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ON THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING GOOD

1. THE RELATIVE DIFFICULTY OF GOOD AND EVIL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE

The longstanding question of whether human beings are more inclined toward good or evil has traditionally been approached through the lens of psychology, prompting inquiries into innate predispositions. Are we, by nature, drawn more powerfully to malice or to virtue? This framework has given rise to a range of interpretations of human nature, from the stark dichotomy between the so-called Hobbesian view—according to which human beings are intrinsically self-serving or malevolent—and the Rousseauian ideal of innate human goodness, to more nuanced theories that emphasize the moral ambivalence at the heart of the human condition. In this paper, however, I wish to shift the focus of this inquiry. Rather than investigating the moral inclinations of human beings as subjects, I propose to examine the nature of good and evil themselves as objects. That is, I will explore whether the asymmetry in human moral behavior might be better explained not solely by our dispositions, but by the inherent characteristics of goodness and evilness—their respective structures, demands, and degrees of difficulty.

The main thesis advanced in this paper can be succinctly put in this way: doing good acts is more difficult than doing evil acts. While this may initially sound like a pessimistic claim about the moral condition of humanity, its implications for the debate on human nature are, in fact, deeply optimistic and rehabilitative. This thesis invites us to reconsider moral failures not necessarily as signs of innate evil or moral corruption, but as evidence of the greater

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effort required to act rightly. In other words, if it is indeed the case—as the paper argues—that doing good is intrinsically more demanding than doing evil, then human beings should not be too hastily condemned for their failures to act morally. Rather, the moral weight of good actions increases, not just because of their outcomes, but because of the resistance they must overcome. This shift in focus—from the actor’s disposition to the nature of the moral object—allows for a more charitable and nuanced view of human moral capacities. Accordingly, if one holds an optimistic view of human nature (i.e., that it is inclined toward goodness), this view gains even more strength: the fact that people succeed in doing good despite its inherent difficulty becomes an even more impressive testimony to their moral potential. On the other hand, if one adopts a pessimistic view of human nature, the same difficulty provides a partial exculpation: it helps explain why even well-meaning individuals may fail to act well. In either case, recognizing the asymmetry between the ease of doing evil and the challenge of doing good moves the debate away from simplistic essentialist accounts of human nature and toward a more complex moral anthropology. This perspective also invites a reinterpretation of traditional theological views. For example, St. Augustine, in *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, observed that human beings do evil on their own but can do good only with divine assistance (cf. AUGUSTINE 2010, 17, 33). While he attributed this asymmetry to the Fall or to the ontological corruption of human nature, we may complement his explanation by suggesting that such asymmetry also follows from the inherent structure of moral value itself: goodness, by its nature, is more fragile, more demanding, and more complex than evil. Furthermore, if we assume the Aristotelian framework—where moral dispositions are seen not as innate but as formed through habituation—the thesis sheds new light on the limits and failures of moral education. The difficulty of instilling virtue may not reflect a deficit in human nature, but rather the challenging nature of the task: the path to the good is not only long but steep. Yet precisely because it is difficult, every successful step on that path becomes more meaningful, and human beings who strive toward goodness—however imperfectly—deserve not condemnation, but admiration.

It is worth noting that the main thesis of this paper is neither odd nor paradoxical; on the contrary, it aligns closely with the understanding of good and evil upheld by sages throughout human history. It resonates, for example, with the Evangelical teaching that “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life,” whereas “the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruc-

tion” (cf. Matt. 7:13–14).¹ A similar intuition can be found in the moral outlook of the ancient Greeks and Romans, eloquently captured by the Belgian historian of religion Franz Cumont in his classic work *Afterlife in Roman Paganism*:

The old poetry of Hesiod already speaks of two roads of life, a short and easy road which is that of vice, and the path of virtue, which is at first steep and rugged but becomes less hard as soon as the top of the slope is reached. Everyone knows the use which the sophist Prodicus makes of this ancient comparison in the famous myth of Hercules at the crossroads. In it, two women appear to the youthful hero, and one seeks to draw him to the path of deceitful pleasures while the other succeeds in conducting him to the path of austere labors which leads to true happiness. This same conception, which is transmitted through the whole of antiquity, inspired the Pythagoreans with the symbol of the letter Y, formed of a vertical spike topped by two divergent branches. The spike is the road common to all men until they have reached the age of reason and responsibility. Subsequently, they must choose between the right and the left branches. The former, say these moralists, is steep and rough and at first requires strenuous effort, but when those who climb it have gained its summit they obtain a well-deserved rest. The other road is at first level and pleasant, but it leads to harsh rocks and ends in a precipice over which the wretched man who has followed it is hurled. This symbol was popular in antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages. (CUMONT 1922, 150–51)

Yet, despite the apparent intuitive appeal of the idea that doing evil is easier than doing good, the thesis demands closer scrutiny and philosophical justification. This is especially true given that discussions of it often overlook an important distinction between the internal and external dimensions of moral action. Moreover, the very notions of “good” and “evil” as used in this context call for further clarification to avoid ambiguity and ensure conceptual precision.

¹ It should be added, however, that the biblical teaching on the nature of the good—its difficulty or ease—is considerably more complex and would require a separate study. For instance, one may counter the earlier quotation with another saying of Jesus: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (cf. Matt. 11:29–30). Nevertheless, it may be argued that the first passage is more characteristic and faithful to the spirit of Christian ethics; in this sense, the thesis I propose appears consistent with it.

2. CLARIFYING THE CORE THESIS

Broadly speaking, morally good actions can be understood as acts that either fulfill a *positive duty*, requiring us to take some affirmative step, such as helping others, or a *negative duty*, requiring us to refrain from certain actions, such as causing harm. Conversely, evil actions can be seen as violations of either type of moral duty. This basic yet instructive distinction allows for a more precise articulation of the paper's central thesis, which can be formulated in three interrelated claims:

1. *Regardless of the type of moral duty involved, noncompliance is easier than compliance* = Failing to help is easier than helping, and harming is easier than refraining from harm.
2. *Noncompliance with a negative duty is easier than compliance with a positive duty* = It is easier to harm than to help.
3. *Noncompliance with a positive duty is easier than compliance with a negative duty* = It is easier to withhold help than to refrain from causing harm.

But what, precisely, do we mean by “compliance” or “noncompliance” with a duty? The meaning of these terms depends on the dimension of moral evaluation we adopt when assessing an action. If we consider only the *external aspect*—what is actually done—we speak of a *weak sense of compliance*, which refers merely to outward conformity with a duty. If we focus solely on the *internal aspect*, namely the agent's *motivation*, the notion of compliance becomes more problematic, as external conformity is a necessary condition for fulfilling a duty in any meaningful sense. However, when both aspects—external action and internal motive—are taken into account, we can speak of a *strong sense of compliance*: fulfilling a duty for the right reason. To borrow the terminology of William D. Ross, in the first case we render judgments of *rightness* or *wrongness*; in the second, judgments of *goodness* or *badness*; and in the third, we arrive at judgments of *complete goodness* or *complete badness*—those that take into account both the act and the intention behind it.²

² As Ross (1930, 156) put it: “When we ask what is the general nature of morally good actions, it seems quite clear that it is in virtue of the motives that they proceed from that actions are morally good. Moral goodness is quite distinct from and independent of rightness, which ... belongs to acts *not* in virtue of the motives they proceed from, but in virtue of what is done. Thus a morally good action need not be the doing of a right act, and the doing of a right act need not be a morally good

I shall advance two distinct lines of argument in support of the central thesis, each grounded in a different perspective on moral judgment. Section 3 will be devoted to an analysis limited to the external dimension of moral action, while section 4 will incorporate both internal and external aspects. To anticipate the results: when attention is restricted to the external dimension alone, only one formulation of the thesis can be substantiated—namely, that noncompliance with a negative duty is easier than compliance with a positive one (that is, it is easier to harm than to help). By contrast, when both dimensions are taken into account, the thesis can be justified in its full tripartite formulation. The analysis in section 3 will proceed without reliance on any particular ethical theory, drawing instead on broadly accessible or commonsense considerations—arguments that should resonate across various normative frameworks. Section 4, however, will be situated primarily within the tradition of virtue ethics, which offers particularly fertile ground for exploring the structural asymmetry between good and evil. At the same time, I will argue that the conclusions reached are not exclusive to this tradition. They may be meaningfully supported within other ethical frameworks as well—personalism and utilitarianism, among others—thereby reinforcing the broader philosophical significance of the thesis.

3. THE EXTERNAL ASPECT OF ACTIONS: JUDGMENTS OF RIGHTNESS AND WRONGNESS

The first argument in support of the thesis concerns only the external aspects of human actions and rests on a commonsense, empirical observation: it is generally easier to inflict significant harm than to confer significant benefit. It is, for instance, easier to kill than to enliven (an impossible task!),

action.” It is worth noting that a similar (though more nuanced) classification of moral judgments was proposed by Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1930). He distinguished four distinct types of ethical judgments: (1) value judgments—deontological assessments of actions *in themselves*, made independently of motives or consequences; (2) rightness judgments—more complex evaluations that consider both the intrinsic nature of the act and its consequences; (3) morality judgments—judgments focused exclusively on the agent’s motives; (4) merit judgments—assessments that take into account the effort required of the agent to perform a moral act. As can readily be seen, the first two types of ethical judgment in Tatarkiewicz’s classification correspond to what Ross referred to as *rightness*. They may be regarded as two distinct forms of rightness—*deontological* and *consequentialist*. It should be noted, however, that Tatarkiewicz’s rightness judgment is, strictly speaking, a composite evaluation, incorporating both deontological and consequentialist considerations into a single moral assessment.

easier to destroy than to create, and easier to make someone unhappy than to make them happy. Thus, at least in cases involving substantial harm or benefit, it appears that doing evil (i.e., causing harm) is easier than doing good (i.e., helping or bestowing benefit). A similar line of thought is advanced by the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen:

The negative possibilities outnumber the positive. In terms of causality, it's always easier to do evil than to do good, easier to hurt another human being in ways that will haunt them for the rest of their lives than to provide a comparable amount of help; and easier to inflict an enormous amount of suffering on an entire nation than to bring about a comparable state of prosperity. In short, there is an asymmetry between our ability to do good and our ability to do evil. (2010, 15)

However, while intuitively compelling, this argument suffers from certain limitations. First, it supports only the second formulation of the core thesis—and even then, only partially. Its force seems persuasive primarily in relation to extreme cases—great harm versus great benefit. It is far less clear whether the same asymmetry holds for minor or moderate acts—whether, for instance, it is truly easier to cause slight harm than to offer slight benefit. Moreover, the argument is limited in scope, as it addresses only one (albeit broad) form of evil—harming—and one corresponding form of good—helping. Nonetheless, within these boundaries, the argument remains convincing and can be fruitfully extended. Let me now offer two examples of how such a development might proceed.

One might venture (admittedly on speculative grounds) that the relative ease with which great harm can be inflicted reflects, at least indirectly, a fundamental law of nature: the second law of thermodynamics. This principle states, in broad terms, that within a closed system, entropy—commonly understood as a measure of disorder—tends not to decrease. In other words, disorder is more probable than order; systems naturally move toward chaos rather than structure, disintegration rather than cohesion. If we interpret evil actions as those which introduce or amplify disorder—whether physical, social, emotional, or moral—it becomes tempting to suggest that such acts, in a certain metaphorical sense, follow or even mimic this physical principle. The perpetrator of evil, then, may be said to align with a universal tendency toward disintegration, whereas the agent of good must act *against* this prevailing current, struggling to impose or preserve a more ordered and harmonious state. This asymmetry could, at least in part, help to explain why doing evil often appears easier, or more readily achievable, than doing good. The contrast be-

tween the destructive ease of evil and the constructive difficulty of good has not gone unnoticed by thinkers in the past. The Roman historian Tacitus says in his *De Vita Iulii Agricolae*, “From the necessary condition of human frailty, the remedy works less quickly than the disease. As our bodies grow but slowly, perish in a moment, so it is easier to crush than to revive genius and its pursuits. Besides, the charm of indolence steals over us, and the idleness which at first we loathed we afterward love” (I, 3).³ However, it must be acknowledged that the preceding interpretation—linking evil with disorder and good with order—is not without significant exceptions. Indeed, there are instances in which evil manifests not through chaos, but through meticulous organization and bureaucratic efficiency. Such cases complicate the simple association of evil with entropy or disorder. One of the most horrifying examples is the Holocaust: the systematic extermination of the Jews by Nazi Germany. This atrocity was not the product of mere violence or uncoordinated hatred, but of an immense and coldly rational bureaucratic apparatus, requiring detailed planning, precise logistics, and hierarchical coordination across various state institutions. Similarly, the German occupation of Poland during the Second World War was administered with what might be described as demonically effective organization. The establishment of the so-called *Generalgouvernement* stands as a chilling example of how bureaucratic structure can be harnessed in the service of cruelty and oppression. These examples reveal that moral disorder—manifested in suffering, dehumanization, and large-scale harm—can, paradoxically, be implemented through externally ordered systems. In such cases, evil does not erupt as chaos but hides behind *the facade of structure, legality, and institutional routine*. This phenomenon has been famously discussed by Hannah Arendt (2006) in her analysis of the “banality of evil”, where the machinery of harm is not only systematic but disturbingly banal in its procedural normalcy.

A less speculative scientific grounding for the thesis that doing good is more difficult than doing evil can be found in game theory. If we identify moral actions with cooperative ones, then it follows, based on numerous game-theoretic models, that such actions are often harder to achieve or, at the very least, less probable than non-cooperative (and thus, morally inferior) alternatives (cf. ZALUSKI 2013, 109–17). This difficulty persists not only in games with conflicting interests, such as the prisoner’s dilemma, but even in

³ “Natura tamen infirmitatis humanae tardiora sunt remedia quam mala; et ut corpora nostra lente augeantur, cito extinguuntur, sic ingenia studiaque oppresseris facilius quam revocaveris: subit quippe etiam ipsius inertiae dulcedo, et invisa primo desidia postremo amatur” (own translation).

pure coordination games, where all players share the same goals and no player benefits from acting selfishly if others cooperate. Consider, for example, the classic stag hunt. Each player must choose between cooperating (“hunt a stag”) or acting alone (“hunt a hare”). The highest payoff is achieved only if both players cooperate, but this outcome carries a risk: if one player defects, the cooperator receives nothing. As a result, the safer but less rewarding option often prevails—mutual defection. This reflects a broader tendency: even when cooperation is rational and mutually beneficial, fear of exploitation or risk aversion can lead to morally suboptimal outcomes. Nevertheless, while this argument offers valuable empirical support for the thesis, it remains partial and limited. First, it depends on a specific identification of moral action with cooperation, which does not capture the full moral landscape. Not all moral duties are cooperative in nature, and not all cooperative behavior is moral. Second, game-theoretic models abstract away from crucial ethical dimensions such as intention, character, and moral worth. Therefore, while such models illuminate structural barriers to doing good, they cannot offer a comprehensive explanation of moral difficulty.

4. THE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ASPECT OF ACTS: JUDGMENTS OF COMPLETE GOODNESS AND COMPLETE BADNESS

4.1 VIRTUE ETHICS PERSPECTIVE

As we have seen, the strength of the first argument is limited in two important respects: it addresses only the *external* aspects of actions, and even within this restricted domain, it appears fully convincing primarily in cases involving stark contrasts between great harm and great benefit. The argument developed in this section, by contrast, is more comprehensive. Drawing on the classical account of *virtue*, it encompasses both the external and internal dimensions of moral action—extending its scope and philosophical depth. On this account, acting virtuously is inherently difficult: in any given situation, a virtuous action can be performed in only one way—what Aristotle famously termed “the mean”. This is precisely why virtuous acts are relatively rare, even when judged solely by their external features. By contrast, vice is far easier to fall into, as it admits of numerous forms and deviations from the mean. Accordingly, morally good actions are less frequent than morally evil ones, both in theory and in practice. To illustrate: consider the virtue of generosity.

As Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas both emphasize, it is not enough simply to give—one must give the right amount, at the right time, and to the right person. This alone is a demanding standard. As Aquinas notes: “The fact that very few people are virtuous, and most people wicked, comes about because there are more ways to deviate from the mean than there are ways to adhere to it” (*Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, q. 1, art. 3). Yet the difficulty of virtue does not lie merely in identifying and choosing the correct external action. A genuinely virtuous act must also meet several demanding internal conditions: it must stem from a stable emotional disposition, be performed deliberately, and be motivated disinterestedly—that is, for the sake of the moral beauty of the act itself. In this sense, the conditions for moral excellence are highly exacting: they require that we evaluate not only *what* the agent does, but also *how* and *why* they do it.

A complication arises at this point: as both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas emphasize, it is not easy to commit a thoroughly evil act—i.e., one that is evil in both its *external* and *internal* dimensions. For an act to qualify as such, it must be performed by a wicked person, and mere repetition of morally wrong choices does not suffice to designate someone as wicked. What is additionally required is that these choices arise from a *stable disposition*—a deeply ingrained feature of character that inclines the agent toward moral failure. In this sense, thorough evil, wickedness, like virtue, is rare, since it, too, demands a kind of coherence and rootedness in the agent’s motivational structure (cf. MIDGLEY 1997, PECK 2015, PIEPER 2001). Thus, while it is undoubtedly correct to affirm—within the framework of virtue ethics—that evil is easier than goodness with respect to the external features of human action, it may seem equally correct to say that, once *motivation* is included, both virtue and vice become comparably difficult to achieve. If that were true, it would partially undermine the central thesis advanced in this paper, restricting its applicability to merely the outward dimension of moral life. However, such a conclusion would be premature. It rests on an unduly restrictive conception of evil motivation—as something that must be deeply rooted, stable, and fully formed, in the way virtue is. But if we allow for a broader, less exacting understanding of evil—as *the absence of virtue*, or more generally, as *a disorder within the soul*—then the asymmetry reasserts itself. Understood in this way, evil motivation is not only more frequent but also easier than moral motivation grounded in virtue. To state the matter more precisely: a virtuous or morally good act must fulfill three conditions: (a) it must be externally right; (b) it must proceed from a stable disposition (virtue); and (c) it must be performed

disinterestedly—that is, solely for the sake of its moral worth. By contrast, an act is morally deficient, and thus evil in a broad sense, if *any* of these conditions is absent. The concept of evil employed here, then, is a capacious one: it includes both thorough evil (where all three conditions are violated, and the agent acts from wickedness), and also more subtle forms of moral disorder, such as acting “generously” for selfish or vain motives. It would be misleading to describe these “non-thorough” instances of evil as occupying some grey area between good and evil—as morally neutral, ambiguous, or ambivalent. Within the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework, *all* such acts are forms of moral disorder—evil in a broad sense. One may, if one prefers, reserve the term “evil” for thorough wickedness and refer to the broader category as *moral badness*; but the ethical import remains the same. This broader conception is encapsulated in the famous dictum of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: *bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu*—“Good arises from the whole and entire cause, evil from any particular defect” (*De Divinis Nominibus*, IV, 30). This principle was fully embraced by classical virtue ethicists, including Aquinas, who echoes it explicitly: “More things are required for good than for evil, since good is the product of a cause that is one and integral, and evil results from any deficiency, as Dionysius says in his work *De Divinis Nominibus*. Therefore, an act of the will is required for merit, but it is only required for demerit that the will not will the good when it should, nor need it always will evil to incur demerit” (*Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, q. 2, art. 2).⁴

Three additional points merit attention here.

1. One could object that although the paper declares its intention to avoid the subjective or psychological dimension of moral difficulty, it nevertheless devotes considerable space—particularly in its engagement with Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s virtue ethics—to elements that seem psychological in nature (such as motivation, habituation, or emotional dispositions). This could be

⁴ Cf. also the following quotation from *Summa Theologiae*: “Every virtue consists in following some rule of human knowledge or operation. Now conformity to a rule happens one way in one matter, whereas a breach of the rule happens in many ways, so that many vices are opposed to one virtue. The diversity of the vices that are opposed to each virtue may be considered in two ways, first, with regard to their different relations to the virtue: and in this way there are determinate species of vices contrary to a virtue: thus to a moral virtue one vice is opposed by exceeding the virtue, and another, by falling short of the virtue. Secondly, the diversity of vices opposed to one virtue may be considered in respect of the corruption of the various conditions required for that virtue. In this way an infinite number of vices are opposed to one virtue, e.g. temperance or fortitude, according to the infinite number of ways in which the various circumstances of a virtue may be corrupted, so that the rectitude of virtue is forsaken. For this reason the Pythagoreans held evil to be infinite” (*ST II-II*, q. 10, art. 5).

seen as either an inconsistency or a shift in focus that requires explicit acknowledgment. In response, it should be clarified that the inclusion of these elements does not undermine the coherence of the argument, nor does it represent a departure from its central methodological stance. While terms like “motivation” or “stable disposition” may sound psychological, in the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework they are not treated merely as subjective mental states, but as objective structural conditions for moral goodness. In this tradition, virtue is not reducible to internal feeling or intention; rather, it is a normative standard—a formal feature of action—that is as objectively binding as the action’s external content. The reference to internal conditions such as right intention or stability of character serves, therefore, not to psychologize moral action, but to highlight the full structure of what counts objectively as a morally good act. Moreover, acknowledging these internal conditions strengthens the thesis, rather than weakens it: it shows that moral goodness is demanding not only because of the difficulty of right external action, but also because it requires internal coherence, something far rarer and harder to achieve. In this sense, the argument moves beyond a merely behavioral conception of goodness and provides a more philosophically robust account of moral excellence. Finally, it may be worth adding that even if one were to concede a partial psychological dimension to this analysis, it is clearly normatively constrained and conceptually integrated into a broader metaphysical and ethical framework. It does not rely on empirical psychology, nor does it claim to explain moral behavior through inner states. Thus, it does not violate the paper’s original methodological commitment, but rather enriches its account of the nature of moral difficulty understood in its fullest, objective sense.

2. The core thesis offers valuable insight into the intricate relationship between ethics and aesthetic experience within the framework of virtue ethics. A distinctive hallmark of classical virtue ethics—particularly in its ancient and medieval articulations—is that its moral vocabulary encompasses not only ethical categories (expressed in ancient Greek by *kakon* for morally bad or evil, and *agathon* for morally good) but also aesthetic dimensions, captured by the terms *aischron* ‘ugly’ and *kalon* ‘beautiful’.⁵ This interweaving of ethics and aesthetics is fundamentally rooted in the perfectionist orientation of classical ethics, which centers on the ultimate telos of human existence: the attainment of *eudaimonia*, an objective flourishing or well-being, understood not as a mere subjective surplus of pleasure over pain, but as the full realiza-

⁵ It is interesting to note that the connection between ethics and aesthetics is also reflected in the dual meaning of the English word “fair”, which denotes both ‘beautiful’ and ‘just.’

tion of human nature. This framework rests on the ontological premise that human beings possess an essential nature or *essence*, whose full realization constitutes the ethical and, indeed, ontological task of the individual. A person who fails to actualize this essential nature falls short of true humanity and thus lacks the *kalon*—the beauty—that accompanies the fulfillment of any being's telos. Accordingly, in classical philosophy, moral evil is inseparable from *aischron*, a form of deformity or ugliness that arises from the failure to become fully what one is meant to be. This duality reveals a deeply held conviction characteristic of classical thought: to act immorally is to harm oneself and to forfeit one's true happiness, which consists in living in accord with reason and virtue—the very realization of one's nature. While this ontological explanation robustly grounds the ethical-aesthetic connection, it can be further enriched by the reflections advanced in this paper. The beauty of a morally good act is not solely derived from its facilitation of human perfection or essence; it is also intimately linked to its difficulty. Indeed, the very challenge inherent in performing a virtuous act enhances its moral beauty; and the more arduous the good deed, the greater its aesthetic and ethical worth.

3. This last insight finds a profound echo in the classical distinction—though not confined solely to virtue ethics—between *praecepta* (commandments or moral precepts) and *consilia* (counsels or recommendations). The *praecepta* delineate the obligatory baseline, constituting the lower ethical life, whereas the *consilia* beckon one toward a loftier, more consummate moral existence, characterized by the voluntary embrace of arduous and elevated virtues (cf. KANIOWSKI 1999). Acts enjoined by the *consilia* are commonly recognized as *supererogationes*—acts of supererogation—that transcend the realm of moral obligation. While their performance is not compulsory and failure to perform them is not culpable, when embraced they confer upon the agent exceptional moral merit and a distinctive aesthetic beauty, born of the extraordinary difficulty and resolute commitment they demand. Thus, supererogatory acts illuminate the intricate nexus between moral rigor, personal excellence, and the aesthetic dimension of virtue, underscoring the profound truth that authentic moral greatness resides not merely in the fulfillment of duty, but in the transcendence thereof. Moreover, the distinction between *praecepta* and *consilia* reveals not only that goodness is more challenging than evil, but also that the very virtue of goodness manifests in gradations of difficulty—there exist higher and lower degrees within the spectrum of moral excellence itself (cf. LAWLOR 2009).

4.2 ALTERNATIVE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES: PERSONALISM AND UTILITARIANISM

In the foregoing argumentation regarding the inherent difficulty of moral goodness, I have principally relied on the tradition of virtue ethics. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that this claim can also be meaningfully supported within other ethical frameworks—though arguably not all, with ethical egoism being a notable exception.

For example, personalist ethics, as articulated by thinkers such as Karol Wojtyła (1985), grounds moral goodness in the recognition of human beings as *persons*—rational agents endowed with intrinsic metaphysical value or dignity. Within this framework, a morally good act is subject to two fundamental conditions, one negative and one positive. The negative condition mandates that a person must never be treated solely as a means but always also as an end in themselves—a personalist articulation akin to Kant’s categorical imperative. To use another person merely as an instrument reduces them to an object, thereby violating their inherent dignity. The positive condition requires that each person be affirmed *for their own sake* (*persona est affirmanda propter se ipsam*), establishing a proper moral relation characterized by disinterested and universal love—*agape* or *caritas*—rooted in the will rather than mere emotion. Yet, acting in full accordance with these stringent demands—free from any form of objectification—is profoundly difficult. Importantly, within the personalist framework (as well as Kantian ethics), arguments concerning the relative ease of evil tend to focus primarily on the motivational dimension of morality. In contrast, virtue ethics offers a more comprehensive justification, demonstrating the greater ease of evil not only in terms of moral motivation but also with respect to the external execution of acts.

Turning to utilitarianism, the core thesis also finds robust support, albeit through a different lens. Utilitarian ethics evaluates the morality of actions based on their consequences—specifically, the maximization of overall happiness or utility. From this perspective, the difficulty of moral goodness arises from the complex demands of impartial calculation and the frequent need to sacrifice immediate personal interests for the greater good. Unlike the straightforward ease of causing harm (which may require minimal effort or thought), producing significant net utility often requires careful deliberation, long-term planning, and self-restraint—factors that render moral action intrinsically more challenging. Moreover, the utilitarian imperative to consider the

well-being of all sentient beings equally imposes a high cognitive and emotional burden, making morally right actions less probable and thus more difficult to achieve. Therefore, the asymmetry between the ease of doing harm and the challenge of doing good resonates strongly within the utilitarian framework, reinforcing the broader thesis from a consequentialist vantage point.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have examined the thesis that it is more difficult to do good than to do evil—a claim that, while seemingly intuitive, is often formulated in vague or overly general terms. I sought to clarify and justify this thesis by distinguishing its various formulations and analyzing them through multiple ethical frameworks, including virtue ethics, personalism, and utilitarianism. The analysis demonstrated that, depending on the perspective adopted—whether focused on the external structure of actions or their internal motivations—different aspects of the thesis come to the fore. Particular attention was paid to the rich explanatory resources offered by classical virtue ethics, where the notion of moral difficulty is intricately tied to the rarity and complexity of virtuous action, as well as to the aesthetic dimension of moral excellence.

Beyond offering a detailed account of what the difficulty of being good entails, this inquiry also illuminated the ways in which such difficulty intersects with broader views of human nature. Whether one adopts a pessimistic or optimistic stance, recognizing the structural and psychological challenges involved in moral action invites a more nuanced moral evaluation of the human condition, either as a partial excuse for our moral failings, or as a reason to admire and affirm even our modest successes.

This investigation opens several avenues for further research. One promising direction would be to explore cross-cultural or interreligious perspectives on the moral asymmetry between good and evil, examining whether the structure of difficulty holds across different moral traditions. Another path might involve empirical moral psychology: how do ordinary agents perceive the difficulty of moral choices, and how does that perception affect moral motivation? Finally, one might inquire into the implications of moral difficulty for applied ethics, particularly in contexts such as war, political resistance, or climate ethics, where doing good often requires exceptional effort, sacrifice, or risk.

Ultimately, the difficulty of being good does not point to a moral deficiency in human nature, but rather to the elevated standard that moral goodness sets. It is, perhaps, in the very challenge of goodness that its dignity and beauty are most fully revealed.

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ON THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING GOOD

Summary

The question of whether human beings are more prone to do evil or good is typically framed in psychological terms, focusing on human predispositions to determine whether “evil” tendencies outweigh “good” ones, or vice versa. This approach has given rise to a variety of views on human nature, ranging from the two classical extremes—the Hobbesian view, which holds that humans are inherently evil, to the Rousseauian view, which sees them as intrinsically good—to more nuanced positions situated between these poles. In this paper, a different line of inquiry is proposed: instead of approaching the issue from the perspective of the subject (i.e., human predispositions), it is examined from the standpoint of the object—the nature of good and evil themselves. The thesis is advanced that if human beings are indeed more inclined to do evil than good, the explanation may lie not only in their psychology, but also in the very structure and character of good and evil—specifically, in the fact that good actions are more difficult to perform than bad ones. The nature of this difficulty is also explored in the paper by analyzing both the external and internal aspects of human actions.

Keywords: human nature; good; evil; virtue; motivation; moral beauty

O TRUDNOŚCI BYCIA DOBRYM

Streszczenie

Pytanie, czy ludzie są bardziej skłonni do czynienia zła czy dobra, zazwyczaj ujmowane jest w kategoriach psychologicznych, koncentrując się na ludzkich predyspozycjach w celu ustalenia, czy tendencje „złe” przeważają nad „dobrymi”, czy też odwrotnie. Takie podejście doprowadziło do powstania wielu koncepcji natury ludzkiej – od dwóch klasycznych skrajności: poglądu Hobbesa, zgodnie z którym człowiek jest z natury zły, po ujęcie Rousseau, według którego człowiek jest z natury dobry – aż po bardziej zniuansowane stanowiska leżące między tymi biegunami. W niniejszym artykule proponowane jest inne podejście badawcze: zamiast ujmować problem z perspektywy podmiotu (tj. ludzkich predyspozycji), analizowany jest on z punktu widzenia przedmiotu – samej natury dobra i zła. Postawiono tezę, że jeśli ludzie rzeczywiście są bardziej skłonni do czynienia zła niż dobra, to wyjaśnienia tego należy szukać nie tylko w psychologii, lecz także w samej strukturze i charakterze dobra i zła – a konkretnie w fakcie, że dobre czyny są trudniejsze do wykonania niż złe. W artykule badana jest również natura tej trudności poprzez analizę zarówno zewnętrznych, jak i wewnętrznych aspektów ludzkiego działania.

Słowa kluczowe: natura ludzka; dobro; zło; cnota; motywacja; moralne piękno