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Disciplinary Brief

EMBODIED GOODNESS IN HUMAN BEINGS, ART, AND LITURGY

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A prominent theme in Professor Biggar's essay "Order" is that of *embodied goodness* – that is, of the goodness possessed by God and by things of divine and human creation. There are some writers who hold that there is no embodied goodness, no objective worth or praiseworthiness in things. Things have value because we human beings value them. Biggar rightly insists that fundamental in the Christian understanding of reality is the affirmation of objective embodied goodness. He reminds us that seven times over in the first chapter of Genesis we read, "God saw that what God had made was good." The things God made are not of worth because we value them; when things go well, we value them because we discern their objective worth. Of course, evil has entered the world God made; but the evil has not eliminated the good.

In my response to Biggar's essay I will point to three areas in which this idea of embodied goodness has played a prominent and indispensable role in my own thinking and writing. Before I do so, however, let me very briefly call attention to another aspect of the Christian understanding of order that is implicit in Biggar's essay.

An essay that I titled "The World Ready-Made" opens with these words:

> That there is, and long has been, a world of kinds of things and of things belonging to those kinds, these for the most part existing independent of our human endeavors and characterized and related in ways that for the most part are also independent of our human endeavors – this is the thesis that I will be articulating and defending in this essay. [1]

No doubt most readers of this Disciplinary Brief will regard what I say here, with these rather labored lines, as obviously true. Why bother to say it?

Here's why. A few decades ago a number of philosophers were arguing that there is no way things are

apart from how we human beings conceptualize them – no ready-made world. *Metaphysical anti-realism* the view was called. Among the most prominent philosophers articulating and defending metaphysical anti-realism was the Harvard philosopher, Hilary Putnam. After remarking that "on the perspective of metaphysical realism . . . the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent reality," Putnam goes on to express his opposition: the phrase " 'of the same kind' makes no sense apart from a categoreal system which says what properties do and what properties do not count as similarities." "Objects do not exist independently of categoreal schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description." [2]

In my article I argued philosophically that metaphysical anti-realism proves, on close scrutiny, to be incoherent. I did not note that, on the biblical picture of things, God the creator placed human beings in a world ready-made – a world of oceans, earth, and sky, of plants of many sorts, of sun and moon and stars, of living creatures of land, sea, and air.

The good and the obligatory: The embodied goodness of human lives and of human beings

In his Brief Biggar writes, "What is good is the foundation of moral order, since morally right behavior defends or promotes what is good, while morally wrong behavior damages it" (p. 4). In another place he writes, along similar lines, "Goods are the fundamental principles of a moral system, being logically prior to moral rules of conduct. Morally right conduct promotes the goods; morally wrong conduct detracts from them" (p. 5). In yet another place he writes, the "created, given, natural, objective moral order compris[es] basic human goods and moral order" (p. 6). In several places he calls the goods that morally right conduct defends or promotes *human goods.* They are, he says "components" of "human flourishing" (p. 4).

Assuming that by "morally right conduct" Biggar means *morally obligatory conduct.* I share his view that morally right conduct – conduct that is obligatory – defends or promotes human goods and that morally wrong conduct damages human goods. I am also of the view, however, that not all cases of promoting someone's good are examples of obligatory (right) conduct, nor that all cases of "damaging" someone's good are examples of morally wrong conduct.

There are many examples of the former. Generosity, for example, often goes beyond the obligatory. Suppose that you admire one of my graphic art prints and I impulsively say, "Here, take it, it's yours." You protest: "No, no, you keep it." "No," I say, "I want you to have it. Please." Assume that having the print hanging on your wall would be a good in your life.

I am nonetheless not obligated to offer it to you. My act of offering it to you is what philosophers call *supererogatory.*

An example of the opposite point: suppose that I am the judge in a piano contest and that you are one of the contestants. I know you well and know that you not only have your heart set on winning first prize but

that you fully expect to do so. As it turns out, however, you were not the best, and I cannot, in good conscience, declare you the winner. You are crushed and angry. I have definitely “damaged” your human good. Nonetheless, I have not wronged you.

The heading of one of the sections in Biggar’s essay is “How basic human goods generate natural law.” Basic human goods do not, by themselves, generate natural moral law. The concept of human goods is not sufficient for explaining moral law. Something else is needed.

I regard one of the most important – and difficult – issues facing those of us who think about ethics and morality to be explaining why some ways of promoting someone’s good are obligatory and some are not, and why some ways of diminishing someone’s good are wrongful and some are not. Biggar takes no note of the issue in his Brief.

In the literature on these matters, some writers propose that obligations are not a component of objective reality but are created by human beings, the most common suggestion being that they are created by our practice of holding each other accountable. Suffice it here to remark that, for every explanation of” holding accountable” that I have seen, you can be held accountable for doing something without your being obligated to do it, and you can be obligated to do something without anyone holding you accountable for doing it.

Most writers who hold that obligations are a component of objective reality have explored one or the other of two ways of accounting for why it is that some ways of promoting someone’s good are obligatory and some are not, and why some ways of diminishing someone’s good are wrongful and some are not.

A good many writers in the Christian tradition have suggested that what accounts for obligation is God’s commands – the so-called *divine command theory.* A way of advancing someone’s good is obligatory just in case God commands it. This was the view that John Locke espoused in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding,* and it is the view that the contemporary philosopher, Robert Adams, develops in his *Finite and Infinite Goods.* In Chapter Twelve of my *Justice: Rights and Wrongs,* I discussed the divine command theory in detail and concluded that, for reasons that I won’t rehearse here, it does not work. [3]

The principal other way of accounting for obligation that one finds in the literature, the way that I favor, requires that we appeal to the worth of persons. When Biggar speaks of *human goods,* what he clearly has in mind is goods in a person’s life, life-goods, goods that contribute to the person’s flourishing. As examples of such goods he cites “the basic human good of knowledge of the truth” (p. 5) and “the basic human good of friendship with God” (p. 6). What surprises me is that he nowhere makes mention of the worth of persons – the fact that it is not only the lives of persons that are praiseworthy in various respects but that persons themselves are praiseworthy: praiseworthy for their moral character, for their intellectual or athletic abilities, for their capacity for empathy, etc. Fundamental to the biblical understanding of human beings is that each and every one of us also possesses the ineradicable dignity of bearing the image of God. Embodied goodness is present not only in the lives of persons but in the persons themselves.

A corollary of the fact that human beings are praiseworthy in various respects is that we can pay our fellows due respect for their worth or fail to do so. What makes it not gratuitous but obligatory to promote some life-good of a fellow human being is that failure to do so would be to treat them in a way that does not befit their worth, their excellence, their goodness. The reason that it's not obligatory for me to offer my friend one of my graphic art prints, even though having it on her wall would be a good in her life, is that not offering it to her does not, in any way, amount to not treating her with due respect for her worth. [4]

The embodied goodness of works of art

I have written a good deal in the area of philosophy of art. Let me indicate the way in which the idea of embodied goodness has played a role in my thought and writing in this area.

A distinction that was unnecessary up to this point, but that will now be indispensable, is that between *instrumental goodness* and *intrinsic goodness.* The *instrumental* goodness of a thing is the goodness it has on account of the contribution it makes to the goodness of something else. The *intrinsic* goodness of a thing is the goodness it has whether or not it contributes to the goodness of something else. Quite obviously, for something to have instrumental goodness, somewhere along the line there has to be something that has intrinsic goodness. Both the life-goods of persons and persons themselves have intrinsic goodness.

Almost all theories in the modern and contemporary period concerning the worth of works of art are instrumentalist theories. The worth of works of art, so it is claimed or assumed, consists in their contributing to something else that is of intrinsic worth. The "something else" that is held to be of intrinsic worth is always an experience of a certain sort. The deepest disagreements among modern and contemporary theories of artistic worth are disagreements about the nature of that experience.

The *emotivist* tradition holds that the intrinsically valuable experience that imparts worth to works of art is an emotion of a certain sort. The *alethic* tradition (from the Greek for "truth," *aletheia*) holds that the fundamental worth of works of art is to be located in their giving us knowledge of certain sorts. The *aestheticist* tradition holds that the worth-imparting experience is aesthetic experience. In my early writing about philosophy of art, I was a resolute exponent of the aestheticist tradition.

Then one day in the spring of 2007 I experienced an awakening. The distinguished American poet, Donald Hall, paid a visit to the University of Virginia. In addition to giving a public lecture, he led a small seminar for young aspiring poets. I was invited to attend as an auditor. To illuminate some point he was making, Hall would often refer to changes he had make in some of his own poems between early drafts and final versions. I remember well one of those changes. In an early draft of one of his poems he had spoken of a dog wagging its tail; in the final version he changed that to the dog swinging its tail. A student asked why he had made the change. Hall replied, "Because it made it a better poem." He did not explain why it made it a better poem and the student did not ask. Probably we all thought, "Of course."

Hall's quick remark had an effect on me that, I am sure, it had on no one else. He did not say that he changed the line because he thought it would give his readers greater aesthetic delight, nor did he refer to any other anticipated effect on his readers. He said that he changed it because it would make it a better poem. He implicitly attributed *intrinsic* worth to the poem. His remark provoked me into reconsidering my instrumentalist assumptions, the eventual outcome of which was that I now regard artistic instrumentalism as untenable. Let me spend a few paragraphs explaining why. [5]

An articulate defense of an instrumentalist theory of artistic worth is Alan H. Goldman's 1995 publication, *Aesthetic Value. [6], he says,* He writes in one place,

> The challenge of great works to our perceptual, cognitive, and affective capacities, and their full occupation and fulfillment in meeting that challenge, removes us entirely from the real world of our practical affairs. It is in the ultimately satisfying exercise of these different mental capacities operating together to appreciate the rich relational properties that I shall argue the primary value of great works is to be found. (p. 8)

Goldman speaks here of *us* and of *our* capacities. To whom is he referring? The worth of a work of art, he says, consists in the degree of satisfaction *we* get from meeting the challenge it presents to *us* of exercising together *our* various mental capacities when *we* appreciate it. Who is the *we* and the *us* in question?

Is it each of those who engage the work, and is Goldman espousing a relativist theory of artistic worth? Is it his view that if some work gives me no satisfaction of the sort he delineates, whereas it gives you a great deal of satisfaction, then it is worthless *relative to me* but of great worth *relative to you*? That is not Goldman's view. The theory he develops is what he calls an *ideal critic* view. The worth of a work of art is determined by the satisfaction an *ideal critic* would experience in meeting the challenges it presents.

And what must a critic be like to be ideal? He or she must be, says Goldman, knowledgeable, unbiased, sensitive, and of developed taste. Goldman spends several pages explaining what he means by each of these terms. For our purposes here we can forego getting into that. Whatever his explanation of his use of each of these terms, notice that it is character traits that he is appealing to; to be an ideal critic, one must possess the four character traits that he mentions.

The critic's possession of the four character traits does not, however, guarantee the ideality that the theory requires. For one thing, the character traits must be employed in an ideal way. I may have all the character traits necessary to be an ideal critic for Stravinsky's *Mass;* but if, while listening to the *Mass,* I find myself distracted by some conflict that has arisen between me and my neighbors, my satisfaction level might be low even though the *Mass* is one of the finest musical works of the twentieth century.

And not only must the critic employ the ideal character traits in an ideal way; he or she must employ them in ideal physical circumstances. If loud sustained noises intrude from outside during a performance of the *Mass*, the degree of satisfaction that I get from listening to the work in this situation is no indication

whatsoever of the worth of the work.

Two observations are now in order. Is there any reason to suppose that there is an end to the project of preventing discrepancy between the worth of the work and the critic's degree of satisfaction by specifying conditions of ideality? Second, and more important: it is now evident that there is something fundamentally misguided about the very project of specifying idealizing conditions in the course of developing an instrumentalist theory of artistic value.

An instrumentalist theorist such as Goldman approaches the project of specifying idealized conditions having already recognized the worth of a good many works of art. What he then tries to do is identify persons of certain character traits who employ those character traits in certain ways and in certain conditions such that, necessarily, the degree of satisfaction of the person with those character traits who employs them in that way in that situation matches the worth of the work. The theorist makes the judgment that works have worth of such-and-such a degree *before* he sets out to identify the idealizing conditions. If he did make those prior judgments of worth, he could not determine whether he had succeeded in identifying the ideality conditions. But then the worth of works of art cannot consist in the degree of satisfaction that an ideal critic experiences when functioning in an ideal way in ideal circumstances.

Works of art have intrinsic worth. In discerning their intrinsic worth, we find satisfaction – and sometimes more than mere satisfaction. *Love.* I love Stravinsky's *Mass.*

Embodied goodness at the heart of liturgy

Let me very briefly mention just one other area of inquiry in which the idea of embodied goodness has played a prominent and indispensable role in my thought and writing, namely, in my writing about liturgy, in particular, Christian liturgy.

Many are the reasons believers have had, and do have, for assembling to enact their liturgy. From the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament it's clear that a common view in ancient Israel was that believers assemble to enact their liturgy so as to please God – perhaps even to *appease* God. In our own times one often hears it said that the point of participating in some liturgical enactment is that it enables one to "center" oneself. And then there are those who hold that it is of benefit for their daily lives: it gives them guidance, motivates them to act in certain way, gives them courage in facing life's troubles. What I have argued in my writing on liturgy is that, at the heart of Christian liturgy, rightly practiced, is worship, understood as acknowledgment of the unsurpassable excellence of God. [7]

There is more to the Christian liturgy than that. There is, among other components, confession of sin and intercessory prayer. But those get their sense, their meaning, from the context in which they occur, the context of worship.

So, too, there are other ways of acknowledging the unsurpassable excellence of God. We do so when, in

our lives in the everyday, we carry out the prophetic call to imitate God by doing justice and loving mercy. But that is not worshipping God. Why not? What is distinctive of worship of God?

Part of what is distinctive of worship of GoD is what one might call its *orientation*. In our lives in the everyday we are oriented toward our tasks, toward our fellow human beings and their works, toward the created world. When we worship God we turn around and face God. Our acknowledgement of God's unsurpassable excellence is *Godward* in its orientation. We kneel, we bow, we stand with face and hands uplifted. There is no creature before whom we are bowing, before whom we are kneeling, before whom we are standing. We are bowing, kneeling, and standing with face and hands uplifted before God.

This is close to identifying that mode of acknowledging God's excellence that constitutes worship but not quite there yet. A theologian, oriented toward God, might discourse about the excellence of God, thereby acknowledging the excellence of God; but that would not be worship of God. Why not? What is missing?

What is missing is a certain *attitudinal stance* of the person toward God. The heart of that that attitudinal stance, I would say, is adoration. Worship of God is adoration of God. One can stand in adoration of many things, however, not just of God – of a landscape, for example. The worship of God is a distinct kind of adoration. At its core in the Christian tradition are awe, reverence, and gratitude. Christian worship is that Godward mode of acknowledging God's excellence whose attitudinal stance is awed, reverential, and grateful adoration.

Awe and horror in the practice of scholarship

In conclusion, let me repeat what I made in concluding my brief initial response to Biggar's Theology Brief. Toward the end of his Brief, Biggar mentions some of the virtues that should characterize the work of Christian scholars. I suggest that, given the presence, rightly emphasized by Biggar, of both embodied goodness and embodied evil in the world, there should be, in addition to the virtues mentioned, two sorts of emotions that Christian scholars experience in the course their work: the emotion of *awe* before the intricacy and immensity of God's creation, and before the ability of human beings to understand something of that intricacy and immensity and their ability themselves to create things of supreme worth, and the emotion of *horror* when considering what human beings have done to each other, to God's creation, and to the Creator. There is something seriously deficient in Christian scholars who never experience such awe or such horror in the course of their work.

Further Reading

Adams, Robert, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The best contemporary articulation of the divine command theory of obligation.

Beardsley, Monroe C., *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). The essays collected here include some of the best contemporary expositions of an aestheticist version of the instrumentalist account of artistic worth.

Cuneo, Terence, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Very few contemporary philosophers in the analytic tradition have written extensively about liturgy; Cuneo is one of the exceptions. *Ritualized Faith* is a probing and insightful discussion of various aspects of liturgy.

Hegel, G.W.F., *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, tr. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, 1993). A classic articulation of an alethic version of the instrumentalist account of artistic worth.

Putnam, Hilary, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Perhaps the best articulation of metaphysical antirealism.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Acting Liturgically* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Here I develop in detail my understanding of liturgy as having, at its core, the awed, reverential, and grateful adoration of God for God’s unsurpassable excellence.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Justice, Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008). In Part III, titled “Having a Right to a Good,” I explain, in the context of developing a theory of rights, why the divine command theory of obligation does not work.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *United in Love: Essays on Justice, Art, and Liturgy,* ed. Joshua Cockayne and Jonathan C. Rutledge (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2021). Here I develop the idea that acting justly, engaging works of art, and acting liturgically, are each, at their core, ways of acknowledging embodied goodness.

End Notes

[1] The essay is collected in my *Practices of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12-40.

[2] These quotations are to be found on p. 13 of “The World Ready-Made.”

[3] Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. After the publication of the book my good friend, Terence Cuneo, called to my attention the fact that my argument against the divine command theory of obligation had already been advanced by the eighteenth century English theologian, Bishop Butler.

[4] In my discussion of these matters in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs,* I argued the case in terms of rights rather than obligations: I developed what one might call a “dignity-based” theory of rights, rather than a “dignity-based” theory of obligations. It is my view that obligations and rights are correlative in the following way: if I have an obligation to treat you a certain way, then you have a right to my treating you that way, and vice versa. So a dignity-based theory of rights has, as its corrolary, a dignity-based theory of obligations, and vice versa.

[5] My argument is fleshed out in the chapter titled “What Sort of Worth Do Works of Art Have,” included in my collection, *United In Love: Essays on Justice, Art, and Liturgy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

[6] Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995.

[7] See especially chapter 2, “God as Worthy of Worship” in my *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015).

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