**16. Goodness Has Nothing (much) to Do with it**

**1. Introduction**

In The 1932 film *Night After Night* there is a brief exchange between a cloakroom attendant, and Mae West. West hands her a fur coat in for safe-keeping and the female cloakroom attendant, looking at West, says: ‘My goodness: what beautiful diamonds’. West replies: ‘Goodness had nothing to do with it’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

My concern, in this piece, is with a related lesson which we seem to me slow to learn. It is that there is no necessary link between good intentions, and good large-scale social outcomes. Mae West has supplied me with my title. But there is no more to the link than that. For in West’s character’s case, the connection between not being good and getting the diamonds was straightforward, and not one which I wish to endorse. I am also not simply arguing that, as ‘Gordon Gekko’ said in the 1987 film *Wall Street*, ‘Greed is Good’.

Rather, my argument is this. First, being good to one another is fine, provided that the others are happy to have the good done to them, and that it is not being done at undue sacrifice to one’s own legitimate interests. Second, and this is an issue that, it seems to me, we are slow to learn: that there is no necessary link between good intentions and good large-scale social outcomes. I will discuss this by way of four kinds of example: the left-wing British playwright J. B. Priestley’s still-widely-studied play, ‘An Inspector Calls’; some issues in Catholic social thought (as illustrated by the British Catholic Publisher Maisie Ward, and also Mother Teresa), and by reference to problems about global warming and the environment. I will conclude with some discussion of the ‘Greed is Good’ issue, and of Bernard Mandeville’s ‘Private Vices, Public Benefits’, the subtitle of his *The Fable of the Bees*.

**2. Virtue – in moderation**

My starting-point is virtue. I am in general all for it. But it has been wisely asked by Susan Wolf: Would you wish to live with a moral saint?[[2]](#footnote-2) There are two obvious-enough issues here.

First, it is good of people to engage in supererogation (that is to say, going beyond what is morally obligatory). For example, it would be expected of an able-bodied person on a bus, that they might volunteer to help an elderly person to get their heavy shopping off the bus. It would be even better, but would go beyond what we would reasonably expect of them, if, beyond that, they got off the bus (although their journey had not ended), and carried the shopping back to the person’s home. A degree of supererogation is fine. But we need to ask: where should it stop? For it would surely be unreasonable if someone was expected to behave in such a way all the time. An undue sacrifice of someone’s own legitimate interests, is problematic. Consider, in this context, the stock figure of a mother who sacrifices everything for her children. Does she not, one might say, also have a right to a life of her own, and, indeed, duties to herself, which should only be sacrificed to a limited extent?

Second, there is the other side to this. C. S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*,[[3]](#footnote-3) writes: ‘She’s the sort of woman who lives for others – you can always tell the others by their hunted expression.’ The point, here, is a serious one. There is a problem about being the *object* of excessive supererogation. It puts a huge and typically unrequested burden onto you. Clearly, when we are little, we are of necessity dependent on others. We can only hope that they get some joy in doing things for us. Similarly, if we are seriously ill, or very old, we may depend on others. But there is something important, it seems to me, about relationships being as reciprocal as possible, and if we can, even as a token, do something in return for what others do for us, if not for them, for someone else.[[4]](#footnote-4)

That being said, it is good if people do whatever duty is appropriate to their situation in life; that they also do what they can to assist others, and generally be pleasant to one another rather than hostile or aggressive. I am stopping to spell this out, lest I be misunderstood in what follows, when I turn to what might be misinterpreted as a critique of virtue.

**3. Virtue and Its Consequences**

My target is not the practise of moderate virtue, but the idea that virtue can be expected to have good large-scale consequences – or, to put things the other way round, if bad things occur, one can assume that this is the result of bad personal behaviour. It might be thought to be overkill to write on this topic.[[5]](#footnote-5) But once one is sensitive to this as an issue – and it is in some ways, one of the key lessons that I think we should learn from social science – then it seems to crop up all over the place. The problem, as I should also stress emphatically, is not with the idea that we should care about social occurrences which are unfair, or in which people suffer, and so on (although we may also discover that there are some problems which we can’t remedy, if we have particular social institutions in place, which we may need to have). It is, rather, the idea that these occurrences are the product of immoral conduct. An obvious enough example of all this, are the current concerns of the ‘black lives matter’ movement. These issues – they are diverse – are morally pressing, and it is proper that all of us should be concerned about them.[[6]](#footnote-6) But what is involved, and how to remedy it,[[7]](#footnote-7) would actually seem to be a complicated matter, and one which it is not helpful to address as if the problem is one of ‘racism’ – which suggests that the problem is simply a matter of morally problematic attitudes at a personal level. There are, to be sure, also discussions of ‘structural racism’. But these tend also to be conducted in a moralized manner – when I would urge that we should distinguish between the social occurrences, about which we should indeed be morally concerned, and issues about whether or not what gives rise to them is, necessarily, behaviour which is bad, at an individual level. My aim here is to argue against the assumption that there is a link between goodness or virtue at the level of individual behaviour, and the character of social outcomes. I think that we should be concerned about social outcomes (and also about individual behaviour), but that what we may need to do to bring about social outcomes may involve our having to embrace things which we may not find particularly attractive at the individual level.

**3.1 An Inspector Calls**

My starting-point here is with a play by the prolific British author J. B. Priestley (1894-1984), ‘An Inspector Calls’. This play, which is currently widely studied in British schools, was written in 1945. It was set in 1912, and is concerned with a visit by a supposed police inspector to a comfortable, bourgeois household. The ‘inspector’ says that he is investigating the death by suicide of a young woman. He gradually discloses the role that different members of the family had in bringing about the circumstances in which the young woman took her own life. The story is contrived. It is clear on any reflection that the man is not a police inspector, and dubious that the young woman is the same as the person with whom the different members of the family were entangled, at various times and in various circumstances. It seems to me, personally, dubious that *all* of the members of the family did anything wrong.[[8]](#footnote-8) But even if one were to grant that they did, the problem seems to me to be that what Priestley is blaming them for is not their individual actions, which may indeed merit censorship, but for the overall outcome of the young woman’s being driven to suicide.

It is just this link – which I think that people are all too prone to make – between problematic actions, and bad but distant outcomes, which is at fault. For while I’d be in favour of us all behaving better to one another, we typically can’t tell what the outcomes of specific acts of virtue or vice, unselfishness or selfishness, will be. All kinds of contingencies may occur; and people may do badly in settings in which everyone was acting in morally impeccable ways. The actual moral to Priestley’s story should, in my view, be that there is a strong case for an insurance-cum-welfare system, which works on a non-discretionary basis, such that if people are unlucky enough to fall into bad circumstances (or if they fall into bad circumstances as a result of other people’s bad actions), they are entitled to assistance, and actually get it without anyone’s discretion being involved.

The play – the dramatic and moralistic character of which makes it, I fear, an all too obvious choice for schools – was in fact first produced in Leningrad.[[9]](#footnote-9) One could read its conclusion simply as an affirmation that our lives are inter-connected and that we should bear responsibility for one another. But its dramatic thrust is very much a matter of connecting particular acts of morally dubious behaviour with the bad outcome, the idea that I am here calling into question.

**3.2 Pious Catholics and Social Outcomes**

My second example is drawn from the life of Maisie Ward (1889-1975). She was a stalwart defender of Catholicism in England and America in the Twentieth Century. She, from a privileged Catholic family, and her working-class Australian husband Frank Sheed (1897-1981) met in London, while they were both enthusiastic outdoor speakers for the Catholic Evidence Guild. They went on to run the Catholic publishing firm Sheed and Ward, which played a key role in the Catholic intellectual revival in the middle years of the Twentieth Century. They were a remarkable and talented couple, and each wrote a number of interesting books. Sheed wished to concentrate on doctrinal matters, while Ward was also interested in practical and political issues. It is in this latter capacity that she has a role in our story, for she seems to me to have fallen victim, spectacularly, to the ideas that I am, here, discussing.

She was, initially, keen on Catholic ideas about ‘distributivism’. In the early years of the Twentieth Century, some British Catholic writers brought together a range of ideas, in a manner that can be seen as a response to Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum novarum* of 1891. This was intended to be a response to the poor conditions of the industrial working class, and which offered a Catholic response to both capitalism and socialism. It stressed the significance of the small-scale ownership of property, of small businesses, and – in the form which impressed Ward – of farming of a small-scale and romantic, minimally-mechanised kind. Ward tried to assist in a practical way, by the purchase of a small farm. She participated in a scheme in which some Catholic boys were ‘rescued’ from the slums of Glasgow, and set to work in such settings. The scheme was not a success. As she gradually came to recognise, the real problem was that none of those involved in this scheme actually knew anything about effective farming. However, she exhibited continuing attractions to Catholic-inspired agricultural ideas.[[10]](#footnote-10) And in her latter years, she showed support for Indian ‘untouchables’, and for the practical efforts of Catholic missionaries among them, although, as her biographer notes, she ‘might have overlooked the ineffectiveness of some of their work’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The ideas and ideals may have been worthy and attractive enough in themselves; but there is the question of how effective they are. This issue also arises in respect of Mother Teresa and her order of the ‘Missionaries of Charity’. Most people are appreciative of her dedication to the poor and the sick, and her self-sacrifice.[[12]](#footnote-12) But questions have been raised as to just how effective the medical work which she and her associates undertook, actually was. There is obviously some room for ambiguity here as to how much Catholicism is concerned with practical outcomes. After all, Simeon Stylites is venerated, when his only activity was living in austerity at the top of a pillar. But at least on the face of it, if people are drawn by their religious faith to social and political action, they can hardly object to being evaluated on the basis of how effective their efforts are, as distinct from just how well-intentioned they are.

**3.3 Richard Titmuss and the Gift Relationship**

My last example here will relate to the arguments of the distinguished theorist of social administration, Richard Titmuss. As I have already discussed briefly in my ‘Selling Yourself’,[[13]](#footnote-13) Titmuss in his *The Gift Relationship*, strongly advocated depending, for the supply of blood for medical purposes, upon donors rather than those who were willing to sell their blood. Titmuss argued not only that this was morally attractive, but that it worked: that it was economically efficient, and also offered much less of a risk of the transmission of disease. In the event, his arguments were not as powerful as they had seemed.[[14]](#footnote-14) Nonetheless, the attractions of a system for the supply of blood – and of body organs – which rests on worthy donors, rather than people selling bodily parts, seems particularly attractive.

It is, however, worth noting that one hospital in the United States, when asked about their arrangements for collecting blood, reported that they had moved from a donor-based system, to paying people who had previously been members of the very group who had been giving their blood for free.[[15]](#footnote-15) Why, one might wonder, would the hospital do that? The explanation turned out to be twofold. First, it was cheaper. For while donors gave their blood for free, the *administration* of donors – a cost carried by the hospital – involved a cost which was greater than what was involved in the administration and payment of donors. This might still seem puzzling. But light is thrown on it by the second part of the explanation. This is that a problem about people rewarded for their blood, related to when one could get them to give blood. The hospital had specific needs for blood. And these, for example, included the need to meet periods of high demand, including Christmas and New Year. But this was a period during which people – including donors – tended to wish to be spending time with their family, rather than going to a hospital to make blood donations. Of course, this would not apply to all donors. But a problem about donors is that, as they are doing you a favour, there is no obvious way – beyond further moral appeal – to get them to come just when they are needed. By contrast, those involved with the collection of blood found that people would respond to cash incentives to give blood, in a much more reliable manner. And for hospitals, reliability of supply played a key role. More generally, it is possible for the purchaser to offer a structure of such incentives specifically geared towards the production of what they need.[[16]](#footnote-16) While my story about this particular hospital is not of lasting significance, I think that a moral that it illustrates is: that there is no necessary connection between what is morally appealing at the level of individual action, and good outcomes.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**3.4 Ecology, Climate Change and String Saving**

It would seem to me that we are in the middle of an ecological crisis, and that it is important that the significance of this, and the arguments about it, be made widely known. I am concerned, however, that currently, those who are aware of the problems and are (in my view properly) alarmed about them, disregard three issues. First, the details of the science are difficult, and may not be easy to communicate. Second, that people’s becoming aware of the problems does not, in itself, resolve them. Third, that there is no reason whatever why we should assume that that we can effectively address the problem by way of things that seem attractive at the level of our day-to-day actions. There is the risk, here, that we will engage in virtue signalling and string saving, while the climate, the ecology and our fellow creatures go to hell. If this is right, it faces governments with the practical problem of how to sell to us actions and restrictions which we may find unattractive. It is possible that popular concern about the environment might help; but there is a danger that this popular concern will also bring with it the expectation that the solutions to the problem will also have popular appeal, rather than being things which the government may have to impose on us.

**4. So, What is my argument?**

It might be asked: just what am I arguing? Am I saying, with Gordon Gekko, that ‘Greed is Good’? Am I saying, with Bernard de Mandeville, ‘Private Vices, Public Benefits’.[[18]](#footnote-18) And what, it might be said, about the global financial crisis?

My response, and the explanation of the view that I favour, might usefully start with Mandeville. In his *A Letter to Dion*,[[19]](#footnote-19) Mandeville wrote:

the words Private Vices, Public Benefits make not a complete sentence according to grammar... In the *Vindication of the Fable of the Bees*, I have said that I understood by it, that private vices, by the dextrous management of a skilful politician, might be turned into public benefits

What Mandeville is pointing to, here, is that a key role is played by the institutional setting in which vice, or self-interest, is operating. This may be a matter of deliberate design. (The work in this context of James Buchanan on ‘constitutional political economy’ makes an important contribution to how we may get results in the public interest from the behaviour of self-interested individuals.) It may be a matter, as F. A. Hayek has stressed, of appreciating the way in which some of our inherited but sometimes unappealing institutions play such a role, but then of improving them so that they work better. But it can also be a matter of working to improve whatever arrangements we have in place, or of learning from how others do things better. The key argument, here, is that what we should be concerned about, is how we can obtain the outcomes that we and others want; outcomes which are in the public interest, rather than with the purity of people’s motives. Following, here, in Mandeville’s path, Adam Smith argued in his *Wealth of Nations*: ‘It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.’ But it is also (obviously) the case that behind this, there lies a legal system, and traditions of compliance with it. This we may have been lucky enough to inherit; but if we haven’t, we may have to design it.

Two issues might be raised here. The first is: do we have to appeal just to people’s self-interest. I’d certainly say: no. But – as I have hinted in my earlier discussion of blood – people’s ‘altruistic’ motivation may need to be re-shaped, in order to deliver the large-scale or distant outcomes which are in the public interest. As I have been arguing, just because people’s motivation is virtuous or altruistic, does not, in itself, mean that the results that flow from it must be good. But if people’s altruistic motives are open to manipulation, we surely need to be very careful. There is something to be said for building on self-interest, simply as a way of protecting the individual!

Second, am I suggesting that simply appealing to self-interest is enough? I would say, emphatically, no. Not only do we stand in need of an appropriate institutional structure and of the socialisation of people into compliance with it. But all kinds of things may call for much more detailed thought about the design of our institutions. Consider the global financial crisis. This is, these days, often simply put down to greed. But it seems to me much more plausible to suggest that it was the product in part of well-intentioned regulation (e.g. of requirements on lenders to lend to poorer people on a basis which they would not have ordinarily done), together with the bad design of some of our financial institutions. More specifically, that[[20]](#footnote-20) the agencies which were responsible for certifying the quality of financial products built upon often dubious mortgages, were paid by the people who were selling these things, not by potential buyers. This created an interest, on the part of these appraisers, in not giving an honest appraisal of their quality – not least because, if they were honest, they would lose their business to those people who were willing to mis-classify them as being of good quality. At every turn, we need to look to see if the institutions that we are developing are, indeed, ones which will actually produce public benefits out of vice or self-interested behaviour. (For what it is worth, I think that we should be especially careful of anyone – e.g. on the internet – who offers us a useful service for free. If we pay a fee for something, it is clear how people are making their money. If the service is ‘free’, this should simply alert us to ask: just how *are* they generating income?)

But it might be said: is there not something paradoxical in all this? For I have been critical (in a certain way) of virtue. But does not my approach call upon the services of a politician, or of a designer of institutions, who is presumed to be virtuous? I would agree. But I don’t think that there is any problem here. For I am not against virtue: indeed, I am all in favour of it. My concern, rather, was with the idea that one can presume that the longer-term, or more remote, consequences of virtuous behaviour will be desirable. And that is not something that I am assuming, in terms of these politicians or academics. Rather, their actions and proposals should be judged for their immediate cogency, by their peers. And that is something that can be assessed directly.

It could be argued, however, that there may be a disparity between the basis on which academic work is currently appraised, and its actually being worthwhile. I think that there is a case to answer, but that is something that I need to pursue in a rather different setting than this one.

1. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7ekAQ\_Plxk [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Susan Wolf, ‘Moral Saints’, *Journal of Philosophy* 79, No. 8 (Aug., 1982), pp. 419–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* [1942], London: Collins, 1955, chapter 26, p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is why I personally would prefer to depend on the paid services of others – if not from our own funds, then from resources supplied to us through taxation – rather than to depend on our family; not least because, if someone is being paid for a service, they can stop when their paid duties come to an end. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. And especially on the part of someone who has already written about ‘Postmodern Politics’. (See chapter 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. If anyone is sceptical about this, they should read Isabel Wilkinson’s *Caste: The Lies That Divide Us* (London: Allen Lane, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Let me put aside issues – e.g. of class-based disadvantage – which it may be difficult to avoid, if we are in a market-based society. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The father had the woman dismissed, as the organiser of a strike for improved wages. But if one assumes that it is correct – as the father is made to claim – that he is paying what were the standard rates for such work, it is not clear that he did anything wrong. Three of the family members behaved in ways which were morally problematic, while the behaviour of one of them seems to have been criminal. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See [https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/aug/29/how-jb-priestley-inspector-calls-ussr](about:blank). As this piece notes, it was not that the play was rejected in London, so much as that no theatre was available there. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. E.g. to the efforts of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in the ‘Catholic Worker’ movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Dana Greene, *The Living of Maisie Ward* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. But see for a contrary view, Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position* (London: Verso, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See chapter 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See for example my ‘The Gift Relationship Revisited’, *HEC Forum* 27, No. 4, 2015, pp. 301–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See ‘The Gift Relationship Revisited’ for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The issue is a little more complex than I have presented it as being here. For while people may initially volunteer on the basis of one set of motives, it is possible that they may become socialised into motivation which is structured by the organisation into which they volunteer. For example, once people give blood a certain number of times, they apparently come to self-identify as ‘blood donors’, and will then – e.g. if they move – deliberately to seek out opportunities to give blood, in their new location. See Jane A. Piliavin and Peter L. Callero, *Giving Blood: the development of an altruistic identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). Nonetheless, it seems to me that more flexibility is possible in the construction of commercial incentives, which need not make any sense to the paid donor, other than that they are what they have to comply with, to get paid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It is striking, although I can only mention this briefly here, that in the face of this problem those who volunteer often find that they are, now, subject to all kinds of unappealing bureaucratic rules. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The (notorious) subtitle of his *The Fable of the Bees;* see for example F. B. Kaye’s edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Mandeville, *A Letter to Dion* [1732] ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1954); see p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As I have discussed in chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)