

In Search of 'the Good of Man': Georg Henrik von Wright's Humanistic Ethics

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1. In this paper I shall make an attempt at tracing one particular path Georg Henrik von Wright travelled in the realm of values and moral philosophy.* More precisely, I shall have a look at some of von Wright's discussions concerning the concept of 'the good of man' – a notion of which von Wright himself states at the beginning of the fifth chapter of his 1963 *The Varieties of Goodness* (henceforth also *Varieties* or *VoG*), that it "is the central notion of our whole inquiry", and that "the problems connected with it are of the utmost difficulty" (*VoG*, 86). He continues: "Many of the things which I say about them may well be wrong. Perhaps the best I can hope for is that what I say will be interesting enough to be worth a refutation."

Von Wright's discussion on the good of man in the *Varieties* has not escaped external criticism,¹ but von Wright himself also later grew dissatisfied with his earlier account and

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¹ Both Thomas Schwartz's (1989) and Kurt Baier's (1989) contributions in the volume of *Library of Living Philosophers* dedicated to von Wright's philosophy take a critical stance on the account von Wright gives of this concept in the *Varieties*.

adopted different strategies in dealing with this central notion. As in many other instances, he was himself one of the fiercest critics of his own thinking. As I shall try to show in this contribution, his understanding of the concept of 'the good of man' went through a decisive change during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The crucial point of this change was the abandonment of an ultimately *subjectivist* account of what the good of man consists of in favour of a more objectivist and balanced conception of human welfare. In tracing this development, we shall do well to start our journey from *The Varieties of Goodness*.

2. Why and in what sense is the good of man such a central notion in the conceptual framework von Wright suggests in his *Varieties of Goodness*? As any reader of this book probably knows, the treatise is primarily an analytical discussion on the various forms, or varieties, of goodness, or – as von Wright occasionally prefers² – of different uses of the word 'good'. In the broad conceptual framework discussed and analysed in the book, the concept of 'the good of man' turns out to be just an interesting sub-form of a more general variety of goodness that von Wright calls 'the good of a being'. Thus, the great importance of this concept is *not* to be accounted in terms of its generality or in terms of its conceptual priority in relation to the other forms.³ Rather, it seems, its significance consists in the central position the concept takes in von Wright's conception of ethics and moral philosophy.

In the sixth chapter of the *Varieties*, subtitled 'Good and Action', von Wright presents his reader some tentative attempts at defining the concept of moral goodness. These suggestions are in fact attempts to articulate (or mould) the concept of moral goodness in a particular fashion – one could

² See e.g. *VoG*, 8.

³ See, however, David Wiggins (2009). He proposes that 'the good of man' could be taken as a concept in terms of which one can try to give an account of the other forms of goodness. The approach suggested by Wiggins is an independent development on the basis of von Wright's ideas, but not a strategy von Wright himself adopts. In fact, one of von Wright's basic philosophical ideas in the *Varieties* seems to have been that *none* of the varieties are conceptually prior to one another. See the somewhataporetic discussion of the meaning pattern of the varieties in *VoG*, 12–18.

say that they are suggestions for adopting particular criteria and rules for the use of the expression 'morally good'.⁴ And it is precisely *these* suggestions that seem to account for the central position von Wright reserves for the concept of 'the good of man'. In order to understand how, let us now have a brief look at one of von Wright's proposed explications of moral goodness:

[A]n act is morally good, if and only if it does good to at least one being and does not do bad (harm) to any being; and

an act is morally bad, if and only if it does bad (harm) to at least one being. (*VoG*, 121).

In this proposed definition, von Wright suggests an account of moral goodness (/badness) as a predicate of acts in terms of another form of goodness, discussed earlier in Chapter III of the book: the beneficial (or harmful). The beneficial in turn is a sub-form of what von Wright calls utilitarian goodness and is intimately related to the idea of the good of a being (see *VoG*, 40–48). According to von Wright, some *x* is good in the utilitarian sense, if *x* (causally) promotes some end or purpose, or, simply, if *x* is useful: a good plan or a good piece of advice are examples of utilitarian goodness. Again, some *x* is *beneficial*, if the end or purpose that *x* causally promotes is some being's good, i.e. if *x* *does good* to some being: water does good (is beneficial) to a lemon tree, as do insightful discussions to a philosopher.

In this context we have limited resources to discuss von Wright's proposed explication of the concept of moral goodness and its philosophical background.⁵ I wanted to highlight this definition only in order to show how the concept of 'the good of a being' – and especially 'the good of man' – is indeed the very central notion in von Wright's understanding of moral value. According to the position suggested, to make judgment on the *moral* value of an act is to evaluate how the

⁴ This approach is intimately related to von Wright's idea that basic concepts of ethics are concepts 'in search of a meaning' and that the philosopher may 'mould' the concept by suggesting some particular standards for the use of the expressions (see *VoG*, 4–6).

⁵ I have, however, dealt with some aspects of this background in another context, see Jakola (2014).

act in question causally promotes (or protects) the good of some being (or in the plural: beings), or alternatively: its (their) welfare or happiness. This basic idea seems to have remained at the very core of von Wright's reflections on morality to the very end of his life.

3. Let us now have a closer look at von Wright's reflections on the good of man. Chapter V of *The Varieties of Goodness* is wholly devoted to this concept, but the discussion is closely connected with the remarks on the more general notion of 'the good of a being' in Chapter III.6 and III.12. We shall thus do well to have a brief look at von Wright's treatment of the latter concept first.

The notion of 'the good of a being' stands out among the other varieties of goodness discussed in the book in one special respect. All the other main varieties – *i.e.* instrumental, technical, hedonic, utilitarian and medical goodness – are different forms of goodness as an *attribute*: that is, they are logically different uses of the word 'good' in compounds of the form 'good x'. In this respect the concept of 'the good of a being' is different. It does not so much designate goodness in the sense of some being or thing *being* good, but rather a good some being *has* or *enjoys*, or a good (state) a being is *in*. Furthermore, we, as human beings, may have a *conception* of our good, and we may in turn *pursue* or *strive for* this good. 'The good of x' is thus an example of the use of the word 'good' as a substantive. The German equivalent mentioned by von Wright for this form is 'das Wohl'.⁶

According to von Wright, the beings that *have* a good are, primarily and foremost, living beings, and only secondarily – and metaphorically – artefacts, parts of living beings, or social units. In fact, von Wright suggests that the good of a being, and the attributes that go along with it, is a *biological* concept in a broad sense – for it is primarily applicable to beings that have a life. Obviously, different kinds of living beings may also have different goods.⁷

⁶ See VoG, 10 and 86.

⁷ See the discussion in VoG, 50–51 and 61–62.

4. von Wright's discussion on the good of man in Chapter V falls roughly in three sections. The first, introductory section V.1, consists of a preliminary discussion of partial synonyms for the expression 'the good of man': Well-being, doing well, being healthy, flourishing, thriving, prospering, happiness and welfare are all mentioned as partial synonyms, but three main candidates seem to stand out: well-being, happiness and welfare. (VoG, 86-87).

The first main candidate, the concept of well-being, is given a fairly quick treatment, and von Wright does not return to it later. He connects this concept with the basic prerequisites of the good of man, and relates it to medical concepts such as health and illness. He writes:

The notion of being well is related to the notion of health. Often 'to be well' means exactly the same as 'to be in good, bodily and mental, health'. A man is said to be well when he is all right, fit, in good shape generally. These various expressions may be said to refer to the minimum requirements of enjoying one's good. (VoG, 86).

Even though von Wright does not state this explicitly in this context, the upshot of connecting well-being with the minimum requirements of the good of man seems to be that well-being is, in a sense, a *privative notion*: it is connected to things without which beings would suffer and not be able to pursue their (higher) goals. This kind of basic or privative dimension of the good of man is, as von Wright states in another context, again closely related to the (basic) needs and wants of living beings. (VoG, 62).

It is, however, not well-being but happiness and welfare that von Wright seems to consider the closest and most important candidates for the synonym of the expression 'the good of man'. In fact, the rest of Chapter V consists of a thorough and minute examination of these two concepts.

According to von Wright, even though the expressions 'happiness' and 'welfare' are sometimes used synonymously, there are some important conceptual differences between them, and they thus belong to different "logical categories". The most important difference is that happiness has a logical affinity with *hedonic* concepts, whereas welfare is more

closely related to *utilitarian* concepts. (VoG, 87–88.)⁸ That is: they are related to two different (main) forms of goodness.⁹ In von Wright's words,

Happiness is allied to pleasure, and therewith to such notions as those of enjoyment, gladness and liking. (...) Welfare, again, is primarily a matter of things beneficial and harmful *i.e.* good and bad, for the being concerned. As happiness, through pleasure, is related to that which a man enjoys and likes, in a similar manner welfare, through the beneficial, is connected with that which a man wants and needs. (VoG, 87).

On the basis of this (and some other considerations) von Wright claims that welfare is a more comprehensive and basic notion than happiness. It covers the *whole* of what we call 'the good of man' – allegedly also including the wants and needs of beings that von Wright connected earlier with the concept of well-being.¹⁰ Happiness, on the other hand, is, according to this position, a more restricted notion, which centres on the idea of a subject enjoying his life as a whole, or alternatively, of prospering or thriving in his life. Using metaphorical expressions, von Wright calls happiness the "consummation, or crown or flower" of welfare. (VoG, 88.) Thus the outcome of von Wright's preliminary discussion is that welfare is the closest synonym for 'the good of man'. Accordingly, to state what the good of man consists in, is, in von Wright's view, to state what the welfare of man consists in. But since well-being comprises the basic prerequisites of the good of man, and since happiness forms the "crown" of welfare, well-being and happiness seem to form two complemen-

⁸ See, however, also Baier's critical comments on this argument (1989, 234–235).

⁹ The upshot of connecting welfare with utilitarian concepts is that the considerations of welfare (unlike considerations of a being's happiness) include a causal component: considerations of welfare are considerations of how some things (causally) promote some being's good.

¹⁰ See, however, VoG, 108, which does not seem to fit well with this general picture of the conceptual interrelations between welfare and well-being.

tary aspects or dimensions of welfare, *i.e.* of the good of man.¹¹

One can perhaps see better the relationships between the concepts of welfare, well-being, happiness and the good of man, as suggested by von Wright in *The Varieties of Goodness*, if we map the concepts in a diagram:

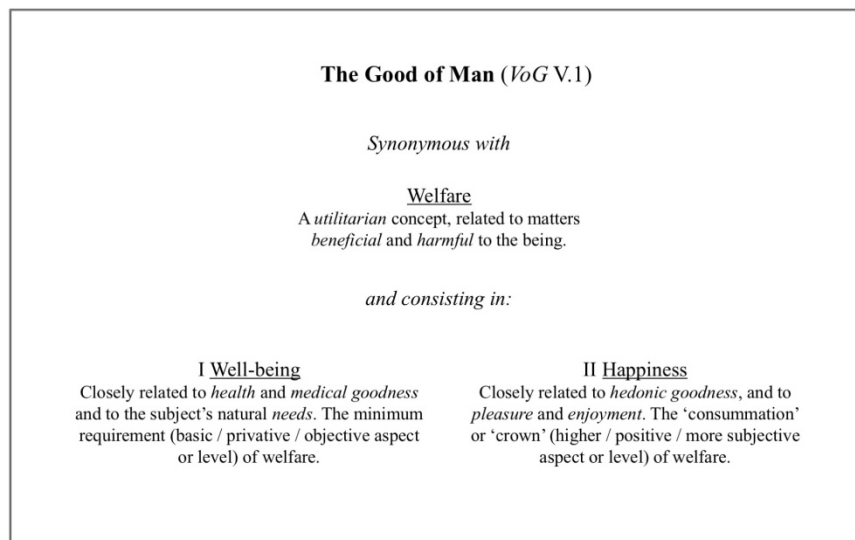


Diagram 1: The Good of Man – a preliminary account

All that has been presented above is based on what von Wright says in his preliminary discussion in the first part of chapter V. The account suggested is quite illuminating, and I think that this sort of perspective might indeed be adopted. For it would allow one to give an account of the concept of 'the good of man', which would include *both* the objective dimension centred on the idea of basic human needs, *and* the subjective dimension of personal preferences. That is: this

¹¹ In Chapter III.12 (*VoG*, 62) von Wright in fact refers to two 'levels' of welfare and calls them "privative" and "positive" aspects of welfare: the first, basic aspect, consisting of fulfilment of basic needs and wants of man, the latter being connected with the hedonic aspects of enjoying one's life. In Chapter V these 'aspects' seem to be covered by well-being and happiness, which together make up the more complex notion of human welfare.

kind of two-dimensional account would allow for a fairly universal basis of human welfare, and would still leave room for subjective variation in the pursuit of *personal* happiness.

5. However, and interestingly, von Wright does not seem to follow this path further in the *Varieties*. His official and more detailed doctrine of welfare, as presented in sections 8–14 of chapter V, rather bears close resemblance to the subjectivist and hedonic account of happiness, as presented in sections 2–7. In this account von Wright seems, as it were, to downplay what we called the “basic” dimension of human welfare above – the dimension of well-being – and to suggest a position according to which each *individual subject* is the final judge in defining what the ultimate constituents of her welfare are. In fact, one can detect a certain discrepancy between the two approaches in the *Varieties*: the one sketched in Chapters III.6, III.12 and V.1 on the one hand (*i.e.* in the general discussion on the concept of ‘the good of a being’ and in the introductory section on ‘the good of man’), and the one suggested in the later sections of Chapter V on the other. Whereas the first approach suggests a two-dimensional interpretation of the concept of ‘the good of man’ (as sketched above), the latter revolves around the idea of the rational preference of an individual subject.¹² Let us now have a closer look at the latter doctrine.

What does it mean to claim that the *individual subject* is the final judge concerning the constituents of her welfare? The position, thus formulated, is open to a grave risk of obliterating completely a distinction between what *in fact* is good (beneficial) for somebody and what *appears* to be good for her. That is: if what is good for an agent A is dependent on the *actual* judgment of hers *that* this something is good for her, we seem to be unable to account for *mistakes* in the first person judgments concerning the content of the good of man. The judgments appear to be pure *expressions* of personal preference. If I (sincerely) claim that a bottle of wine (say, a good German Riesling) a day is good for me, then it simply is, and the matter is closed. But, as things stand: it very much makes sense to say that we sometimes in fact *make mistakes* in judg-

¹² This discrepancy has been well noted by Thomas Schwarz (1989, 224).

ing whether something is good for us or not: later experience may indeed show that what we earlier thought was good for us, was, in fact, only an *apparent* good.

Von Wright agrees that this is the case. In fact, much of the sophisticated discussion in sections 8–14 of Chapter V can be viewed as an attempt at articulating an ultimately subjectivist account of the first person judgments concerning the content of the good of man that is still compatible with the idea of making mistakes in these judgments. Von Wright illuminates his position by means of a “logical fiction” of an idealized situation of preferential choice. This kind of “logical fiction” consists of a counterfactual supposition of the subject’s perfect knowledge of *all* causal connections related to things and goals that she could want and pursue in her life. That is: the subject in the counterfactual position knows (i) what is required for attaining any goal (= its causal prerequisites), and (ii) what would follow from attaining any goal (= its causal consequences), and – perhaps most importantly – (iii) what kind of influence these causal prerequisites and consequences would have for her own welfare. In this kind of situation, the subject would, according to von Wright, be in the position of making a rational choice among all the alternative pursuable goals and things, and could choose the ones which, in fact, would be constitutive of her good. In this kind of *counterfactual* situation there would, according to von Wright, in fact be *no* difference between the real and the apparent good. Thus, the good of man consists, according to von Wright’s position, in what an agent endowed with perfect causal knowledge *would* judge as being good for her. (*VoG*, 106–109.)

It is easy to see how this refined subjectivist account makes room for mistakes in the first person judgments concerning the content of the good of man. At a given time, *t*, I judge that drinking a bottle of good dry Riesling a day is good for me. But I am (then) not aware of the detrimental social and professional consequences this habit would later bring me, and that these consequences in turn would be harmful to my overall welfare. Being aware of these consequences later, I come to the conclusion that my earlier judgment was a mistake; in fact, had I known the consequences earlier at *t*, I would already (then) have revised my judgment concerning the beneficial nature of drinking a bottle of good dry Riesling

every day. The mistake is thus accounted for in terms of defective causal knowledge.

Since what is beneficial and harmful (*i.e.* the content of the good of man) is thus defined in terms of a counterfactual logical fiction of what a subject *would* prefer in an idealized situation, von Wright's definition is independent of what subjects *actually* prefer – but it remains subjective in the sense that the final content of the good of man is dependent on the preferences of the subject in question. (*VoG*, 108–109.)¹³ I think this point is of crucial importance for von Wright's position in the *Varieties*. If I have understood his position correctly, when talking about this “logical fiction” of perfect knowledge of causal prerequisites and consequences of things pursued and of their combined relevance to the subject's welfare, von Wright is *not* talking about an *ideal* subject in an idealized situation – about a constellation that would define the content of the good of man universally for every human being – but about an *ordinary* subject in an idealized situation. Thus the fiction is not meant to illuminate the universal and common *Wertrationalität* involved in choosing the ultimate goals to pursue in life. The good of each individual human being *might*, according to the position, in fact turn out to consist in different things. For von Wright, the good of man is, ultimately, the good of each *individual* man and woman.

Despite the fact that von Wright resorts to what he calls a “logical fiction” in describing the subjective core of the judgments concerning the content of the good of man, he is very aware that this fiction is just that – a fiction or a fantasy. The following quotation also neatly connects with the main topic of this volume – that of the *human condition*:

It is a deeply impressive fact about the condition of man that it should be difficult, or even humanly impossible, to judge confidently of many things which are known to affect our lives importantly, whether they are good or bad for us. I think that becoming *overwhelmed* by this fact is one of the things which can incline a man towards taking a religious view of life. ‘Only god knows what is good or bad for us’. One could say thus – and yet

¹³ For a clear statement of this position, see also von Wright 1989, 778–779.

accept that a man's welfare is a subjective notion in the sense that it is determined by what *he* wants and shuns. (VoG, 110).

To recapitulate: In the later sections of Chapter V of the *Varieties*, von Wright gives a rationalized subjectivist account of the nature of judgments concerning the content of the good of man in terms of a "logical fiction" of perfect causal knowledge. An important consequence of this, ultimately subjective account, is that von Wright does not tell his reader anything *substantial* about the content of human welfare. That is: he does not say on exactly what kind of things the good of man depends. At the time of writing *Varieties of Goodness* von Wright seems to have been quite convinced about the fact that each subject is – or even *has to be* – in the final analysis, the ultimate legislator and final judge of her own welfare. But whence this subjectivism, and what was its main motivation?

6. Before looking at von Wright's official doctrine of welfare, illustrated by the logical fiction of perfect causal knowledge (in 5 above), we learned (in 4 above) that in the first section of Chapter V von Wright mentions three close synonyms for the expression 'the good of man': well-being, happiness and welfare. As we remember (see *Diagram 1* above), von Wright also proposed that welfare is the most comprehensive notion of the three, comprising both well-being and happiness; the former being connected with the basic or lower level of welfare (that is: human needs and health), the latter 'the flower of welfare', with hedonic concepts.

It seems to me that the main flaw in von Wright's analysis of human welfare in the later sections of the Chapter V, as described in section 5 above, is the lack of concern for the 'lower' levels of human welfare – for the basic needs human beings have in order to live well. In fact, I think von Wright somewhat distorts the conceptual landscape in his attempt to reduce the *whole* field of human welfare to what a subject (be it idealized or not) wants, prefers, or aims at in her action. This may do for *some* aspects of welfare, but I do not think an account of this type is suitable for its lower and more basic aspect.

It is possible that von Wright's analysis here has been guided by a false analogy between the judgments concerning

the content of the good of man (judgments of the beneficial) and the judgments concerning happiness (eudaimonic judgments).¹⁴ Since happiness admittedly (as von Wright points out in *VoG*, 99) is a hedonic concept with subjective overtones, and since von Wright's analysis of human welfare is closely married to the analysis of happiness, also his account of human welfare bears a distinctive subjectivist flavour.¹⁵ Both accounts put much weight on the first person authority (allegedly) involved in the eudaimonic judgments and the judgments of the beneficial.

This close parallelism between the accounts of happiness and welfare is evident from the following two quotations. The first concerns happiness and stems from the *Varieties*, whereas the latter is on the good of man and is extracted from the correspondence between Georg Henrik von Wright and Elizabeth Anscombe.¹⁶

On happiness:

The fact that first person judgments of happiness can be insincere must not be allowed to conflict logically with the fact that, whether a person is happy or not depends upon *his own* attitude to his circumstances of life. The supreme judge of the case *must be* the subject himself. To think that it could be otherwise is false objectivism. (*VoG*, 101–101).

¹⁴'Eudaimonic judgment' is a term used by von Wright in a somewhat technical sense. With this expression he simply means "a judgment to the effect that some being is happy or is not happy or is unhappy". He is neither contrasting nor equating hedonic interpretation of happiness with a eudaimonic one. (*VoG*, 97.)

¹⁵ And this is the case despite the fact that von Wright acknowledges that the two concepts belong to different logical categories (*VoG*, 87–88) and is careful to note that judgments of the beneficial contain a causal component missing from eudaimonic judgments (*e.g.* *VoG*, 101).

¹⁶ Von Wright had sent the manuscript of his Gifford Lectures, on which *The Varieties of Goodness* is based, to Elizabeth Anscombe in late 1962 or early 1963; and Anscombe had replied on 21 January 1963 with some critical comments on von Wright's treatment of the 'Golden Rule'. The quotation is from von Wright's extended reply to this letter.

On welfare & the good of man:

A man may not know that a certain thing is bad for him and therefore tolerate or even want it. And another man may be able to enlighten the first (as regards the first man's own good) by pointing out to him existing causal connections and also by other means. But none of these possibilities must be allowed logically to conflict with the idea that every man is the supreme judge in questions relating to his own good, i.e. that the ultimate criterion of what is good or bad for a man is set by what he wants and shuns for himself. (...)

This subjectivity of the notion of man's good is essential to my view. I can see myself no honest alternative. If I am mistaken, it is a frightful mistake. And I cannot feel sure that I am not mistaken. (...) I think I can say truthfully that what I say in my book is meant very seriously. But the "detached" nature of philosophic writing makes it terribly difficult to speak seriously. Also what I have just written seems to me very "academic" and humpty-dumpty.¹⁷ (von Wright to Elizabeth Anscombe, 2. February 1963).

One reason behind von Wright's subjectivism seems thus to be the intimate juxtaposition of judgments of the beneficial with eudaimonic judgments. The only relevant logical difference between them seems to be that the former contain a causal component – which at the same time accounts for the possibility of mistakes in these judgments, as we saw in section 5. But the quotations above also point to another source of motivation. The striking feature of these two quotations is, I think, not primarily that they contain astonishingly strong philosophical claims, but that they have a strong *personal* tone in them. Especially the latter quotation shows quite clearly how important – and even personal! – the issue of subjectivism was for von Wright at the time. It was, as it were, very important *for him* not to allow any third person or external authority to interfere with the *personal* valuations and prefer-

¹⁷ This particular reference to Humpty Dumpty, a character featured in English nursery-rhymes, is probably to the sixth chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), in which Alice and the egg-shaped Humpty Dumpty talk, among other things, about the meanings of words. I am indebted to Lars Herzberg for pointing out this reference to me.

ences of a subject.¹⁸ Perhaps this kind of strong conceptual intuition of first person authority (or could one say, a liberal moral conviction?) also partly guided his analysis at the time of writing *The Varieties of Goodness*.¹⁹

7. Let us now move on to have a brief look at how von Wright's position takes a decisive turn in some writings from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Briefly put: this turn consists in the partial abandonment of the rationalized subjectivist position of the *Varieties* in favour of a more objectivistic conception of human welfare. The ground for the change is prepared (at least) by a pair of critical essays by Thomas Schwartz and Kurt Baier, written in 1975 and 1974 respectively, but published regrettably as late as in 1989 in the von Wright volume in the *Library of Living Philosophers*. In their contributions both Schwartz and Baier criticize von Wright's subjectivist account of the good of man and of human welfare, suggesting (among other things) that the concept of welfare is intimately connected with basic human needs.²⁰ In his replies, written in 1975 (but, again, not published until 1989), von Wright seems to accept some of the main points of criticism, but seems still committed to the subjective basis of judgments concerning

¹⁸ For another statement, see VoG 93, where von Wright calls such an external interference "moralistic perversion".

¹⁹ It might be fruitful and interesting to connect von Wright's insistence on subjectivism with his general remarks about conceptual analysis as explication of conceptual intuitions, which may end up changing or moulding the concepts we use (see von Wright 1989, 49). In his *Intellectual Autobiography*, von Wright also notes his need to "make philosophy relevant to my life and my understanding of the world", and suggests that *The Varieties of Goodness* may be viewed as an attempt in this direction (*ibid.*, 18). Could one not view von Wright's work on the good of man as an attempt at moulding a particular concept of human welfare around the fixed central idea of subjectivism?

²⁰ Schwartz 1989, 222–223 and Baier 1989, 238. Neither Schwartz nor Baier fail to notice that von Wright occasionally does connect welfare to the basic needs in the *Varieties*. They do, however, seem to fail to take fully into account that von Wright reserved the concept of *well-being* to the basic level of human needs, and that he suggested a two-level account of human welfare.

the content of the good of man.²¹ This, however, was soon to change.

As is evident from the two passages from the 1960s quoted in section 6 above, the issue of subjectivism was quite central for von Wright, and his change of mind seems to have been gradual. Already in the early 1970s we find von Wright arguing, in contexts related to philosophy of action, that subjects are not always the best judges concerning their own intentions.²² Eventually, he was to connect such reflections with his earlier insistence on the first person authority of eudaimonic judgments. As far as I know, the earliest explicit abandonment of the position informing his view on happiness and the good of man in *The Varieties of Goodness* appears in *Freedom and Determination*, written in 1977–1978. The passage in question deals primarily with the more general question of how one may establish what the agent's intentions, reasons and motives for a particular action were, but it also contains an explicit reference to the lines, quoted above from the *Varieties*, on the first person authority of eudaimonic judgments. After having argued, on the basis of some observations on self-deception and corruption of character, that the subject is *not* necessarily the final judge about her own reasons and motives of action, von Wright pauses and comments on his new position as follows (note again the personal tone of voice):

This view differs from the one which I have professed in earlier writings [footnote reference to *VoG*, 101 quoted above; L.J.] when I have regarded it as a conceptual truth that the agent must be 'supreme judge' of his own case. It seemed to me then that to deny this would be to assume an unwarranted authority on the part of one man over another man's 'inner life' – and it is only with reluctance that I now admit this need not be so. (von Wright 1980, 60–61).

But what bearing does the abandonment of (the requirement of) subjectivism have on von Wright's reflections on the good of man? It most definitely allowed him to approach the *content* of human welfare from a new point of view. But I think it

²¹ See especially von Wright 1989, 774; 776; 780 and 796. For a slight revision of the schema of preferential choice, see *ibid.* 786–789.

²² See, e.g. von Wright 1971, 114.

is fair to say he never quite spelled out his new approach in a well-articulated and extended form comparable with the sophistication of *The Varieties of Goodness*. Consequently, we have to gather the evidence from several scattered sources. In the early 1980s the new approach is exemplified by two articles: “Om Behov” (Engl. “On Need”) (1982) and “Rationality: Means and Ends” (1986, but first written in 1982). I think that these two pieces of philosophy together constitute the most important revision of von Wright’s earlier treatment of the good of man. The former article deals with the (neglected) lower level of human welfare, whereas the latter contains new reflections on the rationality of choosing ultimate goals to pursue in life. Due to the restrictions of space, I shall confine myself to the main points of the former article.²³

“Om Behov” deals with the concept of need and thus addresses a dimension of human welfare that was insufficiently treated in the *Varieties*. (As we remember, in the *Varieties* von Wright did point out that human well-being is related to fulfilment of basic human needs; but he did not really elaborate the idea further, nor did he have much to say on the concept of need in general.) Even though this is not stated with great emphasis, this article is clearly meant to be a supplement to and partial correction of the *Varieties*. In fact, von Wright starts the discussion by remarking that the concept of need has been a neglected topic in analytic philosophy and by paraphrasing what he calls his own earlier “definition” of need: “En varelse behöver sådant, som det är illa för den att undvara” – “The being *needs* that, the lack of which is bad for it” (1982, 1 = 1985, 152; my translation).²⁴ The concept of need

²³ For a more extended discussion, the interested reader is advised to consult Bernt Österman’s article “Att veta vad som är bra eller illa för en – Georg Henrik von Wright om värderationalitet” published in *Ajatus* 73, 2017.

²⁴ In the 1982 paraphrase of his earlier “definition”, von Wright does not give a definite reference to the *Varieties*, but a similar definition appears on p. 108 of *VoG*: “The needed is that, the lack or loss of which is a bad thing, an evil.” It seems obvious to me that this is the definition von Wright is referring to. Interestingly, in *VoG* von Wright thinks that what is needed is primarily *protective* of somebody’s good, and thus *good for*, but not really *beneficial* to the subject (see also *VoG*, 43). In von Wright’s view, what is beneficial must *actively promote* the being’s good. It seems to me

is thus depicted – quite correctly – as a *privative* concept: what is needed is defined by a reference to that, the lack or loss of which is bad or harmful to a being.

The focus on the privative concept of need seems to pave way for a more objectivist approach to the concept of 'the good of man'. Without going much further into detail, let me just quote one passage where the new objectivist trend of von Wright's thought is obvious. After quoting his earlier definition of need, von Wright proceeds to ask whether the concept of need is ultimately a subjective concept and whether it introduces subjective valuations to discourse. He answers as follows:

This kind of fear is groundless for many reasons. *One* reason is that the claim that a being is suffering, is, as I see it, not a value judgment. That somebody is suffering is objectively true or false, even though it may often be difficult to judge how things in fact are. The concept is *vague* – and we simply have to accept this. If more exact concepts are employed in science than the subject matter admits to, a distorted description of reality follows. Aristotle already warned us of such distortion. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I book, chapter 3). (von Wright 1985, 153; my translation).²⁵

The remainder of this short article contains a discussion of need on various levels of complexity, from the needs of plants via animal needs to the higher human needs.²⁶ The

that this particular way of analysing the concept of beneficial may have lead von Wright to downplay the significance of the concept of need in his (official) analysis human welfare: Since von Wright connects the concept of welfare closely with his analysis of the beneficial, and the beneficial concerns the *promotion* of the being's good, the privative dimension of need seems to be left out of the analysis. Here it is also obvious that von Wright's preliminary discussion on the good of man, as reconstructed in 4 above, is partly incompatible with his refined doctrine: his official doctrine of welfare does not really seem to take the 'privative dimension' of the good of man into account, despite von Wright's claim that he uses the term "welfare" synonymously with "the good of man".

²⁵ For a similar reflection on the signs of human suffering in "Rationality: Means and Ends", see von Wright 1985, 165.

²⁶ These sections of the paper bear a distinctive Aristotelian flavour – but also, I think, simultaneously develop further von Wright's earlier idea

article also concerns the relationship of needs to the concept of health and well-being, the contrast between natural and artificial needs, and it touches upon the generation of false needs in modern societies, characterized by the growing imbalance between generated wants and natural needs. Furthermore, it includes a short sketch of how the concept of need may be used in criticizing repressive societal norms.

By focusing on the concept of need and on the (previously neglected) concept of well-being, von Wright seems to be in search of an approach to human welfare that would admit of some objective dimensions. This objective dimension is to be found in natural (and necessary?) needs of living beings. From the perspective of von Wright's earlier treatment of the good of man, one interesting novelty of this approach is that it enables him to say something quite *substantial* about the content of the (lower level) of the good of man – something he, I should like to say, absolutely refrained from doing in his earlier analysis. After having already mentioned some basic needs of shelter and nutrition that humans share with animals (and to a lesser degree with plants), he comes to specific human needs – and simply provides his reader with a list:

What, then, are the specific human needs? Loving and safe environment, especially in childhood and during the formative years; introduction to life in the human community to which the person naturally belongs; opportunities to receive and give expressions of friendship and tenderness. This is what a human being needs in addition to the satisfaction of the animal needs. But these 'higher' needs are also anchored in the 'animal' basis. We encounter them in rudimentary forms in the animal world. The exclusively human seems to be contained only in those complex relations that are the consequence of man being a speaking creature (...) and has thus, alone in the animal world, developed forms of life that we call *culture*. (von Wright 1985,

that 'the good of a being' is a *biological* concept in a broad sense: all living beings have some basic needs, and the needs of different beings are closely related to what kind of functions the kinds of living beings can perform. The needs of plants, animals and human beings form a hierarchical order – and this hierarchy, in turn, is analogous the hierarchy of functions the creatures can perform.

167; my translation; for a similar passage in "Rationality: Means and Ends" see *ibid.* 183–184).

8. Let us now come back to where we started our philosophical journey into von Wright's reflections on the good of man. As we remember, at the very beginning of the chapter on the good of man in the *Varieties*, von Wright stated that

The notion of the good of man (...) is the central notion of our whole inquiry. The problems connected with it are of the utmost difficulty. Many things which I say about them may well be wrong. Perhaps the best I can hope for is that what I say will be interesting enough to be worth a refutation. (*VoG*, 86).

Now it seems quite obvious that in von Wright's post-*Varieties* thinking on morals and ethics the concept of 'the good of man' remains the very central notion. It also seems clear that he in fact subjected his earlier approach to criticism – to criticism, which, however, is more often implicit than explicit. But this critique does not amount to a complete refutation. Surely, the abandonment of the requirement of the ultimate subjective basis of first person judgments concerning the content of human welfare was a crucial change. But still, it seems to me, the later developments in his thinking rather enrich than completely replace the somewhat one-sided analysis given in the *Varieties*. As I have suggested, his mistake was that the examination of human welfare was too closely married to the account of the hedonic concept of happiness. But, to be just to von Wright's earlier reflections, the idea of an objective basis of human welfare in the basic needs and wants *was* already there – and this was designated by the (then insufficiently treated) concept of well-being. The conceptual pieces were already there, but they needed to wait for some 20 years to be put together.

What I have said above about the later development of von Wright's position is preliminary and simplifying, and the topic merits further research. However, the ideas and insights discussed here from the historical perspective of von Wright's intellectual development are quite important and illuminating. As already stated at the end of section 4 above, the insistence on the objective basis of human welfare in fulfilment of

basic human needs (= level of human well-being) is perfectly compatible with the idea of (subjective) variation in the higher levels of human welfare and with the pursuit of personal happiness. And in fact there is much to recommend in this picture. To work this position out in further detail would, of course, require one to revisit, reformulate and even to abandon some of the more detailed things von Wright has to say in *The Varieties of Goodness*.

9. To conclude this essay, I should like to connect the issues discussed above with another topic of interest in von Wright's intellectual biography – and thus also to the very topic of this publication: humanism. In the eponymous essay published in von Wright's 1978 collection *Humanismen som livshållning* (Finnish translation *Humanismi elämänasenteena* 1981; Engl. "Humanism as an attitude of life") von Wright characterizes humanism as an intellectual attitude to the problems of life – an attitude which is defined by concern for the good or the best of man. (von Wright 1981, 151–152, 166).

As we can see, the concept so central in von Wright's approach to moral philosophy – the good of man – was, for him, also the concept defining humanism. This allows us, I think, to characterize von Wright's search for the good of man as a search for a genuinely *humanistic* approach to ethics and to the moral life of man – a kind of perspective on ethics which makes reference neither to the transcendent realities nor to the universal moral laws of human thought, but finds its focus in the idea of the suffering and striving human being and in the idea of the human condition in the ever-changing world.

As friends of his writings well know, the idea of humanism and concern for the human condition were ever-important themes for von Wright. In his *Intellectual Autobiography*, written in the mid 1970s for his *Library of Living Philosophers* volume, von Wright describes his long-standing personal interest in humanism. He divides his humanistic approach to life into various stages: He speaks of the Burckhardian "aesthetic humanism" of his youth, which was to be replaced by the "ethical humanism" of the 1950s and 1960s, which again was to develop further into "social humanism" in the 1970's. Now, it seems to me that we can detect a paral-

lel development in von Wright's ethical convictions and, in particular, in his ideas on the good of man. The subjective but rationalized conception of the *Varieties*, with its insistence on the subjective basis of judgments concerning human happiness and welfare, reflects the attitude he calls "ethical humanism"; an attitude which still remained, as he himself put it, "decidedly self-centered and individualistic", and in the light of which the problems of life were "the problems of 'hiin Enkelte'", as von Wright quotes Kierkegaard's words. (von Wright 1989, 18). Perhaps this connection between von Wright's value-theoretical reflections and his humanistic *Weltanschauung* also helps us understand why the issue of subjectivism was so important and personal for him at the time. But this, as we have seen, was to change. And the change towards the objective dimensions of human welfare in the 1980s was not the final stop. Some fairly late and short writings of the 1990s were to connect the good of man more intimately with ideas of social identity.²⁷ To trace our philosopher's path further is, however, a task for another occasion.

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²⁷ See von Wright 2006.

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