'Good' Defined in Terms of 'Better'

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Abstract   A parable is presented. Three attempts to define the positive notion 'good' in terms of the comparative 'better' are discussed and shown inadequate in light of it.

This paper has three sections. In Section 1 I draw attention to some general features of the positive term 'good' as against its comparative 'better', and I give three examples. In Section 2 these are seen as counterexamples to three attempts to define the positive term 'good' in terms of the comparative 'better'. In Section 3 I draw conclusions about 'good', 'better', and 'best'.

1   Just as we have the positive trios: left—middle—right, beautiful—plain—ugly, light—middling—heavy, black—gray—white, hot—middling—cold, and pleasurable—indifferent—painful, so we have the positive trio good—indifferent—bad. And for the comparatives: more left—more right, more beautiful—uglier, heavier—lighter, blacker—whiter, hotter—colder, and more pleasurable—more painful, we have better—worse.

For some comparatives there are limits on one or both sides. For others, if limits do exist, they are not obvious. Scientists tell us that nothing can be colder than absolute zero. Yet when we face one way, it is hard to imagine someone directing our attention to a leftmost limit point beyond which nothing is more to the left. Whether a "bettermost" or "worsemost" limit point exists, beyond which nothing could be better or worse are questions that have received no definitive answers.

Furthermore, things in front of us which are neither to our left nor to our right are in the middle, although because of the breadth of the middle (in my case substantial) and absence of an exact midpoint, two things may both be in the middle, one to the left of the other. Among things that are neither good nor bad but indifferent, that no better or worse exists has received no definitive proof either.

These simple things said and noted, I want to describe certain possible *situations* that can be described both by the one-place positive terms 'good', 'indifferent', 'bad' and by the comparative two-place terms 'better than' and 'worse than'. These will ultimately provide counter-examples to several attempts to define 'good' in terms of 'better'.

Once, a long, long time ago in a kingdom far away, the warden of the one prison fortress, to relieve the heavy boredom that invariably settles upon such places, instituted an unusual system of meal selection. A single meal was served daily, and all inmates received the same fare. Their food was always one of six sorts:

(A) *Haute cuisine.* A five-course dinner was prepared for each prisoner by a fine Gallic chef and served with appropriate libations.

(B) (A) without libations.

(C) Each inmate was served a lukewarm hamburger, fries, and an appropriate beverage, the hamburger being similar to those mass-produced by a ubiquitous fast-food chain we know today, but without the added pickles, mustard, ketchup, onion, and sesame-seed bun.

(D) (C) without the appropriate beverage.

(E) Each prisoner received a cup of water, a hard, dry, crumbling crust of bread, and a cup of watery soup with a few pieces of potato, a minuscule piece of meat, and several maggots floating in it.

(F) (E) without the water or bread.

The inmates of this prison were unanimous in the judgment that meals (A) and (B) were good, (C) and (D) indifferent, and (E) and (F) bad, and furthermore that (A) was better than (B), (B) than (C), . . . , (E) than (F).

This warden's genius lay in devising the method used to determine which fare would be served each day. The preceding evening a die with faces marked 'A' through 'F' would be rolled six times. On the Monday evening before our story begins the die was cast as usual with the following results:

Tuesday's "Menu"

C(ast) 1 — D(ie) F(ace) U(ppermost) A
C 2 — DFU A
C 3 — DFU E
C 4 — DFU E
C 5 — DFU E
C 6 — DFU E

As was their custom, the inmates jokingly called this assignment Tuesday's "Menu" because on Tuesday morning a regular die would be thrown once; and as prescribed in the day's "Menu," if it came up 1 or 2, their day's fare would be meal A, and if it came up 3, 4, 5, or 6, meal E.

The warden was right. The rolls of the dice were followed with great interest by everyone in the fortress, inmates and guards alike, as well as some persons without. At vespers in the prison chapel, the pious regularly sent culinary prayers soaring heavenward. Once a "Menu" was established, everyone agreed that some possibilities connected with the next morning's cast of the die were good, others bad, and yet others

indifferent, depending on what Lady Destiny, in the form of a roll of a die, would "choose" from the day's "Menu." On Monday night, all judged that:

> a roll the next morning of 1 would be good,
> a roll of 2 would be good,
> a roll of 3 would be bad,
>
> $\vdots$
>
> a roll of 6 would be bad.

These judgments about the goodness, indifference, and badness of the daily cast of the die were derivative, i.e., based upon judgments as to the goodness, indifference, and badness of the meals themselves.

How Tuesday morning's roll turned out is not germane to our story, but on Tuesday night Wednesday's "Menu" was worked out in the usual way:

<div align="center">

Wednesday's "Menu"

C 1 — DFU E
C 2 — DFU F
C 3 — DFU F
C 4 — DFU F
C 5 — DFU F
C 6 — DFU F

</div>

and consequently on Tuesday night everyone held that Wednesday would be a *bad* day, in particular, that

> a roll the next morning of 1 would be bad,
>
> $\vdots$
>
> a roll of 6 would be bad.

A roll the next morning of 1 would be bad, but it was judged marginally *better than* that the die should turn up any other number.

Again Wednesday morning's outcome is not relevant to our story, but that night Thursday's "Menu" was produced:

<div align="center">

Thursday's "Menu"

C 1 — DFU B
C 2 — DFU C
C 3 — DFU D
C 4 — DFU F
C 5 — DFU F
C 6 — DFU F

</div>

On Wednesday night the prison population similarly concluded that

> a roll the next morning of 1 would be good,
> a roll of 2 would be indifferent,
> a roll of 3 would be indifferent,
> a roll of 4 would be bad,
> a roll of 5 would be bad, and
> a roll of 6 would be bad.

It was also generally agreed that a roll the next morning of 2 would be better than one of 3.

Suddenly, on Thursday morning a revolution broke out. After fierce fighting throughout the kingdom, all prisoners won their release, the warden committed suicide, and that was the end of his unusual system.

2   Now consider G. H. von Wright's definition of 'good':

> A state p is *good* ... if it is unconditionally preferred to its contradictory $\sim p$, i.e., if its presence is unconditionally preferred to its absence ([4], p. 34).

Letting P abbreviate "1 is cast," Q "2 is cast," and R "3 is cast," Tuesday's "Menu" refutes this definition in the left-right direction. That P is good, but it is *not* unconditionally preferred to $\sim P$. That P is not better than that Q, and that Q obtains only if $\sim P$ obtains. Wednesday's "Menu" refutes the definition in the right-left direction. That P is unconditionally preferred to that $\sim P$, but of the six possible casts of the die Wednesday morning, *none* is any good, so we fail to have that P is good.

These two cases also refute Goble's definition:

> In saying that it is good that p, we mean ... that the way things are, including that p, is better than the way they would be if it were not true that p. Putting it this way immediately locates the modality "good" within a framework of alternative possible situations, and requires that alternative situations can be compared with respect to a relation of betterness ... ([2], p. 171).

or (semantically):

> Gp is true[1] if and only if (i) p is true and (ii) the actual world is better than the available (not-p)-alternative worlds[2] ([2], p. 172).

From Tuesday's "Menu" we have that GP, and yet that P is not preferable to each of the five other (not-P)-alternatives. In Wednesday's "Menu" that P is preferable to each of the five other (not-P)-alternatives and yet it is not good that P.

Chisholm and Sosa offer another definition:

> Let us say that a state of affairs is good provided it is better than some state of affairs that is indifferent.
> $$Gp =_{df} (\exists q)(Iq \wedge pPq)^3, \text{ i.e.,}$$
> p is good iff p is better than some indifferent state of affairs ([1], p. 247).

The preceding definitions were attempts to define the positive notion *good* in terms of just the comparative notion *better*. The Chisholm–Sosa definition makes use of the additional positive notion of *indifference*. But again the left-right direction is refuted by Tuesday's "Menu," for no indifferent states of affairs are in it, but two good states of affairs are.

It might be argued that there are *always* indifferent states of affairs, for example, putting your right shoe on first in the morning rather than your left. But why should we accept this and take as axiomatic that indifferent states of affairs exist? Moreover, to count something like putting on your right shoe first as relevant in the present context, one must be willing to acknowledge that some completely alien irrelevancy like that of putting on my right shoe first in the morning is worse than a roll of a 1 or 2 Tuesday morning and hence a type A meal. This is counterintuitive.

Another move would be to stipulate that impossible or necessary states of affairs are indifferent. But if stipulation is used, 'good' turns out to be defined in an artificial sense that exactly matches the artificiality of holding that to roll, say, 1 *is better than*, say, $R \lor {\sim}R$, or $R \land {\sim}R$.

And as to the right-left direction, the Chisholm–Sosa definition rests upon the assumption that "things which are neither good nor bad are not among themselves better or worse" (Hansson [3], p. 139). Yet in Thursday's "Menu," while to roll a 2 or 3 is judged indifferent, to roll a 2 is still marginally better than to roll a 3.

In light of the last criticism, a revision of the Chisholm–Sosa definition might be suggested:

> p is good iff p is not itself indifferent and there is some indifferent state of affairs q such that p is better than q.

The amended version is still open to the first objection, that there may be good states of affairs even when no states of affairs are relevant, commensurable, and at the same time indifferent.

What seems to be required is a definition like:

> p is good iff p is neither indifferent nor bad.

But that 'good' can be defined in this way in terms of 'indifferent' and 'bad' is hardly news.

3   Where have these definitions gone wrong?

(a) Although existing, and even possible, states of affairs can be compared and said to be better or worse, and although among them there might even turn out to be *the* best or *the* worst, none need be good. For all we know all future "menus" might turn out never to contain anything good. The six nightly rolls of the die might produce only Cs, Ds, Es, and Fs, *never* an A or a B. So no morning die roll would have even a chance of being good. Yet for all of that, some possibilities might be better than others. And a morning roll that produced a C would be best of all.

(b) Not only can one actual or possible state of affairs be better than another when both are good or both bad, this can happen when both are neither good nor bad, that is when both are indifferent. "Menus" containing only Cs and Ds contain nothing really good or bad, but (ask the prisoners!) a morning die cast producing a C is better than one that produces a D. The lesson here is that positive indifference does not entail comparative indifference.

My original listing of positive trios: left—middle—right, beautiful— plain— ugly, light—middling—heavy, black—gray—white, hot—middling—cold, and plea- surable—indifferent—painful, perhaps misled, in that the listing of comparatives that followed it contained only pairings: more left—more right, more beautiful— uglier, heavier—lighter, blacker—whiter, hotter—colder, and more pleasurable— more painful. The lack of attention paid to comparative indifference may give rise to the idea that positive indifference *is* comparative indifference and that hence two items which are positively indifferent are comparatively the same. But in the interest of absolute clarity the comparatives should also have been listed as trios: more left— situated exactly the same along the left-right scale—more right, more beautiful— situated exactly the same along the beauty-ugliness scale—uglier, heavier —exactly the same in weight—lighter, blacker—situated exactly the same along the black- white scale—whiter, hotter—exactly the same in temperature—colder, and more

pleasurable—situated exactly the same along the pleasantness-painfulness scale—more painful. Had the comparatives been presented this way, that the two notions of indifference, positive and comparative, were distinct would perhaps have been clearer. There would be no temptation to think that two positively indifferent items must be situated in exactly the same position along the good-bad scale.

(c) Finally, where the prisoner's culinary lot is an especially hard one and As and Bs never appear on menus, it might be argued that C is good, because C is as good a meal as any prisoner is ever going to get. But although prisoners often learn to resign themselves in the face of what seems a woeful and inexorable fate, do not count upon their support here. C isn't really a good meal, even though, they might say, C is *as good* as anything, indeed *better than* anything else, that fate seems destined to deliver.

NOTES

1. Where 'Gp' is meant to be read 'it is good that p'.

2. I shall ignore clause (i). For our purposes the definition might as well read: Gp is true iff worlds in which p is true are better than (not-p)-alternative worlds.

3. 'Iq' is meant to be read 'it is indifferent that q' and 'pPq' 'that p is better than that q'.

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