Are Functional Accounts of Goodness Relativist?

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The short answer, which will no doubt frustrate those who read to find the short answer, is *yes* and *no*. *Yes* in respect of the fact that all agents are not the same and so what is good for (or judged good by) one agent may be different from what is good for another agent. *No* in respect of the fact that normativity, or standards which range over agents relevantly similar, is still quite present. The point of this paper will be to unpack this position.

I

I want to begin by talking about functional accounts of goodness. Credit for their origination is owed to Aristotle.[1] However, I mean less to write about Aristotle and more about functional accounts themselves. My first attempt at such an account is the following:

(A1) X is good if X is a highly functioning one of its kind.

First note that this is an empirically-grounded definition because it relies on an empirically investigatable state of an object, on what that object is - of what kind it is a member - and to what degree its functions as what it is, for determination of what that object ought to be. It is an empirical question as to whether an object is one of a kind, and to what degree that object functions as one of its kind. A good knife is a knife that functions highly as a knife: it cuts well, is sharp, is balanced, is heavy or light enough to do the job. Whatever properties there are of a knife (in general) are what grounds the goodness of any particular knife. Within the kind 'knife' there is room for gaining precision: what makes a butter knife is possession of different properties from what makes a bread knife. A bread knife should be long and have a serrated edge; a butter knife ought not. So the first order in determining the goodness of an object, as specifically as needs be, is to *define the kind* under which the object falls.

(A2) X is good if (i) X is a member of a certain kind (kind K), and (ii) X is a highly functioning one of its kind.

How is an object's kind determined? A kind is determined not because of some essence that the object has or participates in.[2] Baggage of a nonnatural or a priori-discovered sort is unnecessary. Kinds are determined empirically, in terms of common properties. We determine what a feline is on the basis of shared characteristics; we determine a species to that genus on the basis of still further shared commonalities. But how do we know which properties to pick out as *relevant*? Color is not relevant to the classification of an object as a *house* cat. If we group all yellow/orange cats together, then lions, tigers and *some* house cats would be classed together, while black, white and grey (house) cats would be classed separately. It is in determining whether a given property is *relevant*, and

in determining how to define '*relevancy*', that we leave direct and immediate empirical examination.[3]

Kinds are determined, I suggest, on just the criterion we use to determine the goodness of an object. If an object is a member of a kind, then it shares relevant objective properties with others of that kind. But then how is relevancy determined? *Relevancy is fixed on the basis of functionality.* Relevancy is, I suggest, more a matter of what an object *does*, not what an object is. A property is relevant to the classification of an object under a certain kind if (and only if) that property contributes to the functionality of that object as one of its kind.

(A3) X is good if (i) X is one of a kind K, which is to say that it possesses relevant objective properties, properties whose relevance is determined on the basis of those properties contributing to the effectiveness/functionality of that object as one of kind K, and (ii) the level of effectiveness or functionality is high relative to the other members of kind K.

Kinds are determined on grounds of possession of certain properties, and the relevancy of these properties (to that kind) is determined on grounds of functionality. Then the degree of functionality is grounds for the goodness of that object.

Functionality is determined empirically, in the practical world of means-and-ends. If I wish to know if a certain object is a knife, then I investigate its properties to determine if it has the relevant objective properties that other knives have. Color, for one, does not matter. This is because it is irrelevant, and so on the grounds that it contributes not at all to the functioning of that object as a knife, defined perhaps in terms of the function of cutting - we could be much more precise with the function of a knife if we knew what sort of knife we were talking about - and dependent on certain objective properties of the knife such as sharpness, balance, strength. If the knife fails to accomplish the goals of a knife then it is either the case that it is (i) not a good knife, or (ii) not a knife at all. This decision is made on the level of functionality it exhibits.

We need be mindful of the fact that determining the kind of a given object is a two-tiered process. An object is a member of a certain kind first because it possesses relevant objective properties in common with the others of that kind. It is a secondary matter to determine relevancy. So this is why some objects continue to share in a kind despite their immediate practical-world use. For instance, I keep a meat cleaver with my gardening supplies. I use that cleaver as a small machete when I am doing heavy gardening. Now, while that meat cleaver has never been used for cutting up meat - and it has been used several times for chopping branches - it is still a meat cleaver on the grounds that it shares in common with other meat cleavers relevant objective properties. I might take a further step in saying that while it functions adequately as a small machete, it would have originally functioned much better as a meat cleaver.[4]

But what about *functions* themselves? Are *functions*, and so ultimately kinds, determined subjectively and individually? We can here disallow moves which render the determination of a kind merely a matter of individual subjective decision. If we relativize kinds to identification by individuals only, then the work the determination of kinds is

supposed to do is lost. Certainly, we can consider or regard an object which falls under one kind as falling under another. The Venus di Milo can be used as a doorstop. A butter knife can be used as a screwdriver. And if this is so, is it the case that the butter knife then *is* a screwdriver? This may suggest that how we here and now regard an object - what we actually do use it for - is of prime importance in the establishment of that object's classification. This suggestion, though, renders redundant any work the classification would do. If kinds are fixed in this way, then they are relative to time and to the subjective phenomenon of use or labelling. No determination of kinds would endure past the last use or labelling of any object. Every time someone used an object in a way other than how it was last used, the object would cease to be a member of the first kind and take on an identity as a member of some other kind. This makes kinds, dependent on their member-ships for their ontological existence and status,[5] completely unstable. Since science does indeed determine kinds, and this classification endures, it seems a shame to lose the work they do by having them determined subjectively and individually.

Certainly a butter knife can be used as a screwdriver. But the butter knife does not function *best* as a screwdriver. Its properties are clearly those of a butter knife, because they contribute to its use as a butter knife. Whether or not it is ever used or regarded as a screwdriver or awl or symphony baton is irrelevant to what objective properties it in fact possesses. And these properties objectively fix what function that object will best perform. Since the object will perform best as a butter knife - and not as a screwdriver or baton - then we class the object as a butter knife.

My last attempt at fashioning a statement of a functional account of goodness was the best one. We must be mindful of how kinds are determined, and of how use or function plays a role in that determination, in order to understand how it is that a given object can be good. An object must meet a minimal level of commonality with other objects to be classed with them. This commonality is based on having certain objective properties in common with them, and the relevancy of those properties is determined against how well those properties function in meeting the uses to which that object is put. Finally, the higher the functionality of that object (as one of its kind), the better that object is. In short, a butter knife must have the features to function as a butter knife to be a butter knife, and the higher the degree of function of that butter knife as a butter knife, the better that object is. Butter knives are not screwdrivers because they do not share in the relevant objective properties that screwdrivers possess. And this is the case no matter how much a given butter knife is used as a screwdriver.

II

'Relativism' refers to the broad position that more than a single answer to a single inquiry can be equally true, with the (trivial) addition that there is no means available to adjudicate between the two (or three or more) competing answers. Moreover, 'relativism' is always relativism to *something*. One cannot be a sibling without, at least, a brother or a sister. So 'relativism' is the position that more than a single answer to a single inquiry can be equally true, but true *relative* to some, for lack of a more modest term, paradigm. Competing answers are true relative to some person, some group, some time, some locale, some species, some theory, some paradigm. This is the nature of *hard* relativism, that

there is no single right answer, no absolutely true answer - answers (plural) are only true relative to something else.

There is another sort of relativism, though, that bears explication: "Soft relativism" or "*indexing*." People are bound to view the world out of their own eyes, both literally and metaphorically. Literally, I can view some patch of bright blue for a time and then upon switching my gaze to a patch of bright yellow, see that patch - phenomenally - as greenish. Metaphorically, I (say) see the world through the eyes of a whitish Hispanic American male who is married, fairly well educated, socio-economically middle-class, protestant, more-or-less politically liberal, with a rather strong commitment to the arts, and who has made a life within the Academy.

Now, nothing follows from the fact that I see through my own eyes that I *must* see through these eyes and these eyes only: "soft" relativism, or indexing, does not entail "hard" relativism. On the face of things, it would seem that I can identify each of the various "lenses" through which I see[6] - to perhaps push the metaphor past prudence. And in recognizing my biases, partialities, and so forth, I can take steps toward further and further impartiality. At least all of this seems theoretically possible. Whether it is *actually* possible is another question (one of *skepticism* or *fallibilism*), and not less interesting and important than the theoretical move. Though I seem to be able to recognize where I am biased, and may take pains to remove or address that bias, I am still met with the empirical difficulty which is that I may not be able to identify *all* of the biases and prejudices - all of the "lenses" - through which I in fact view the world. If I am unable to identify all the lenses, I will be unable to address them all and compensate for them.

Part of what may impede my impartiality is the range of background beliefs that I have. What may count as evidence for me will in some measure depend on the beliefs that I already have. If shown, say, some streak in a cloud chamber, I may or not count that as evidence for the presence of some subatomic particle dependent on what subatomic physical theory I hold, or what scientific-philosophical orientation I have toward theoretical entities. If I am a devout Roman Catholic, I may view some phenomenon as an appearance by the Virgin Mary. If I am not religious, I may view that phenomenon as anything but an appearance by Mary. Again and again, my background beliefs will alter what I count as evidence, and what I discard as irrelevant. Starting from my root set of beliefs, using a criterion of coherence to determine which candidate beliefs I will accept and which reject, I may end up with a set of total beliefs rather different in nature from that set belonging to one who started with only a slightly different root set. In order to count something as evidence or not, and do so impartially, I must recognize that I have the background beliefs that I have and, moreover, must question the legitimacy of *those* beliefs.

The theoretical move of saying that there are impediments to impartiality that potentially can be identified and accounted for is a necessary part of a discussion of *access to (absolute) truth. And access to truth is precisely the motivation for seeking impartiality.* If there is such a thing as absolute truth, then it would seem that the only way to access it is to view the world impartially (or exercise our rationality impartially). However, apart from the question of the existence of absolute truth (a discussion outside our present

scope), there is the looming question about whether gaining the sort of impartiality necessary for accessing truth is *actually* possible. In philosophical terms, the problem of skepticism or fallibilism must be addressed prior to an addressing of the problem of hard relativism/absolute truth. The "access" problem is more immediate and pressing than the problem of what that access is access to. This is because the object of that access is determined against the very access itself. (Recognized) absolute truth is dependent for its very content on the intersubjective agreement of rational agents. Without that agreement, truth is a concept without a content. The content is dependent on its identification. And it is identified only on the grounds that it is what *impartial* rational agents see.

It is only through a *purity of sameness* that I may end up in the position of calling any one of my beliefs impartial. If being impartial means that all those "lenses" through which I look are identified and compensated for, then the goal of seeking impartiality is sameness. It is this sameness, this uniformity in viewing the world, that is the core of the search for impartiality and ultimately the core of how we (might) identify absolute truth. Absolute truth is what we decide is the case once we *see* impartially, once the evidence of our senses and our minds is arrived at in the absence of difference with other viewers. "Lenses" are essentially differences among us as epistemic agents. So sameness in view, by recognition and compensation for differences, seems the means by which we are able to access absolute truth (if there is any absolute truth to be had).

But again, the empirical problem of whether this sameness is actually possible faces us. There are, it seems, specific properties that I possess that stand in the way of the sameness that is necessary for impartiality *that in themselves do not seem to be specifics that I necessarily wish to exclude.* For instance, suppose that I have a certain talent to see very slight variations in color, and that this talent is rather unusual. Ought I suppress this talent in order to protect the sameness that seems at the heart of impartiality? If we identify impartiality with a loss of anything that would differentiate us, one from another, then the hallmark of impartiality seems to be sameness. But if I have unique talents and abilities, it would seem a shame to need to suppress them or deny them or order to claim greater impartiality.

Candidate beliefs will depend for their acceptance on my indexing. If I see the patch as greenish, if I see the presence of an electron or an appearance of the Virgin Mary, if I see one patch of orange as slightly different from another, if I can add numbers faster than you, or have a more assertive personality, it is unclear that (1) these can ever be completely identified and so completely attended to (in pursuit of impartiality), and (2) that it is necessarily a good thing to reach for the denial or suppression of unique abilities and talents. Instead of reaching for sameness, perhaps we ought to be content to be different. I certainly do not mean to be arguing for ignorance of differences. I support wholeheartedly being mindful of such differences. However, it is unclear that such differences should always - if that is even possible - be removed. *And removal is important if the goal is sameness (uniformity of view); sameness is important if the goal is impartiality; impartiality is important if the goal is access to absolute truth.*

As I mentioned, soft relativism does not imply hard relativism. The sort of indexing - of being mindful, though not suppressive, of individual differences - does not lead to

irreconcilable and unadjudicatable differences that render competing claims equally true. That is a slippery slope. Rather, the normativity that hard relativism denies or renders impossible is left in tact with a program only inclusive of indexing. The key is normativity. But we must be careful not to define normativity too broadly. If normativity refers to some standard ranging over *all* agents in *all* instances (whether aesthetic, moral or rational), then we have a normativity that is too broad. Consider the following case. Suppose that Fred has a certain rare disease - tropical, no doubt. And suppose that he visits a battery of physicians, and in the end they prescribe for him a very unusual medicine. Now, we can say with little fear of defining normativity too narrowly, that Fred *ought* to take the medicine. And moreover, we can say that with all the power of the normative behind that 'ought'. Fred, and all those with the similar ailment (all members of the kind "has that certain rare disease") *ought* to take that particular medicine. But suppose that Fred is the only person on earth who has ever had that disease. Would the normativity be lost in having only a single member of the kind "has that certain rare disease"? Of course not. Fred ought to take his medicine. And whether or not anyone else is relevantly similar - has similar relevant objective properties - such that the standard or prescription should range over her too, is unimportant.

Normativity need not be a matter of ranging over all agents (at least certainly not in every instance, that is, in the absence of clear relevant similarity). Normativity, the sort that stands against a hard relativism, may be the sort that ranges only over agents relevantly similar, given whatever topic is at hand. To impose relevant similarity on everyone in all instances seems not only artificial, but actually harmful in a majority of cases. Better we should instead simply be cognizant of the dissimilarities and make suitable allowance in order to establish a meaningful normativity. If I have a particular ability or talent, then we ought index normativity to that peculiarity. This is what we do in prescribing medicine. This is also what we do in prescribing certain lifestyles: I am okay as a philosopher (no comments from the audience, please), but would probably be less than adequate as a bio-chemist, because I have little patience for the sort of intricate carefulness called for in that vocation. Indexing normativity is also what we do in aesthetic appreciation. I do not expect any aesthetic appreciator who is not relevantly similar to me to match all my aesthetic judgments. While we may build a standard wherein there is a best position - an ideal judge (most practiced, most sensitive, most knowledgeable) - it is unclear as to whether this ideal judge *should* be more impressed with Eastern rather than Western art, with Abstract Expressionism rather than Cubism, with Arts- and-Crafts rather than with oils-on-canvas, and so forth. Some concerns may be matters of taste and may not admit an adjudicating standard such that one preference is better than another. Better then that we should index our normativities, our ideal judges, to particular tastes in matters of aesthetics.

Again and again this sort of indexing will be important to a non-artificial treatment of normativity. And in treating normativity non-artificially we not only achieve the avoidance of hard relativism, but we also realize the importance of difference between individuals. If I have unique talents and abilities - and I, like you, do - then there seems little reason to deny or suppress them in order to retain an outmoded sense of impartiality or normativity. This is the sort of position that I attribute, at least in origin, to Aristotle.

Through understanding that there are differences between individuals, and through understanding that some of these differences may actually be beneficial, we understand how it is that goodness - be it aesthetic or ethical - must be indexed to the *kind* in question. Kinds may include one another. The kind 'numeral' includes the kind 'odd number', and that kind includes the kind '7'. And if at base there is but a single instance of a given kind, the normativity involved in discussions of that kind is not lessened.

Furthermore, since kinds will include other kinds, broader and broader evaluations are possible. So long as there is some relevant similarity, no matter how broad, against which determinations of goodness may be made, we need not fear that human ideals will be lost. The kind 'human being' has the relevant similarity that each and every human being possesses the right to life. So the morality of murder is never justified. This sort of example can be multiplied as many times as necessary to show that many of the precepts of an absolutist ethic remain very much in tact in a functional system. The key is relevant similarity.

The same case can be made in defense of *excellence*. Excellence, and objective standards, are not lost in a program like the one I describe. This program is not an advocate of diversity for its own sake, or for a lessening of the standards to which some person, some group or some kind ought aspire. While global uniformity is artificial as a basis for normativity, creating diversity in the absence of relevant differences is equally artificial. My aesthetic judgments ought not be held to the same criteria as one with whom I do not share a common aesthetic taste; however, by the same token, I cannot claim that my aesthetic judgments are every bit as good as those of one who is more practiced, more sensitive, more knowledgeable in appreciating or criticizing art. There is a standard against which I can compare myself and to which I can aspire and train. Again, the key is relevant similarity, and to some large measure I can determine, against the kind 'aesthetic appreciator', an objective standard. What I cannot determine is an objective standard in matters of pure or simple taste (such as in preferring Eastern art to Western, or in preferring chocolate ice cream to vanilla); this is to appeal to a different kind from simply 'aesthetic appreciator'.

Whether we are talking about persons or butter knives, the point is the same. We do ourselves a disservice to think in terms of simple global commonality as the basis for normativity and the avoidance of relativism (*hard* relativism). This is artificial, and through an active use of indexing, in matters of ethics, politics or aesthetics, we may avoid that artifice.[7] What is sought is a ground against which determinations of goodness are made. This ground can be found in the natural world, the world experienced by our senses.

Are Functional Accounts of Goodness Relativist? Yes and No. Yes, insofar as the determination of an object being good is made against (and only against) the *kind* of which the object is a member. No, insofar as the normativity inherent in the notion of goodness is protected as the normativity appropriately ranges only over those objects relevantly similar. Any attempt, furthermore, to determine goodness apart from determining it internally, as against some particular kind or given some particular index, will fail. Given

that kinds can be included in still more broad kinds, this restriction need not be seen as limiting. What is limiting, in the final analysis, is the attempt to determine some unconnected, ungrounded, artificial standard of goodness whose use requires global uniformity.