodness that lies in being useful to have around), I would suggest that such true goodness must involve at the very least a certain amount of naïvety. This is because moral goodness has a paradoxical character; the truly good person is someone who does not see herself as truly good. Since this might sound as if the truly good person must be actively deluding herself, which might seem to be a peculiar position, the statement should be qualified.

What I mean is not that the truly good person is utterly incapable of thinking the thought ‘I am a good person’, it is just that she is inherently uncomfortable with this thought because it involves putting herself on a pedestal. She might realise it in a way, being able to recognise that she has very often done the kind of things that should be done, but she also realises how much more there is that needs to be done, and given this disproportion will not prefer to dwell on her own qualities; her virtue will not be part of the way in which she categorises herself. Additionally, it should be noted that since what I have called a naïvely benevolent person would tend to think the best of others, that would further lessen the contrast that she could perceive between her own character and that of others. The moral gap between her and others is thus closed from two directions. While these cognitive tendencies certainly warrants the view that she is cognitively biased, I do not find this to be harmful to naïve benevolence as a moral ideal.

Now, as we have seen, the problem with utilitarianism is that according to it the kind of outlook that illuminates our relation to others is an external one, a point of view from outside of ourselves. On the view advocated here, what we need to do is rather to approach such moral matters from the inside, to change the way that we qua agents actually see the world. What this means is that a cardinal virtue of the good person will be humility, a state characterised by Iris Murdoch as ‘the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self’ (Murdoch, 1970, p. 103). It might be thought that the proper way of achieving humility will be precisely to regularly make recourse to the point of view of the universe, but this is simply wrong. Humility does not come from considering things from, so to speak, above; from there things will only look petty. Instead, humility has to do with seeing others with the kind of awe that is connected with
standing before something enormous, something grand. Thus, it must be cultivated in our meetings with concrete individuals, in a gradual coming to see the immensity of each and every one of them, in a coming to see how each individual is in a sense a world entire.

Although the picture of true moral goodness defended here is probably much in line with a common sense understanding, it can still be questioned and we can take a comment by Kant as a point of departure: ‘Innocence is a splendid thing, only it has the misfortune not to keep very well and to be easily misled’ (Kant, 1964, p. 404-5). The first of Kant’s worries concerns the risk of disillusionment; there is a clear risk that the naïvely benevolent person will eventually discover that the world is a cruel and wicked place and might then grow bitter and resentful. Thus, while we might recognise a certain moral beauty in the character of the naïvely benevolent person, it is perhaps an inappropriate ideal since it is bound to be such a fragile state. Yet given that we, like Kant himself, are drawn to a picture of moral goodness as something which even in the most dreadful circumstances will ‘shine like a jewel’, then perhaps fragility should not be understood as jeopardising that worth, but rather as underlining it. At any rate, it is difficult to see how we could formulate a picture of goodness that would make goodness a more robust state without at the same time making it too austere.

Kant’s point about the naïvely benevolent being easily misled can be understood in two ways. The first is that such persons will be gullible and therefore might easily be taken advantage of. This would be an objection akin to the ‘refutation’ of virtue given by the Marquis de Sade in his novel Justine where the eponymous Justine, who is virtuous in an innocent way, is repeatedly exploited, beaten, tortured, and raped, mainly due to her naïvety in the ways of the world. For present purposes we can put aside the fact that what de Sade is most successful in doing is to demonstrate precisely two of the features that Simone Weil attributed to real-life evil, namely how boring and monotonous it is. The main problem with his refutation of virtue is however that since the naïvely benevolent person is someone whose happiness lies in the happiness of others, the fact that such a disposition will lead them to suffer personally can hardly amount to more than a recognition of the point that there is a risk of disillusionment; something which we have already discussed. Furthermore, even if the naïvely benevolent person might very well suffer because of her virtue, we would have to presuppose eudaimonism - the idea that the virtues essentially benefit their possessor - in order for this to be a decisive objection. This is not really an option since eudaimonist theories of virtue will have great difficulty in making sense of evil because they will have to understand it as connected to the unhappiness of the agent herself.

The other way to understand the second worry is that it has to do with there being something accidental about the right-doing of naïvely benevolent persons; benevolence can often cause us to act rightly, but it can also mislead us into acting wrongly. But while virtue might often be understood as consisting in a disposition to act rightly, it is quite possible to take the view that there is no standard of rightness that is wholly independent of matters of moral goodness and which can be used to measure a theory of the latter. Rather, as has for instance been suggested by Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), one could approach ethics by first stating that a certain kind of character is good and then understand rightness in relation to what such a person would (characteristically) choose to do. Given such a position there will not be any systematic discrepancies between what the good person does and what it is right to do, although the person that is on the whole good might of course occasionally act contrary to what it is right. Still, such occasional wrongdoing is not the same as there being something accidental about her right-doing. Exactly how this kind of connection between virtue and moral rightness should be worked out is clearly a question that calls for further investigation, but here the focus will lie on goodness rather than rightness.

Finally, a related worry might concern the relation between naïvety and wisdom. The latter is often seen as a key to leading a good life and while it is one thing that morality might sometimes require us to sacrifice our own good, it would be problematic if moral goodness systematically stood in the way of attaining wisdom and, hence, being capable of leading a good human life. Naïvety in the sense relevant here is certainly incompatible with world-weary cynicism, but even though people of the latter kind might perhaps regard themselves as wise in the ways of the world, this is hardly the notion of wisdom connected to leading a full and balanced life. Wisdom is not just a matter of possessing information, but also of interpreting the world in certain ways, of seeing things in terms of certain categories rather than others, and as such it is fully compatible with the kind of naïvety characterised here. I would even go as far as saying that wisdom, in the relevant sense, actually includes such naïvety because while this kind of naïvety might certainly open us up for being exploited, the other side of that coin is that it opens us up for entering into loving and trusting relationships with others. This is not to say that people cannot have had experiences that make it difficult, if not almost impossible, to be able to trust other people, but however understandable that kind of loss of faith might be, it will tend to undermine their attempts to enter into the kind of deep relationships that they themselves would probably still wish for, thus adding further hurt to the damage already done.

Outline of a Picture of Goodness and Evil

It is now time to draw together some of the threads that have been running through this essay. Although I have already given some literary examples pointing to the kind of personality I am thinking of when speaking about naïve benevolence, I will now try to give this notion a more precise meaning. Although I do think that moral goodness and naïvety are strongly connected, it would at the same time be unwise to explicate moral goodness in a very narrow way, for instance to model it on a specific literary character; persons might be morally good and still differ in many ways from each other. Any sound account of moral goodness should therefore make room for some degree of diversity. Nonetheless, the view advocated here is still that an account of moral goodness should be such that the examples of literary characters that I have given will not be located at the periphery of the class of good persons, but rather at its core.
I suggest that we take the following four characteristics as defining morally good persons:

(1) Reflexive benevolence: they take pleasure in the suffering of others which acts like a positive reinforcement on their tendencies towards doing ill to others.

(2) Interpretative charity: they tend to attribute good behaviour on the part of others not to any innate goodness of character, but to factors like misunderstandings and unfortunate circumstances. They always see the impossibility of genuine goodness in others.

(3) Humility: they tend to see themselves as reasonably insignificant in the affairs of the world and they do not see themselves as exemplars, moral or otherwise.

(4) Sensitivity about means: they tend to be easily discouraged in the pursuit of their ends when the means necessary for those ends involve causing suffering to others.

Two comments are in order here. First, this way of explicating moral goodness does not presuppose that good persons do not think in moral terms at all. Thus, it does not tie moral goodness to a strong form of naïveté, though it does still leave room for such strongly naïve persons being perfectly good. Second, since all of these characteristics admit differences in degree, it will not be possible to draw any exact line beyond which the person in possession of these characteristics falls in the category of the truly good. But this is not a major problem; given that we see goodness and evil as located on a moral spectrum, which I think we should, then it is only natural that there are no sharply distinct lines to be drawn.

Now, if we take the kind of naïve benevolence we have discussed here to be moral goodness in its purest form, for example, lying at the extreme on the good end of the moral spectrum, then we can form a conception of evil as an opposite to this, thus getting the following four characteristics of an evil person:

(1) Reflexive malevolence: they take pleasure in the suffering of others which acts like a positive reinforcement on their tendencies towards doing ill to others.

(2) Interpretative cynicism: they tend to attribute good behaviour on the part of others not to any innate goodness of character, but to factors like pretence or forcing circumstances. They always see the impossibility of genuine goodness in others.

(3) Arrogance: they tend to see themselves as being of great importance in the affairs of the world and they see themselves as exemplars of how a clear-sighted person would behave.

(4) Sensitivity about means: they tend to pursue their ends relentlessly, disregarding the effects their chosen means will have on others (unless such effects would endanger the success of their own pursuits).

Evil thus understood is an extreme condition and not many human beings will ever fall to such depths, just as malevolence especially is a trait that it quite rare, although it is still that which most people associate with evil. For instance, in his work with prisoners and other informants on the subject-matter of evil, C. Fred Alford (1991, p. 21) notes that the standard view among both groups were that ‘evil is pleasure in hurting and a lack of remorse’. While all of us might at times fall prey to surges of malevolence, and perhaps even act on it on some occasions, it would certainly be rare not to feel any remorse in retrospect.
References


Johan Brännmark is a researcher in moral philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, Lund University, Sweden. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Kantian ethics, but has since been working on axiology and has published several papers on issues concerning narrativity and the good life.

Johan.Branenmark@fil.lu.se