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Understanding Good of a Kind and Good for in Terms of Reasons

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Abstract: Revisits and assesses the “buck-passing” analysis of good of a kind and good for, comparing it with Joseph Raz’s views. It is proposed that good of a kind and good for should be understood in terms of sets of reasons comprising points of view. Facts about goodness, so understood, can in some cases be reasons for individuals, but in other cases they “pass the normative buck” to more specific underlying reasons. Also discusses how this analysis can avoid the “wrong kind of reason” objection.

I have learned a great deal from Joseph’s writing and from my conversations with him. I have, of course, learned most from him about things on which we have disagreed. I learned much, for example, from his astute criticisms of my views on equality, of my contractualist moral theory, and of my “buck-passing” account of goodness and value. In my remarks today I will focus on the latter disagreement, taking it as an opportunity to continue learning from Joseph by considering how much we in fact disagree and whether my views of goodness and value may need to be modified or restated in the light of his criticisms.

I intended the buck-passing view as an alternative to the idea that goodness and value are reason-providing properties that come in amounts, and that what we have reason to do is to

¹ I am grateful to Richard Kraut for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to Robert Audi and Christine Korsgaard for discussion of the idea of what is good for a person.

promote the things that have more rather than less of them.² The idea of buck-passing was intended to apply to these properties, the claim being that it is not these properties but other more specific properties that are reasons for action.

I was led to this view because it seemed to me implausible that, across all the cases in which 'good' is used, there is a single property of goodness, the occurrence of which is our reason for promoting the various things that have that property. It seemed to me much more plausible not only that things are good because they have various "good-making" properties (which is uncontroversial), but also that these properties themselves, rather than a distinct property of goodness, are our reasons for promoting or preferring those things. To say that something is good is just to say that it has some properties that provide reasons of this kind.³ The fact that these various properties are less abstract than a general property of goodness seemed to me to make their normative significance more obvious.

The examples I gave of these these reason-providing properties in my first presentation of the buck-passing view were natural properties. But, as I later acknowledged, normative properties can also play this role.⁴ For example, the fact that a practice is unjust can be a reason to try to change it. One of my main claims in *What We Owe to Each Other* was that the fact that an action would be permitted only by principles that others could reasonably reject is a strong

² See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Chapter 2.

³ Here I was following Paul Ziff, who said that 'good' in English means answering to certain interests, the interests in question being supplied by the context, and John Rawls, who wrote that something is 'a good x' if it has (to a higher degree than most x's) the properties that it is rational to want in an x, given how x's figure in our lives. See Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, Chapter 8; and Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Chapter VII. It was later pointed out to me that a very similar view had been put forward earlier by A. C. Ewing in *The Definition of Good*. See Dancy, "Should We Pass the Buck?")

⁴ This was pointed out by a number of people, including R. Jay Wallace. See pp. 447ff of his "Scanlon's Contractualism," *Ethics* 112 (2002), 429-470. In my response to Wallace, I agree with him that this is overly narrow and that the properties that provide reasons can themselves be normative. See p. 513 of my "Reasons, Responsibility, and Reliance: Replies to Wallace, Dworkin and Deigh," *Ethics* 112 (2002), pp. 507-528.

reason not to do it. It therefore would have been inconsistent for me to maintain that only non-normative properties can be fundamental reasons.

The buck-passing view also appealed to me because it is “pluralistic” in two ways. It recognizes that we have a variety of reasons to respond to things that are good or valuable, and that these reasons can be reasons for a variety of different responses. We not only have reasons for promoting or preserving things that are good or valuable, but also reasons for admiring and emulating them, being pleased by them, and interacting with and responding to them in other specific ways which depend on the things in question. This plurality of responses is especially clear in the case of ‘value’ and ‘valuable’ as opposed to ‘good,’ which has been the main focus of discussion, and which has generally been understood solely in terms of reasons to promote.⁵ But we also have reason to respond in other ways to things because they are good, such by as praising them, emulating them, or taking pleasure in their occurrence.

This raises the question of why goodness has been generally characterized more narrowly, simply as a property of states of affairs that there is reason to promote. Two possible explanations occur to me. One is the fact that much of the discussion of good has occurred in accounts of morality. Moore, for example, was offering a specifically moral theory in *Principia Ethica*, and he took morality to be concerned solely with the promotion of the best consequences. He writes, “In short, to assert that a certain line of conduct is, at a given time, right or obligatory, is obviously to assert that more good or less evil will exist in the world, if it

⁵ Donald Regan, for example, characterizes ‘good’ as “the most fundamental ‘to-be-promotedness’, property. See, “Why am I my Brother’s Keeper?”, in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, pp. 202-230.

be adopted than if anything else be done instead.”⁶ This focus on moral rightness narrows the discussion to goodness as something to be promoted, leaving aside the possibility that goodness might also be significant in other ways.

A second possible explanation is the influence of hedonism as a substantive theory of value. If pleasure (or some broader class of experiential states) is the only thing that is good in itself, then our fundamental relation to the good is as something that we can promote and have reason to promote more of rather than less. But even if hedonism is not correct as a complete account of goodness, it may be assumed that the correct account will have this same structure.⁷ I saw it as advantage of my pluralistic view that it enables us to avoid understanding goodness and value in this narrow and quantitative way. On this I agree with Joseph, who argued against the idea that we must promote the greatest possible value.⁸

Here I should mention the possibility that the difference between my buck-passing view and the idea of goodness that I take myself to be rejecting may be illusory. Perhaps, for example, when Donald Regan says that goodness is “the most fundamental ‘to-be-promotedness’ property” what he means is not that the goodness of a thing is itself a reason for promoting it but rather that the property of being good is the property of being “to be promoted” for other reasons, such as the fact that it is pleasant. It seems to me, however, that Regan is not an unacknowledged buck-passer in this way. He argues, for example, that the only explanation of why we have reason to care about what happens in other peoples’ lives is that

⁶ *Principia Ethica*, p. 23.

⁷ This is what I called “the shadow of hedonism” in *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 100-103.

⁸ See *The Roots of Normativity*, Chapter 5. Richard Kraut also argues against this idea in *Against Absolute Goodness*.

what happens in their lives can be impartially good (or bad) that is to say, something the occurrence of which makes the world better (or worse.) If being impartially good in the way in question here were understood in the buck-passing way just described, then the fact that what happens in other peoples' lives can be good in this sense would not itself *explain* why we should care about it. Rather, claiming that what happens to them can be impartially good would just amount to asserting that this can be something that others have reason to care about, not an explanation of why that is so. In any event, it does not seem that my apparent disagreement with Joseph could be explained away in this fashion. When he says that we have reason to do some action only when there is some value in it, he seems to have in mind particular forms of value that are reasons. He is not simply asserting the tautology that we have reason to do something only if doing so has some property that provides a reason to do it.

As I have acknowledged, the properties that provide reason to choose, promote, or admire something that is good can themselves be normative properties. But I have also held that these properties themselves can be understood in terms of reasons. This would put my view in conflict with Joseph's if it meant that whenever it appears that a particular value provides reason for action this reason is provided by some underlying reason in terms of which that value is analyzed. To see why this is not the case, and why there is less conflict between our views than might at first appear, I need to consider some examples. Joseph mentions loyalty as a value that provides practical reasons, but I will first consider courage, which provides a helpful contrast.

Courage is a normative concept. Being courageous consists at least in large part in having a strong tendency to respond correctly to the reasons one has in situations in which one

must decide whether to risk some danger or loss. As Aristotle argued, courage is a settled disposition to choose the mean between foolhardiness and cowardly weakness.⁹ A person who acts courageously does not do so in response to the value of courage but on the basis of a correct assessment of the considerations that count for and against taking a risk. So a buck-passing analysis of courageous action seems correct. This does not mean, however, that the value of courage is never itself a reason for action. For example, we have reason to admire and honor a person who is courageous, reason to be ashamed when we have acted in a way that is cowardly (or foolhardy), and reason to try to bring up our children to be courageous. So the value of courage can be the basis of practical reasons in some cases even though this is not so in central cases of courageous action.

Things are somewhat different in the case of loyalty. Loyalty has limits. Loyalty to a friend, a cause, or a political party may need to be sacrificed for the sake of the public interest, or justice. So insofar as loyalty is a virtue it consists at least in part in having a settled tendency to strike the right balance in such cases. So far, the case seems similar to that of courage.

The difference lies in the fact that what is balanced against these other goods is the value of *loyalty*, that is to say, the reasons one has to remain true to a person, cause, or party that one stand in a particular relationship with. This is why it makes sense to say that a person who acts loyally by, say, keeping a secret at some risk to herself, or accepting some loss in order to help a friend—acts “out of loyalty” or in response to the value of loyalty. This difference between loyalty and courage is due to the fact that being loyal involves being responsive to reasons of a particular kind. These reasons are distinctive in part because they depend on and

⁹ Nicomachean Ethics, Book III.

are shaped by the agent's relation with the beneficiary. The reason for loyal action is not simply that it is a good thing that this person should benefit or that this cause should be promoted. The reason depends on the fact that the beneficiary is a friend, or that the cause is one to which one is committed.¹⁰ There are thus distinctive reasons of loyalty in a way that there are not distinctive reasons of courage.

The upshot of this discussion is that when a particular value is analyzable in terms of reasons this may lead to a buck-passing analysis of some actions explained by that value but not others. There may remain cases in which reasons for action are provided by that value itself (i.e., by the particular considerations with which it is concerned.) In addition to making clear how my view differs (and does not differ) from Joseph's, I hope this illustrates some of the advantages of analyzing value concepts in terms of reasons. One thing it shows is how an analysis of this kind can allow for the diversity of the reasons we have.¹¹

As I have said, I proposed the buck-passing view in opposition to the idea that goodness in a very general sense, such as the idea of "making the world better by occurring in it," is a reason providing property. I turn now to two more specific ideas of goodness that may seem to be prior to ideas of reasons and therefore to provide reasons in a way that may seem to pose difficulties for my analysis: good of a kind, and good for a person.

¹⁰ For a similar reason, my contractualist action of right and wrong does not lead to a buck-passing analysis of reasons to tell the truth or to save a person's life. See my "Wrongness and Reasons." This is an instance of the more general point, noted by Raz, that the weight, or conclusiveness, of a reason is not an inherent feature of the consideration that is a reason, but is relative to a situation. So the same consideration can be conclusive in one situation but not in another. *The Roots of Normativity*, p. 131. This relativity is explicit in my analysis of reasons in terms of a four-place relation. See *Being Realistic about Reasons*, Chapter 2.

¹¹ Contrary to what Joseph says in *The Roots of Normativity* pp. 119-120.

My account of good of a kind relies on the more general idea of a normative point of view. A point of view, in the sense I have in mind, is defined by a set of considerations considered as potential reasons. Contrary to what the term “point of view” might suggest, these need not be reasons of some rational agent. They are just a set of reasons specified in some way, the reasons of some person being just one way of doing this. Something is good from a point of view if it would follow from the specified reasons that there are good reasons to promote, choose, prefer, admire, etc., that thing. Claims about goodness from a point of view are thus normative only in a qualified way. They are normative insofar as they consider certain specified considerations *as reasons*, but they do so only hypothetically, as possible reasons, without claiming that they are in fact good reasons.

Here I am following Paul Ziff and John Rawls. The reasons that I am saying define a normative point of view correspond to the “interests” that Ziff refers to when he says that “‘good’ has associated with it the condition of answering to certain interests.”¹² As Ziff says, these interests can be indicated by the kind in question, or by ways in which the claims of goodness is qualified, or simply clear from the context.

In Rawls’ version, to say that something is good of a kind is to say that it has properties that it is rational to want in such a thing “*given what such things are used for, or expected to do, and the like (whichever rider is appropriate)*.”¹³ As examples, he mentions “artifacts, functional parts of systems, and occupations and roles.”¹⁴ He also says that “There always stands in the background a point of view from which an artifact, functional part, or role is being appraised,

¹² Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, pp. 218, 236.

¹³ *A Theory of Justice* (First ed.) p. 399. Emphasis added.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

although this need not be made explicit. This perspective is characterized by “identifying the persons whose concerns are relevant for making the judgment, and then by describing the interests which they take in the object.”¹⁵

Understanding “good” in general, and “good of a kind” in particular, in terms of reasons has a number of advantages. It explains when and why the claim that something is good of a kind makes sense, namely when the kind is specified in a way that identifies a point of view, as is the case with the kind “hammer” but not “pebble.” ‘Good pebble’ may make perfect sense if, as Ziff says, the context identifies a set of reasons, for example, when we are looking for a pebble of the right color for an art project or the right size to serve as a counterweight.¹⁶

The account also explains why claims about something being good of a kind can be ambiguous, or puzzling. Saying that someone is a good spy, for example, could mean that the person is skilled in spy craft, or that he or she is morally good because and spies only for a good cause. ‘Good tiger’ seems to me puzzling. Thomson takes it to mean a healthy, flourishing tiger, but this seems to me forced. More likely, I think, would be that it means a good *example* of a tiger for a zoologist, or a *benign* tiger, one that does not threaten the humans living nearby. Each of these make sense because the relevant point of view has been specified.

The hypothetical character of the reasons that define a point of view allows for the possibility that the standards that follow from these reasons can, as Joseph says, be arbitrary or even nonsensical.¹⁷ This hypothetical character also means that the fact that something is good

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 402

¹⁶ As Judith Thomson says in *Normativity* (taking it to be an objection to Ziff), this would not be an instance of goodness of *a kind*, because the kind, pebble, would not be determining the relevant standards.

¹⁷ *The Roots of Normativity*, p. 129. As both Ziff and Rawls make clear. See Ziff, pp. 218-223. Rawls, (p. 403) writes, “... there is nothing necessarily right, or morally correct, about the point of view from which things are judged to be good or bad. One may say of a man that he is a good spy, or a good assassin, without approving of his skills.”

of its kind leaves open the question of whether anyone has any practical reason to choose, prefer or promote it. I think this separation between facts about goodness of a kind and individuals' reasons for action is what Richard Kraut and Roger Crisp have in mind in saying that claims about goodness of a kind are evaluative judgments rather than normative ones.¹⁸

This raises the question of when and how the fact that something is good of a kind can be a reason for some person to choose, prefer or promote it. More specifically, when goodness of a kind appears to be a reason, does the analysis I have given imply that these reason for action are provided by properties that make the thing good of its kind rather than by that normative property itself? My answer will be that (as with the value of courage) there is a central class of cases in which this is true, but there are other cases in which goodness of a kind (understood in the way I have proposed) is itself a practical reason.

This is clearest in the case of artifacts, such as hammers and knives, where the reasons constituting the relevant points of view are reasons to do the things that they are useful for, such as pounding nails or cutting bread. A good hammer, on the proposed analysis, is one that has the properties it is rational to want in a hammer, given reasons of this kind for wanting one. These will include such things as being of the right weight and balance and having a smooth handle that will not cause blisters. It follows that a person who has reasons to use a hammer will have reason to choose a good hammer. But her reason for doing so will be the fact that it has properties such as those just mentioned, not the fact that these are properties it is rational to want given her aims.

¹⁸Kraut, *Against Absolute Goodness*, p. 57; Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*, pp. 62, 139.

Things are different for someone who is choosing a present for a friend whose hobby is carpentry. What this person has reason to do is not to pound nails but to choose a present that the friend has reason to want. So the fact that a hammer has the properties that the friend has reason to want in a hammer, given her reason for wanting one (namely, to pound nails) is the right kind of reason for him to choose a hammer to give. Thus, in some cases goodness of a kind “passes the normative buck” to underlying properties, but there are other cases in which it is itself a reason. Which of these is the case depends on the relationship between the reasons an agent has and the reasons constituting the point of view picked out by the kind.

This dependence on the reasons constituting a point of view makes the proposed analysis of good of a kind immune to the widely discussed “wrong kind of reason” problem.¹⁹ The problem for an analysis of the goodness of something in terms of reasons to choose, promote, admire or hold some other attitude toward that thing is that there may be reasons to respond to the thing in these ways that do not, intuitively, make it good. Familiar examples are cases in which an evil demon threatens to torture a person unless the person responds in some of these ways. One reply, due to Derek Parfit,²⁰ is to specify in the analysis that the reasons to respond must be “object-given,” that is to say, given by properties of the thing that is held to be good, rather than “state-given,” such as reasons based on the consequences of responding to it in some way. As Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen show, however, this solution is only approximate: a satisfactory response needs to explain which features of the object count as

¹⁹ See Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, “The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value, and works cited there. For an overview, see Suikkanen, Jussi, “Buck-passing Accounts of Value.”

²⁰ Derek Parfit, “Rationality and Reasons”

relevant reasons.²¹ The challenge for a buck-passing analysis is to specify the relevant class of “object given” reasons, and do this without presupposing the idea of goodness that is being analyzed.

The account I have been proposing accomplishes this by holding that the relevant reasons for choosing, promoting, or admiring a thing are ones that flow from the interests people have in things of the kind in question. The fact that an evil demon will torture me if I do not buy hammers made by his firm does not make them hammers that “answer to” these interests, although it may make them good hammers to choose in order to appease a demon.²² By specifying the relevant reasons in terms of the interests in question, the analysis captures the wrongness of the wrong kind of reasons, and does so, arguably, without appealing to an independent idea of goodness.²³ It both clarifies the range of object-given reasons and explains why the distinction between object-given reasons and state-given reasons is relevant.²⁴

Against this, it might be argued that the idea of good of a kind plays a more fundamental role than I am claiming. It might be claimed, for example, that the fact that a play is a good play

²¹ Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen pp. 406ff.

²² John Skorupski makes this point by distinguishing between evaluative reasons and practical reasons. See “Buck-passing about Goodness,” p. 10, and also *The Realm of Reasons*, section 4.4.

²³ Even if this response to the wrong kind of reason problem is satisfactory in the case of good of a kind, it is a further question whether the relevant class of reasons can be specified sufficiently clearly in the case of other forms of goodness. As Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen note, Rawls was offering an account of attributive goodness (good of a kind.) But Ziff was making a more general claim: “‘good’ has associated with it the condition of answering to certain interests, which interests are in question being indicated either by the element modifying or the element modified by ‘good,’ or by certain features of the context of utterance.” (*Semantic Analysis*, pp. 218, 236) It may also be relevant that Skorupski, defending the buck-passing analysis, writes “‘good’ and ‘bad’ are attributive adjectives – if a thing is said to be good or bad it makes sense to ask what it’s good or bad *as*.” (“Buck-passing about Goodness,” p.6)

²⁴ This response is compatible with responses that emphasize what is wrong with the wrong kind of reasons, such as that they are based on the consequences of holding an attitude of admiration. See, for example, Skorupski, “Buck-passing about Goodness,” p. 10, and Rowland, *The Normative and the Evaluative*, Chapter 6. But my response attempts to cut off the seeming relevance of reasons of the wrong kind from the start by circumscribing reasons of the right kind. Rowland also appeals to this. See p. 123.

is a reason to see it and, moreover, that the it is the idea of a good play that we are guided by in identifying the considerations that make a play worth seeing.²⁵ As properties that make a play a good play, we might, for example, cite “three-dimensional characters, dramatic interaction, plot development, credible dialogue, wit, and so on.”²⁶ A play that has these properties is a good play and therefore one that people have reason to see.

But why does this complex of properties seem to make a play a good play? The answer, I think, lies in our assumptions about what reasons there are to see a play. If the reason for going to the theater is to have a certain kind of experience, then a good play is one that has the properties that are likely to provide an experience of the kind theatergoers have reason to want, such as features that make the play likely to provide an entertaining evening. This means that a person has a reason to see that play on a particular occasion just in case the person has a reason to want that kind of entertainment at that time.

But there can be disagreement about this. The properties just listed are rather conservative ones. An *avant garde* theater director might contest them, arguing that other kinds of experience, such as being challenged or even disturbed, are what audience members have reason to seek in going to the theater, and that producers and directors have reason to provide. Perhaps calling something a good *play* already identifies certain kinds of experiences as the relevant ones. If so, the *avant garde* director might concede that the properties I listed make something a good “play” but argue that good plays in this conventional sense do not provide the kind of theatrical experience that contemporary audiences have most reason to

²⁵ Here I am drawing on and responding to Kraut, *Against Absolute Goodness*, pp. 57-59 and on Joseph’s discussion of genres in *The Roots of Normativity*, pp. 141-142.

²⁶ Kraut, p. 58.

seek, and that directors should be aiming at. So, to sum up, deliberation about what makes for a good play presupposes some idea of the reasons people have to go to the theater, which can, of course be the subject of further deliberation. A play is a good play if it is likely to provide experience of that kind, that is to say, if it has further properties that make this likely.²⁷ A person has reason to see a good play if they have reason to seek an experience of this kind.

Even if a buck-passing analysis of good of a kind succeeds in avoiding the wrong kind of reason problem in this way, there remains the question of whether buck-passing analyses of other forms of goodness can do so.²⁸ This will depend on whether those analyses identify the relevant reasons in a sufficiently clear way.

I turn now to the idea of something being good for a person. Two questions need to be distinguished. The first is how the idea of something being good for a person—something that benefits a person and therefore might be brought about “for that person’s sake”—should be understood. In particular, how should this idea be understood within a view like mine that gives primacy to facts about reasons? The second question is what things are in fact good for a person in this sense.

Outside of philosophy, to say that something would be good for some person or thing is most often to make a claim about what would promote that person’s health, or about what is

²⁷ Ulrike Heuer asks why being a good play passes the normative buck to “likely to provide an entertaining evening” as a reason for going to a play, the latter property does not pass the buck on to more specific properties such as being witty, having complex characters, and so on. (In Section III of her “Explaining Reasons: Where Does the Buck Stop? In the *Journal of Ethics and Social Policy* 1 (2006). My answer is that these more specific properties are reasons for seeing a play only when and because they make it a play that would provide an entertaining evening. But that a play would provide an entertaining evening is not a reason or seeing it only because this makes the play a good one. Or so it seems to me.

²⁸ It may be relevant that Skorupski, in his defense of a buck-passing view against the wrong kind of reasons objection, writes that “‘good’ and ‘bad’ are attributive adjectives,” which would mean, in the way I am putting things, that they always presuppose some class of relevant reasons.

necessary in order for a thing to function in the way that is normal for things of its kind. We may say, for example, that exercise is good for humans and alcohol consumption is not, but also that rain is good for grass and for weeds, that a diet of meat is good for tigers, and that it is good for an engine to have its oil changed regularly.

This functional idea is plausible as an account of what it is for something to be good for a tiger, an engine, or a dandelion. But a good life for a human being requires more than simply being healthy. Because humans are conscious, it is plausible to say that the quality of a human life depends on the quality of the experience of living it, and because they are rational, it is plausible to say that the quality of a life for the person who lives it depends on their degree of success in pursuing their rational aims. So a purely functional idea is implausible as an answer to the first question.

Reacting to this, we might say that what it is for something to be good for a person is for it to be good from that person's point of view, the point of view defined by all the reasons that that person has, not just reasons for wanting to be healthy, or to function well. (I mean here the reasons that individuals actually have, not just those that they take themselves to have.) But this is too broad. Individuals have many reasons that extend beyond their own lives. I have reason to want the victims of the earthquake in Turkey to be saved. But taken alone, this does not make it plausible to say that their being saved would be good for me.

So the range of reasons included in the point of view that determines the idea of what it is for something to be good for a person is broader than that corresponding to the idea of functioning well but narrower than those determining what is good from a person's point of view in this inclusive sense. The question is how this class of reasons is to be specified. My

proposal is that for something to be good for a person is for it to be good from the point of view defined by the reasons that the person has to care about how his or her life goes. So what is most fundamentally good for a person is for her life to go in the way that she has reason to want. Other things can be good for a person if they facilitate this.

This seems to be the idea of what is good for a person that Sidgwick has in mind, and contrasts with impartial goodness, when he speaks of “what it is reasonable for an individual to desire when he considers his own existence alone.”²⁹ It also seems to be the idea of what it is to be good for a person that Sidgwick is presupposing when he defends his own answer to the second question (of content), when he argues that factors other than desirable consciousness do not contribute to a person’s good by claiming that it is clear on reflection that these are not things that a person has reason to want, as far as his or her own life is concerned.³⁰

I disagree with this answer to my second question (the question of content.) In my view, although desirable conscious states are one thing that can be good for individuals, the goodness of a life for the person who lives it also depends on that a person’s relationships with others and on the person’s success in their main projects, insofar as these are worth having. This brings out the fact that reasons for wanting one’s life to go in certain ways that define the idea of good for can depend on reasons of other kinds. Success in a project contributes to the goodness of a person’s life only if it is worth pursuing. Success in helping others, or in discovering the cause of a form of cancer make a life better. Success in counting blades of grass does not.

²⁹ *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 405.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 400-401.

But although reasons that make something good for a person can depend on reasons of this other kind, the two kinds of reasons are distinct. There is a difference, for example, between striving to find a treatment for cancer because of the lives it will save and striving to do this in order to succeed in being the person who made an important discovery. Moreover, as Joseph argues, success in a project contributes to the goodness of a life only if the person engages in it for reasons for the former sort—reasons having to do with the goal itself rather than the difference that achieving it would make to the person’s life. Only pursuing a project for reasons of the former sort is the kind of engagement with a value that contributes to a person’s well-being on Joseph’s view.

Call the two kinds of reasons I have been distinguishing goal-based reasons and life-based reasons. Success in pursuit of a goal makes a life better for the person whose life it is only if the person pursues that goal for goal-based reasons. Life-based reasons are not the right kind of reasons for pursuing the goal. On the other hand, success in pursuing a worthwhile goal for the right kind of (goal-based) reason makes a person’s life better because a person has life-based reasons for wanting a life of that kind, that is to say, a life that includes successful pursuit of worthwhile projects for goal-based reasons.

Whether this analysis of good for can avoid wrong kind of reason objections in the way that I discussed in regard to goodness of a kind depends on the clarity of the idea of “life-based reasons.” Suppose, for example, that a person believes that because of his sins he ought to suffer.³¹ I of course do not think that a person could actually have such a reason to seek, or to acquiesce in, suffering. But the question is whether if someone did, this would be an objection

³¹ I am grateful to Richard Kraut for raising this objection.

to the view I have proposed. Such a reason would seem to be a reason for wanting his life to go a certain way. But it would not, I think, be a “life-based” reason, grounded in what the life is like for the person who lives it. It would be more like a reason to comply with what morality demands. I admit, however, that this distinction may be less clear than in the case of a good hammer.

There are differing views about the range of things that individuals have life-based reasons to be concerned with. One source of this disagreement is that there are different ways of understanding my first question—of what it is for a life to be a good one for the person who lives it—which reflect different ways of evaluating a life. Another source of disagreement is that even those who understand this first question in the same way may differ about the range of things that “affect a person’s life” because they give different answers to my second question, about the things that make a life good for a person in the sense that they are both concerned with. The first of these is illustrated by a possible difference between my view and Josephs; the second by the difference between my view and Sidgwick’s.

It is somewhat unclear whether Joseph understands the question of well-being in the same as the way I understand the question of what is good for a person. Although he says a great deal about the content of well-being, Joseph says much less about how he is understanding the idea of well-being itself (i.e., about his answer to my first question.) Two things that he does say, however, indicate that he may understand this idea in a way that differs from the one I have proposed. In *The Morality of Freedom*, for example, he says that the question of well-being is “how good or successful [a person’s life] is from his point of view.” And in *The Roots of Normativity*, he says, “the aspects of our life that contribute to our well-being, in

the sense that success in them enhances it and failure detracts from it, are those that could make us feel that our life is not meaningless.”³²

These remarks suggest that Joseph’s idea of the question of well-being is narrower than my way of understanding the idea of good for a person, which encompasses all the ways of one’s life being affected that one has reason to want. This broader way of understanding the first question allows for a broader “objective list” of the things that make a life better for the person who lives it, including desirable states of consciousness (and the avoidance of undesirable states) as well as relationships one has reason to value and success in one’s main aims, insofar as they are aims one has reason to want.³³ The reasons for caring about these different ways in which one’s life can be affected need to be balanced against one another, and against reasons of other kinds.

Joseph acknowledges the possibility of a broader view. He says in *The Morality of Freedom*, that what he is proposing “captures one crucial evaluation of a person’s life.”³⁴ I take it that he means here evaluation in terms of meaningfulness and success. This leaves open the possibility that pleasure and the absence of pain may also be good for a person. But it is plausible to say that someone who gave an important role to these factors when evaluating their life in the particular way Joseph has in mind would be a shallow person.³⁵

³² *The Morality of Freedom*, p. 289, and *The Roots of Normativity*, p. 222.

³³ See *What We Owe to Each Other*, Chapter 3. As I say there, I am open to the possibility that this list is incomplete, and that there are other ways of one’s life being affected that one has reason to care about.

³⁴ p. 289.

³⁵ This might be put by saying that the idea of “a life” plays a different role in Joseph’s view than it does in Sidgwick’s. For Joseph, the question of well-being is (at least primarily) an evaluation of a life as a whole considered, as it were, as a large-scale project that can be successful or unsuccessful, meaningful, or meaningless. (See *The Roots of Normativity*, pp. 216-222.) For Sidgwick, on the other hand, whether things are good or bad for a person depends ultimately only on the kind of consciousness—desirable or undesirable—that they cause. The goodness of a life as a whole is determined by summing up these effects.

Although my way of understanding the idea of something being good for a person allows for the possibility of a pluralist “objective list” answer to my second question, it does not require such an answer. As I have said, Sidgwick seems to understand the idea of something being good for a person in the same way as I do. But he holds that the goodness of a life for the person who lives it depends, ultimately, only on the kind of consciousness—desirable or undesirable—that it includes.³⁶ I disagree. In my view, things that happen to a person can be good or bad for her because of their effects on the person’s conscious experience. But the goodness of a life for the person who lives it also depends on features of the kind that Joseph emphasizes, such as valuable relationships and the success and meaningfulness of their important projects. This means that the things that are good or bad for a person can include things that occur during individuals’ lives but they are unaware of, such as whether the people they consider friends really care about them, and things that occur after they die, such as whether the things they did to promote their worthwhile goals turn out to have been fruitful or a waste of time. If the success of the projects one has while one is alive, and the meaningfulness of what one does to promote these, are “parts of one’s life,” then things that happen after one has died that affect these things can be things one has reason to care about, and hope for, “because of their affect on one’s life.”

My disagreement with Sidgwick is a normative one, about what individuals have reason to care about. When Sidgwick denies that what is good for individuals depends on “objective relations” of their conscious states, such as whether their beliefs are true and whether the things they value are really valuable, he is not denying that these things are facts about an

³⁶ In my view, Sidgwick’s account is also an “objective list” theory, just one with a shorter list.

individual's life, but only claiming that they are not aspects of their lives that individuals have reason to care about, as long as their conscious states are not affected.³⁷

With this account of the similarities and differences between my idea of "good for a person" and Joseph's idea of well-being as background, I turn to the question of whether facts of either of these kinds can serve as practical reasons for individuals themselves or for others. It appears that Joseph and I arrive at basically the same, somewhat surprising, conclusions via different routes.

On the account I have proposed, the fact that something is good for a person is (at least in the most central cases) not itself a reason for that person to seek or promote that thing: the fact that X is good for me is just the fact that X is something I have reason to want because of the way it would affect my life. The reason or reasons I have to want X or to promote it are these facts about how it would affect my life, such as the fact that it would lead to things I would enjoy, or that it would help me to make progress on a project that I have reason to care about. To say that X would be good for me, on this interpretation, is merely to state that I have *some* reason of a particular kind to promote X.³⁸ This is not vacuous because it claims that the reason is of a particular kind. But to take the fact that something would be good for me (understood in this way) as itself a further reason would be a form of double counting. So, in the first-person case, the idea of something being good for a person seems to "pass the normative buck," at least in these central cases.

³⁷ See *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 400-401.

³⁸ Saying that X would be good for me thus has some power as an explanation of why I should promote X because it identifies the kind of reason I have. Compare Skorupski, "Buck-passing about Goodness," p. 13.

Joseph reaches a parallel conclusion about well-being. He writes “Generally speaking, one’s own well-being is not an independent normative consideration for the person whose life is in question. This is consistent with people caring about their well-being, for what they then care about is what their well-being consists in, that is, their success in their adopted valuable (as they see matters) relationships and pursuits, and in those they may adopt or pursue in the future.”³⁹ But Joseph reaches this conclusion in a different way than I do. The “double counting” argument I have just given relies simply on my analysis of the idea of something being good for a person. Joseph’s argument, by contrast, is based on his particular account of the things that make a life better for the person who lives it. In his view, “Our well-being is constituted by success and failure in our worthwhile relationships and pursuits.”⁴⁰ But in order for these things to contribute to our well-being we must engage with them in the right way, that is to say, in response to their value, not in order to enhance our own well-being. This rules out being loyal to my friends or working hard on a project simply because of the difference that friendship and success in this project make or will make to my well-being.

But it remains the case that if I am a good friend, or succeed in a project for the right reasons, these things will contribute to my well-being. And there remains the possibility that facts about my well-being may provide reasons in other contexts. For example, if I lack friends, or recognize that I am not doing anything worthwhile with my life, I might have reason to seek experiences that would bring me into contact with potential friends or lead me to look for more worthwhile aims. The idea that facts about possible contributions to my well-being (the

³⁹ *The Roots of Normativity*, pp. 228-229.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 222.

meaningfulness and successfulness of my life) would be reasons for doing this is not ruled out by Joseph's argument or by mine. Acting for these reasons would not be double counting or involve pursuing something valuable for the wrong kind of reason. These cases would, I think, be covered by the last clause of the passage of Joseph's the I quoted above: "and in those they may adopt or pursue in the future." What I am suggesting is that in those cases, in which the valuable relationships or pursuits that can contribute to a person's well-being are as yet not determined, the reason for seeking them lies not in the value of any one of them but in the difference, it would make to the person's life to have *some* relationship or pursuit of this kind.

Facts about what is good for a person can also provide reasons in third person cases. A friend or benefactor has a reason to do something for a person because it would benefit him—that is to say, because it is something that that person has reason to want. Indeed, as Richard Kraut observes, one does not have reason of the appropriate kind to promote a pleasure for a friend (a reason based in concern for the friend) unless this pleasure is something that the friend has reason to want.⁴¹

It might be said in response that what Kraut says is true, but not in a way that requires a fact about what is good for the friend to provide the benefactor's reason. It is true that not all pleasures are things a person has reason to want or things that a friend of the person has reason to promote. But it is also true that, as I have just argued in the first-person case, when a pleasant experience is something that a person has reason to want there is something about the nature of that experience and the person's situation at the time that make this the case. The person has reason to want it, under those circumstances, because it is a pleasant experience of

⁴¹ See Kraut, *Against Absolute Goodness*, p. 56.

a certain kind. He has reason to seek it because of what it is like, not because he has reason to seek things like that (which would be double counting.)

Therefore, this alternative analysis concludes, it could be true that what an experience is like for a person (in certain circumstances) is not only a reason for that person to promote this experience but also for a friend to do so. Although the friend would not have this reason if the person himself did not, this might not be because the fact that the person has this reason is itself the reason that the friend has, but only because the quality of the experience would be a reason for one of them only if it were also a reason for the other. The two reasons stand or fall together. And it could be said that someone who promotes her friend's experience for this reason (because of what it is like for the friend) does so "for her friend's sake" not just because it is a good thing in general for such experiences to occur.

Although this alternative analysis of Kraut's example seems to me a possibility, I still agree with Kraut that the fact that something would be good for another person, understood in the way I have proposed, can be a reason to promote that thing, for someone who cares about that person, even though this fact is not itself a reason for that person. The alternative view (that the fact that the beneficiary has a reason to want this thing is not itself a reason for his friend to promote it) looks less plausible when we move beyond the case of pleasant experiences and consider other things that contribute to a person's good, such as success in that person's main projects. In general, it seems that the range of things that one might have reason to promote "for a person's sake" is largely shaped by what that person has reason to want.

Are these conclusions consistent with the buck-passing account of goodness? Accepting the view that facts about what is good for a person can themselves provide reasons for others (and in some cases for the person in question) is a departure from the broad claim that facts about what is good in any sense are never, in themselves, reasons for action. But it is quite consistent with the concerns that made the buck-passing view attractive to begin with. To restate these concerns briefly: First, it seemed to me implausible that there is a single property common to all cases in which things are properly called good, which provides a reason for promoting things that have that property. Second, the abstractness of such a property made it difficult for me to see it as reason-providing. The idea that facts about how others have reason to want their lives to go can provide us with reasons does not raise either of these difficulties. To put the point another way: the buck-passing view provides an analysis of facts about what it is to be good for someone. The fact that, so analyzed, these facts themselves can in some cases be reasons is not an objection to that view.

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