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WHY WE SHOULD ALL BE PLATONISTS

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Collegeville, Minnesota
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As my title suggests, I am going to try to persuade you tonight that we should all be Platonists. That is really a rather bizarre thing to do. Plato is generally conceded to have written very useful works for teaching philosophy, but his own philosophy has supposedly been decisively refuted long ago. I am yet to meet a professional philosopher who will admit to being a Platonist. On the other hand, when I have told non-philosophers about my project, the response has been more along the lines "but of course that's right." I was glad to hear that many of you in the audience tonight are not professional academic philosophers, for that increases the chances I will get a sympathetic hearing. Because my goal is so bizarre, I must be careful to be very clear about precisely what I'm defending.

In the first place, my focus tonight is on the area of ethics. I am not going to argue that we should be Platonists in our physics, or mathematics, or social theory—only in our ethics. The job of the ethicist, as I conceive it, is basically to make sense of the ethical dimension of our lives. The ethical dimension is the one in which we make choices and judge the choices that others make, by identifying choices as good or bad, better or worse, right or wrong. We have values by which we make these choices and judgments. The ethicist must make sense of these values and these activities for us. The notion of "making sense" of something is deliberately vague. In the present context, we can say that making sense of ethics requires us to answer three sorts of questions about it.

First are the metaphysical questions. As a general matter, metaphysics tries to answer questions like "What are the basic realities? What kinds of things are there in the world?" In ethics, our values are expressed as guidelines for choosing actions and policies. The guidelines may take the form of rules, or may be expressed as ideals to be emulated. The crucial metaphysical question for ethics, then, is "What are these things? What kind of real existence do they have? Where do they come from?"

Then there are epistemological questions, or questions about knowledge. How do we know these rules are correct? How are ethical judgments to be justified?

The metaphysical and epistemological questions can be asked about any science or discipline, but the third set of questions is peculiar to ethics. These are what we may call the motivational questions. Why should I follow the rules that ethics identifies? What is there in human psychology that makes it possible to follow such rules?

Every theory of ethics must address these three sorts of questions. My claim about Platonism is that it does this better than the currently available alternatives. I am not arguing that it is the best, or ultimate, or final theory, that we will never see a better one. I claim only that in the present state of ethical discussion, Platonism is the best option. It is a theory whose time has come. Or rather, since it was the dominant theory in much of antiquity and the Middle Ages, it is a theory whose time has come again.

To show this, I will offer a very sketchy survey of the current state of affairs in ethical theory, with a view to showing what is wanting in the available theories. It will

be fairly easy to see how Platonism shares some of the strengths of these theories. In the process, the point of great vulnerability in Platonism will become clear as well. I will then try to defend Platonism precisely at that point of vulnerability.

Now to the first part of my argument, which begins with a whirlwind tour of the recent history of ethics. (I suppose only a philosopher would refer to the last one hundred years as “recent.”) I should warn you that the history I will describe is limited to the mainstream of ethical discussion in the English-speaking world. I am no master of German Idealism or Phenomenology or any of the versions of Post-modernism, nor do I have more than a nodding acquaintance with non-Western philosophies, so I cannot predict how my arguments would be received by philosophers in those traditions. Working with the material I know best, and speaking to people steeped in the same tradition as myself, this argument seems to me a persuasive one.

For much of the twentieth century the debate over the foundations of ethics was essentially a dispute between the Utilitarians and the Deontologists.¹ The debate took this form in part because each of these theories was strong at exactly the point where the other theory was weak. For Utilitarianism in its classical form, the ultimate good was pleasure. The phenomenon of pleasure is not as clear and simple as some philosophers and psychologists have thought, but compared to many other concepts deployed in ethics, it is at least relatively unproblematic. That pleasure and pain are real elements of our experience cannot reasonably be denied. Moreover, although the experiences of pleasure and pain are in some sense subjective, there are generally accepted, objective, we may even say “scientific” ways of determining what sorts of things please or pain people, and of determining what sorts of circumstances produce the objects or bring about the states of affairs that people enjoy. These facts are sometimes expressed by saying that Utilitarianism is a “naturalistic” theory. This is a much-abused term, but the general idea seems to be that Utilitarianism makes no appeal to anything philosophically suspicious. You need not believe in any mysterious, “supernatural” entities or in some special cognitive faculty by which such entities are known in order to be a Utilitarian. So the metaphysical and epistemological questions are fairly easy for the Utilitarian to answer.

A similar point can be made about Utilitarianism’s answer to the question of motivation. In explaining how human beings are motivated by morality, they fall back again on the principles of pleasure and pain. Of course, it’s not as simple as claiming that behaving morally is pleasant, and the opposite painful. The account of moral motivation is more complicated than that. But Utilitarians are sure that they can ultimately relate moral motivation to these principles, and surely no one can deny that pleasure and pain do have motivational force.

As the century advanced, Utilitarianism was elaborated in various ways, and we may question whether all of its variants retained undiluted this strength of the simpler, classical theory. The versions favored by economists, for example, tend to replace “pleasure” with “preference satisfaction,” and there is room for doubt whether this represents an improvement in every respect.² But I don’t want to go into that here. It is generally conceded that even when more abstract notions than pleasure are put into play, Utilitarian theories remain more grounded in ordinary experience, less suspicious, than theories of the Deontological sort.

Deontological theories appeared in various forms as well. The beginning of the century witnessed G.E. Moore’s defense of the proposition that goodness is an objective

but “non-natural” property of good things. Moore also famously claimed that goodness cannot be defined, so we must fall back on some sort of perception or intuition in order to recognize it and to distinguish better and worse.³ The next classical statement of Deontology was that of W.D. Ross. The objects of ethical intuition in his view were not so many subcategories of the good, but certain ethical principles, which he considered to be self-evident in much the way that principles of logic and mathematics are.⁴ This version of Deontology can be thought of as an attempt to preserve a Kantian sort of ethics, while abandoning the epistemological apparatus through which Kant sought to establish the principles of ethics as synthetic *a priori* propositions. The theory of John Rawls and others in a similar vein are often presented, under the heading of contractualism, as a third alternative to both Utilitarianism and Deontology, but Rawls at least regarded his theory as Kantian in spirit. He replaces the Kantian epistemology with the scenario of a social contract entered into in the so-called “original position” behind a “veil of ignorance,” and so on. But I will take him at his word that the intent remains Kantian.⁵ Finally, there have been, over the last twenty years or so, numerous defenses of a purer form of Kantianism. If the modern Kantians do not attempt to restore the entire “transcendental” apparatus, they do try to ground ethics in Kant’s categorical imperative, to interpret and apply the categorical imperative in a way faithful to Kant’s intentions and guided by Kant’s own examples, and to defend Kant’s more dubious ethical claims against criticism. We are still in the midst of this revival of Kantianism.⁶

All of these versions of Deontology share the same weakness. Their ontological and epistemological credentials are not in good order. Their accounts of the ontological status of ethical goods or principles, and their accounts of our cognitive access to these goods or principles, have not won wide acceptance. The faculty of “ethical intuition” seems to be a cognitive function entirely *sui generis*, and has long been suspected of being a figment of the Deontologists’ imagination. In the absence of a satisfactory account of ethical knowledge, the goods and principles of the Deontologists become vulnerable to reductive and destructive analyses of a Marxist or Freudian or other variety. Some of the recent revivers of Kantianism appear to have thought that they had solved these problems, but I have not yet come across a solution that I found compelling, and apparently I have lots of company in that respect.⁷ In sum, then, the Deontological theories stack up poorly against the “naturalism” of Utilitarian theories.

This is also true with regard to the other benefit of naturalism: the ease with which the Utilitarian hopes to account for moral motivation. The motive force of pleasure and pain is not disputed. But how will the Deontologist explain our obedience to the dictates of ethical intuition? They have generally maintained something to the effect that intuition is in itself motivating, and thus is capable of overriding the promptings of pleasure. But ever since Hume declared that “Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions,” most philosophers and psychologists in the West have denied that any merely cognitive function could possibly have motivating force by itself. This has perhaps been accepted more as an article of faith than on evidential grounds, but the failure of Deontologists to give a plausible account of how reason or intuition could motivate has left the Utilitarians in possession of the field.

On the other hand, Deontology fared much better than Utilitarianism on another score. One of our most deeply held ethical convictions is that the interests of other persons must carry independent weight in the deliberations of each of us. That is, they

must carry some weight independent of how their satisfactions and frustrations indirectly impact our own. Exactly whose interests must be taken into account, and how much weight they should be given, may vary from one instance of deliberation to another, and in a particular instance we may disagree over these issues. Much of our deliberation involves weighing the strength of various obligations to different people to whom we stand in various relationships. But that some interests of some others must be given independent weight in our decision-making is among the most deeply held and widely accepted of our ethical intuitions. This is why some philosophers insist that Ethical Egoism, which rejects this intuition, is not an ethical theory at all.

Most of us of course claim intuitive warrant for more than this. Note that as I have stated it, acceptance of the truth of this intuition is consistent with gross differences in the treatment of others. It is even consistent with denying ethical status to some persons altogether. For it only requires that we take some people other than ourselves into consideration. But most of us believe that there is some minimum consideration to be given to all persons as such. To be more precise, we might say that there are some interests which everyone has, and our deliberations must take these into account for everyone materially affected by the actions under deliberation, and further, that with respect to these interests, each person must initially be given equal consideration. I say “initially” because a sophisticated deliberation may also assign different weights to some of the interests of different persons because of special rights or obligations they or we have, or because of our special relationships to them. But such preferential treatment must, we say, be built up on a base line of equality.

The ideal of egalitarianism has not been embraced as widely or as vigorously as the principle, if I may call it that, of non-egotism. The sentiment of equality has been widely expressed, in one form or another, both historically and geographically, but expression of this sentiment appears to be compatible with condoning radical inequalities in practice. To take but one conspicuous example, among the more strident assertions of equality is that found in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, but for decades after the composition of that document, many stout defenders of its doctrine denied any inconsistency between the proclamation of universal equality and the institution of slavery. A pessimist might argue that the idea of equality only really began to be taken seriously, as an element of ethical and political theory, in the 17th century, and that the realization of this theoretical ideal in practice is still far from complete. Be that as it may, the notion that there is some sense in which we are all equal is firmly entrenched in contemporary ethical discourse, so we may count this, too, as a solidly grounded ethical intuition.

The Deontologists have stood fast by the principle of independent and equal consideration for the interests of others. Their ethical principles included egalitarian requirements. And their egalitarianism was on no different footing than the other aspects of their theories. This has been the great merit of Deontology, and to it there corresponds the great demerit of Utilitarianism.

The Utilitarians interpreted the principle of utility as saying that the important thing is to bring about the greatest possible pleasure, regardless of whose pleasure it is. The principle thus requires that in assessments of utility, each person’s interests shall count equally. In this way, Utilitarianism is egalitarian. But it isn’t egalitarian enough. The classic criticism of Utilitarianism is to point out that weighting people equally when

assessing the inputs into the Utilitarian calculus does not mean requiring anything like equality in the distribution of goods that results from the calculus. It may well turn out that a grossly inequitable distribution yields the largest balance of total pleasure over total pain, and if that is the case, Utilitarianism will require us to endorse that non-egalitarian outcome.

The simplest solution to this problem is to supplement the principle of utility with some principle of justice to guarantee fairness in the distribution of benefits.⁸ But this solution is less than satisfactory, for it gives rise to two other problems.

The first of these arises from the fact that what makes Utilitarianism so attractive in the first place is its “naturalism.” But it is far from clear that a naturalistic account can be given of the supplementary principle of justice. Lacking this, Utilitarianism’s greatest advantage over Deontology vanishes. Utilitarianism invokes a principle as metaphysically and epistemologically suspect as those of the Deontologists. Admittedly, many Utilitarians have thought they could give naturalistic accounts of justice. I am not going to pronounce authoritatively that they have failed. But their accounts do leave one uneasy, in the absence of a prior commitment to Utilitarianism.

The second problem concerns Utilitarianism’s promise to be congruent with a naturalistic account of moral motivation. While they appeal merely to pleasure and pain, we are inclined to grant without much scrutiny that some such account can be worked out. But when a principle of justice or equality is added to the principle of utility, we run up against this simple difficulty: the motivating effect on me of my pleasure and pain is very different from the motivating effect force on me of someone else’s pleasure and pain. That most of us feel some sympathy with others is evident. Nearly everyone is prey to the occasional altruistic impulse. But it is not at all evident that this tendency naturally and normally rises to the level of respect for all persons as such. Indeed, our instincts seem to reach so far only as a result of assiduous cultivation in that direction. That being the case, one may well ask what motive one has to cultivate them that way. Indeed, might it not be much more prudent to repress one’s altruistic instincts? Hedonism gravitates toward provincialism if not egoism, and it is far from obvious that Utilitarianism has the resources to resist this force.

Thus, when Utilitarians try to supplement the original principle of utility with a principle of justice, there seems something terribly “ad hoc” about it. Again, died-in-the-wool Utilitarians offer to reduce justice to utility, but their explanations seem rather convoluted and artificial and insufficient.

So neither the Utilitarians nor the Deontologists have come up with an altogether satisfactory theory. To make matters worse—or is it better?—in the last decades of the 20th century a great many philosophers began to feel that there were important features of our ethical lives that both of these schools of thought had neglected. Some of these critics were merely critical, others developed alternative theories, but for convenience I shall refer to them collectively as the “new theories.” I will lump Utilitarianism and Deontology together as the “traditional theories.”

Despite the title I have given them, the new theories are not altogether new, being professedly revivals of a way of looking at ethics that preceded the theories I am calling “traditional.” Both the traditional schools took for granted that the primary focus of ethics ought to be duties or obligations, customarily spelled out in general rules of action. But the ethical thinkers of antiquity and the middle ages shared a different focus. The

central question for these pre-modern thinkers was the question of happiness, and their explications of this notion directed their attentions to the shape of a human life considered as a whole, rather than to general rules for guiding particular actions. Concomitant with this was a focus on character as a major factor in determining the quality of one's life. The revival of this outlook in recent years is often referred to as "virtue ethics," although the attention to virtue is but one aspect of these complex and diverse theories.⁹

Both virtue theorists and other new theorists have faulted the traditional theories for their belief that ethics could be reduced to a single coherent system within which all conflicts of values could be rationally resolved. The new theorists tend to see deliberation not as a matter of deciding which ethical principle takes precedence in a given situation, but as striking a balance or harmony among competing values, a harmony reflected in numerous choices over a span of time, rather than being instantiated in each single choice. They have also differed from the traditional theorists in admitting the possibility that there are situations in which ethical deliberation cannot be made to yield a unique result, and some have argued that situations can arise in which there is no ethically acceptable outcome available. Some versions of this claim take the form of the "dirty hands" theory, the idea being that in some circumstances one is morally obligated to act in a way which is inconsistent with other moral obligations which one has in those circumstances. These are not conflicts to be resolved by distinguishing *prima facie* from "all things considered" obligations. The claim is rather that two or more obligations which remain binding on the agent cannot both be satisfied, so that any course of action chosen is in some way immoral.¹⁰ A less drastic version argues that some situations confront us with choices in which every alternative is detrimental to the agent's character, so that even if the preferred alternative can be justified as morally preferable, the agent inevitably becomes a worse person as a result.¹¹ Sometimes this is expressed by saying that there is not always a guaranteed, sure-fire way to avoid moral "costs" or genuine moral "losses." New theorists argue that the traditional theories encourage us to overlook such losses by their promise that one can always do the right thing, and one can always take comfort in the consciousness that one did do the right thing.

Utilitarianism has long come under criticism for being too demanding.¹² Utilitarians seem to make every decision an ethical decision, to be dominated by the aim of maximizing utility. No department of our lives lies outside the jurisdiction of this principle, and since it both requires maximizing value and requires us to regard everyone as equal in the calculation of outcomes, the likely result for any but the entirely destitute is to require drastic sacrifices of one's own good and the good of one's loved ones for the sake of people less well off in the world. Utilitarianism seems to demand that all of us behave in ways we have typically associated with saints and heroes. Duty looms so large that nothing is above and beyond its call.

A related criticism which has come to the fore more recently, and is not always clearly distinguished from the former, is that Utilitarianism is incapable of doing justice to our particular attachments. It is argued that love and friendship for particular people are inseparable from giving those people special consideration in our deliberations, and that the worth of these relationships in a human life is such that we must allow for, and ought to encourage such attachments. It therefore becomes important to draw a line between ethically reprehensible favoritism and a kind of special regard for particular

persons that is ethically praiseworthy. The claim against Utilitarianism, then, is that it has not the resources for making such a distinction, or indeed, for condoning such special consideration at all.

Deontologists have commonly been thought immune to these criticisms because they have kept a place in their theories for the rights and duties attaching to particular roles and relationships. But lately it has been argued that, at least in its neo-Kantian versions, Deontology is just as liable to be over-demanding, or to do violence to particular attachments, or to do violence to particular attachments because it is too demanding, as is Utilitarianism.¹³

Many feminist approaches to ethics come within the boundary of what I call the “new theories.” Feminists have faulted traditional theories for what they see as an overemphasis on abstract notions of justice and equality, characterized as a “masculine” approach to ethics, to the neglect or exclusion of the varying needs of particular individuals and the relationships and social structures capable of responding to such particular needs, a dimension of ethics typically embodied in feminine experience, but historically neglected by theory. A promising development of this line of thought is what has been christened “care ethics.”¹⁴

This is an almost ludicrously sketchy summary of recent developments in ethics, but it is perhaps sufficient to justify a powerful impression that the traditional theories simply haven’t worked. Utilitarianism and Deontology of course continue to have their defenders, and these have been especially occupied latterly with attempts to rebut the criticisms the new theorists have offered. My view is that the further this strategy is pursued, the more convoluted and counter-intuitive the results become.

On the other hand, I do not believe we should draw the conclusion that the traditional theories should be supplanted by one of the new theories. For it seems to me that to a large extent the new theories have not been offering alternative answers to the questions addressed by the traditional ones, but have instead been suggesting or assuming that other questions are more important. What the traditional theories promised was specific guidelines on how to decide on a course of action in particular circumstances. The new theories, concentrating on ways of life and character, have endorsed certain dispositions, attitudes, or commitments seen as fundamental to the best life, and these sorts of ideals must be characterized in other, less precise ways than the traditional ethical rules. To be sure, the new theorists believe that decision-making in particular cases is best guided by such ideals which, if less definite than rules, yet better capture what ethical life is all about. Perhaps this is sufficient in some contexts. But there are also contexts in which we need something more definite, and this is particularly true when we set out to articulate and defend a theory of human rights. One of the things we want from an ethical theory is an account of such rights. The problem is not so much that of identifying what rights we have or what rules we should *prima facie* follow. Despite disagreement on some points, there is a strikingly large area of consensus on this. The real difficulty is to give an account of the nature of such things, so that they don’t collapse under the Benthamite criticism that “natural rights are nonsense, and imprescriptible natural rights, nonsense upon stilts.” Deontology promised an answer to this criticism, but the new theories have been otherwise occupied. Philosophers with primary interests in rights have accordingly developed independent theories more or less taking rights as given, and textbooks have consequently canonized rights theory as a

distinctive approach to ethics, alongside the others. What we really want is a theory that can combine the strengths of the traditional theories and integrate them with the insights of the new theories, and in the process do justice to our intuitions about human rights.

My argument is that for this role, Platonism shows great promise. But it is now high time I said what I mean by “Platonism.”

In a Platonic scheme, the fundamental concept of ethics is that of the Good. All guidelines for human life are derived from the goal of life, which is happiness. And happiness is conceived as the enjoyment of the Good. So far, Plato is not in disagreement with the Utilitarians. But for the Utilitarians, the only thing good in itself, intrinsically good, is pleasure—an experience of a sentient being. Anything else which is good must be so only extrinsically, in that it contributes to the realization of pleasure. Here, Plato and the Utilitarians part company. For the Platonist, to call a thing “good” in the sense relevant to ethics is to attribute to it an objective property—“objective” in the sense that the object’s possession of this property is independent of anyone’s recognizing that the object possesses it. It is independent, likewise, of anyone’s appreciating, estimating, or taking pleasure in the object. Contrary to the view typical among analytic philosophers, but in agreement with G.E. Moore, some things “just are” good. Moreover, among good things, some are better than others. Goodness is not manifested to the same degree or even in the same way in everything that shares it. Some goods are qualitatively higher, and not merely quantitatively greater, than others. In fact, the diversity of these manifestations is so great that it is possible to doubt that there is any unity to the class of things rightly called “good.” The Platonic philosopher does not pretend to possess a single, univocal definition which captures that unity. Indeed the belief in such a unity is perhaps better denominated a hope than a belief. But it is—or can be—hope, not in the meager sense of wishful thinking, but in the stronger sense of confident expectation.

Platonic ethics is thus a form of ethical realism or objectivism, in that it interprets ethical judgments as asserting, either truly or falsely, the existence of goodness as an objective fact independent of the observer’s perceptions or interests. It is misleading to call it a naturalistic theory, for in Moore’s terms, that would require that good be explicable solely in terms of the kinds of properties recognized by physical science, and I see no evidence that physical science now does or is about to make use either of the concept of the good or of any other concept that the good might plausibly be reduced to. Following Moore’s usage, then, we would have to say that goodness is a non-natural property. Does this then commit the Platonist to some philosophically obnoxious mode of intuition by which this supernatural quality is to be apprehended? The appearance that it does is what I earlier called the “great point of vulnerability” in Platonic ethics. Whether this weakness is merely apparent depends on whether we can give a coherent account of the way in which this quality of goodness is perceived, and on the subsequent judgment as to how philosophically obnoxious that account is. If the perception of the good can be shown to be grounded in a not uncommon experience, then Platonism may even lay claim to a kind of “naturalism” in a loose sense of the term—the sense in which whatever is discerned in a sufficiently unproblematic empirical fashion can be called “natural.”

The belief in a unity which we do not clearly perceive among radically diverse goods in each of which we perceive some goodness can be expressed by distinguishing the Good in itself—the concept which would capture the unity of the class of goods—and

the goodness in things, which is how the unified good is refracted into its particular manifestations. We might then go on to suppose that this admittedly inadequate account of how we see things corresponds to the way they really are: that there is some one Good such that all the particular goods possess their goodness in dependence on it. This is tantamount to the Platonic doctrine of participation.

Because of the belief that there is something like a form of the Good, the Platonist will hesitate to say that all good things are intrinsically good. Strictly speaking, only the Good itself possesses its goodness independently of all other things. The other goods derive their goodness from it, by virtue of their relationship to it. In this sense, the goodness of the other things is extrinsic. But there is yet an element of truth to the proposition that all good things are intrinsically good. For it captures the idea that goodness is not in the eye of the beholder, or in the esteem of the evaluator. Furthermore, it preserves the notion that the goodness of a thing is not merely accidentally connected to its other properties. This is the rock on which Moore's notion of goodness as a simple property, comparable to "yellow," came to grief. In contemporary terminology, we may think of goodness as a supervenient property: it is possible to state the properties on which goodness supervenes without noting that goodness supervenes on them, but insofar as those properties represent one way of manifesting goodness, it is not possible for an object to possess those properties without, to that extent, being good.

But why should we take our perception of goodness in a thing as a reliable index to some objective property of the thing? And if we feel ourselves inclined to describe this experience, comparing it to many similar experiences, as the apprehension of some greater good lying beyond all its manifestations, why should we give in to this inclination? I have already described belief in the unity of goods as a kind of leap of faith. Surely the belief in the existence of the form of the Good is an even greater leap. Is there any way to defend such a leap? Perhaps some element of faith, or as I suggested earlier, of hope, is ineliminable here, but can we at least assure ourselves that the platform from which we make the leap is solid ground? I believe that we can, and that we can reduce the component of sheer faith in this leap by showing that the Platonic account of our experience of goodness is a more apt way of capturing the experience than the available alternatives.

I shall approach the Platonic interpretation of the experience in two stages, beginning with a way of describing it which is not specifically Platonic; this description will be more nearly neutral than a full-blown Platonic account would be. My hope is that the aptness of this description will be readily recognized. I will then try to show how the Platonic account of value does justice to this experience by elaborating on the simpler description. If that succeeds, it will supply me with my "empirical foundation," my "sufficiently unproblematic" Platonic epistemology of ethics.

My strategy here is suggested by the observation that in a Platonic scheme, the differences between ethical experience and aesthetic experience are negligible. Since we in the modern world seem more alert to the aesthetic than to the ethical aspects of experience—and perhaps this is a universal feature of human nature—I will begin by reflecting on a very simple and very common aesthetic experience.

Think about what happens when you hear a piece of music, a good piece of music, that was meant to be danced to. The impulse to dance, or at least to participate in the dance in some way, by tapping your toes or clapping your hands, is almost

irresistible. How should we think about this phenomenon? We could describe it in rather clinical terms by saying simply, “It is an observable fact that most people exposed to music with a pronounced rhythm tend to engage in rhythmic behavior in synchrony with the music.” What this leaves out, of course, is the subjective side of the experience, what it feels like to have this experience. According to classical behaviorists, that is an advantage. They believe that scientific explanation requires that we limit ourselves to what is observable by a non-participant observer—a third-person explanation, we might call it. But most people have come to believe that that represents a highly artificial restriction. The behaviorists wanted to be strict empiricists, but an honest empiricism has to admit that many phenomena can only be understood from the first-person perspective. If you do not grasp how the agent sees the action, you can give only a grossly impoverished explanation of the action itself.

All right, suppose we revert to the first-person perspective. Shall we just describe the experience as I did initially? When I hear this music, I feel like dancing. That is certainly true, but does it leave out some important dimension of the experience? If a poet were called upon to describe the experience, would he or she be satisfied with this? Surely not. But is that because poets are inclined, by natural disposition or professional habit, to embellish the plain truth? Or should we say that at least sometimes their embellishments capture a bit of truth that was already there, but eluded the plainer description? There is a tradition in philosophy that regards any connection between poetry and truth as purely coincidental. The same tradition sees the function of poetry, and music, and other arts, as essentially to express and evoke emotions. Over the last century, and especially over the last thirty years, the concept of a neat distinction between reason and emotion has come under increasing criticism. Lately, cognitive psychologists have acknowledged that emotions play an essential role in cognition. Of course, this would not have been news to William James, but philosophers after James retreated to a narrower, more “positivistic” empiricism. If we are now returning to a more Jamesian outlook, we can again raise a question which for much of the twentieth century would have been philosophical heresy. Do our emotions afford an avenue of access to information about the external world?

Let me return to my example to make this question clearer. When the music begins, and I feel like dancing, is this feeling just a fact about me? Or since I can tell that others share the feeling, is it just a fact about us? The old-style empiricist would say that the only thing this feeling reveals about the music itself is the fact that music of this sort tends to affect people in this way. In other words, my feeling reveals only an extrinsic property of the music—what Hume would call a “secondary” property—not a property that it possesses independent of the feeling—a “primary” property. But should we accept the old-style empiricist’s verdict? I claim that we should not. My initial description of the experience—When I hear this music, I feel like dancing—certainly leaves itself open to the empiricist’s interpretation. But once again, I must ask, is that the fullest or most accurate description?

The judgment as to which of two descriptions best captures the experience being described is not one that can be made mechanically. Reflecting on one’s experience is itself an essentially perceptual experience. When two people look at the same object, one may fail to register features of the object that the other notices, one may discern relationships among its parts to which the other is blind. But perhaps blindness is the

wrong metaphor, for often no more is required than to point out the overlooked features to enable the “blind” observer to see them. If that strategy fails, other techniques may be adopted to, as we say, “open one’s eyes.” But no technique is foolproof. You can try to get someone to see something by directing their attention to it. But they must finally see it for themselves.

I think something like this is happening when we are struck by the aptness of a poet’s description. The description is striking because we hadn’t seen things quite that way before. It draws our attention to an aspect of the thing described that we had previously overlooked. But by doing so, it enables us to see it. Of course, it does not do this infallibly. Sometimes I just don’t get it. But when I do, I’m tempted to say, “Yes, that’s just exactly how it is, though I only half-realized it before.”

So, what I am now trying to claim, about the experience of hearing dance music, is that there is a better way of describing it than the way which leaves it open to the naïve empiricist criticism. But the only way to persuade you of this is to offer a better description and hope you “get it.”

Back to the experience itself. It would not be at all unnatural to say of the music that it is “enticing” or “inviting.” I think this way of putting it captures something that other descriptions omit. An integral part of the experience is the feeling that the music is, as it were, addressing me. It calls out to me, it summons me to take part in it. The impulse I feel to dance is not just a reaction I happen to have. It is an apprehension of a possibility of relationship to the music. It is at the same time an apprehension that there is something “there,” in the music, which both lends itself to such a relationship and, as I said before, invites my participation. My reaction is simultaneously an awareness of what is there, offering itself to relationship, and a drive to respond affirmatively to this invitation. Hence the “feeling” involved in “I feel like dancing” has a cognitive dimension. It is at once both a motive and a mode of perception. It’s this feeling that gives me reason to believe that the “something” I perceive in the music is really there.

It seems to me that human experience at its most basic, and stripped of distorting preconceptions, exhibits this fundamental pattern of invitation and response. The objects in the world are not experienced simply as existing out there. They are experienced as inviting me into relationship, and my spontaneous response is to enter into that relationship. Some philosophers will tell me that this experience is delusional. But I don’t see why I should believe them.¹⁵

If I now ask myself, Why do I believe in human rights? I think the answer will sound remarkably similar to my account of responding to music. Of course, first we must set aside the merely biographical explanations. Yes, I believe in human rights because that’s what I was taught, and my upbringing is reinforced by the fact that discourse about human rights is widely accepted as legitimate. But where is the empirical basis for this belief, what makes it genuinely mine rather than merely derivative from the opinions of others? I have seen that there is something about a human being that calls for respect. This “something” is the property often referred to under the heading of “human worth” or “dignity.” I think it must be a part of what was meant by saying that humans are created “in the image of God.” Where have I seen this? I’m sure it first became evident to me in close relationships with other people. I think the worth of the other person is evident even to an infant, though the infant experiences it in an indefinite and inarticulate way. Except in the most dysfunctional families, family members are bound to each other by

mutual love. And I submit that familial affection is the fundamental or primitive affect in which the independent value of another is perceived. The child does not love its parents because they are useful, because they are sources of pleasure, or because they can be frightening when provoked. I say this because injury done to a loved one is not experienced merely as a threat to a source of personal well-being. It is experienced also as an act of disrespect toward what deserves to be respected. When we speak of a physical injury as a violation of the “sanctity” of the person, that is no metaphor. There is something about a person which an injustice violates.

I believe we see this first and most clearly in those who are closest to us. And there is always a tendency for the strength of this feeling to vary in proportion to the closeness of our relationship with a person. But one effect of being taught that all others are valuable, and of having this reinforced by the widespread acceptance of the idea, is that my attention has been brought to the fact that something of what I see in my nearest and dearest is there even in the most remote stranger. There are moments when we are struck by a feeling of kinship to a stranger. There are moments when we are being narrow-minded and someone reminds us that “they are people, too.” There are moments when someone says to us, or we say to ourselves, “Remember, as you criticize or condemn this person, that you might have been such a person yourself.” I do not think it is going too far to call what we see in the other person in such moments a kind of beauty or goodness. It does not force itself on our perceptions. If it did, the history of human atrocities would be much shorter than it is. No, it is there, inviting us to recognize it and respond to it. The invitation can be refused, and the worth of the other denied. But surely that is a willful kind of blindness.

I am arguing that my belief in human rights is grounded in such “intuitions” of the independent and in some sense equal worth of all persons. But this is not some mysterious mode of perception, or if you like, it is mysterious, but it is not at all uncommon. Indeed, if my account of a very simple response to music is correct, this is perhaps the most common mode of experience of all, for it can be present as an element in almost any experience.

In the relationship to human beings there stands out an aspect of the experience which is inconspicuous in my reaction to music. The response which is evoked in a perception of human worth may justly be described with words like “concern,” or “care,” or sometimes “love.” There is an impulse to affirm, to nurture, to promote the good of the other. I think there is an echo of this even in the musical experience. I want the music to go on, I want to keep the beat. I want it to come out right in the end. Here again I think we have something which is common to our experiences of relationship, though the precise nature of the impulse, the precise nature of the concern that is appropriate and of the action in which this should be expressed varies with the object and with the circumstances.

To speak in this way is to lay oneself open to the charge of anthropomorphism. It is quite clearly a matter of taking good human relationships as a model for our relationships to every other thing. But I believe that an honest empiricism must admit that this attitude emerges spontaneously from our experience, and that a deliberate effort is needed to block it. There is something common to our experiences of human relations and to our other experiences, and the commonality is so strong that it is easier to deny its existence altogether than to maintain its reality in human relations and deny its presence

elsewhere. In sum, I believe we must either reject the notion of human worth as illusory, or confess that something similar to it is found everywhere.

To say this is by no means to abolish all distinctions of value. I am not about to argue that the value of a cow or of an artwork is equal to that of a human being. Nor am I arguing that the “something” that is common to all things admits of univocal definition. Qualitative differences of very radical sorts remain in place. There are greater and lesser goods. And sometimes—rather frequently, actually, sacrifices must be made. Sometimes the sacrifices required of us are very large. The goods we must forego or even see destroyed are genuine goods, their loss a genuine loss. This way of thinking does not at all deny that bad things happen or that people sometimes—too often—make evil choices. To believe that beauty and goodness can be found everywhere is not necessarily to adopt a childish optimism or become blind to suffering. But it is a crucial part of being a Platonist.

In characterizing this experience and drawing lessons from it, I have already begun to use language of the same sort I used in describing Platonism. I have already begun to speak of the objects of my experience as partaking, in different ways and to different degrees, in some common source of value. Call that value the form of the Good, and say that the goodness of all good things belongs to them by virtue of their participation in that form, and you have clearly become a bona fide Platonist.

I don’t think it’s necessary to belabor that point. I think you can see why I think that this talk about forms and participation gives fitting expression to our experiences of value. If you are prepared to accept such experiences as providing a sufficient empirical basis for a Platonic ethics—and I do not pretend that my argument makes your acceptance inevitable—then I can go on to briefly survey how Platonic ethics responds to the needs of the day.

First, if my account is acceptable, then Platonism can claim the great strength of Utilitarianism. It doesn’t quite qualify as “naturalistic” in the narrow sense, but it is founded on a common and readily accessible experience. While I have not explained how this experience is possible, I believe its reality is evident. It is not a special revelation vouchsafed only to a few, though it is possible that a great many of us have been trained to ignore it.

Second, this approach has the advantage over Utilitarianism—shares the advantage with Deontology—that it locates the value of things in the things themselves, making it independent of human perceptions and interests. Unlike Deontology, however, it does not derive our obligations toward other things and other persons from some categorical imperative. It views obligations, duties, rights, and so on, as attempts to articulate what the “intrinsic” value of things demands of us, what sort of behavior is called for by the invitations things issue to us, what kinds of respect represent an appropriate response to these invitations.

A Platonic ethics explains egalitarian principles by alleging that to be human is to participate in a particular way in the Good, and all our talk of human rights is but a way of expressing with fine detail and specificity the kind of treatment due to a creature which exhibits the Good in that way. But in doing so, it need not deny the goodness of particular relationships in which others are valued for more than their mere humanity, relationships whose maintenance requires special responses which can be articulated as special obligations or priorities.

A Platonic metaphysics of ethics is far from answering all of our ethical questions. The doctrines I have enunciated do not obviously entail specific rights or duties. They do not tell us how to assess the goodness of things, what responses are appropriate to different things, or how to adjudicate conflicts or competitions among goods. But I think this is actually a strength of the theory. Can you imagine a rule general enough to guide you in the raising of cattle, the raising of children, and the composition of a piece of music? A rule so general would afford very little information, like Aquinas's first law of nature: "Do good and avoid evil." The Good has many manifestations, and there are many ways of cultivating them. You must learn what is good and what is good for it, and this learning has as many departments as there are aspects to our lives. What is common to all these things eludes definition. The hope of the Platonic philosopher is that we may ultimately see that there is but one voice which speaks to us in everything.

¹ The way I classify ethical theories is commonplace, reflecting that found in the standard textbooks. In these notes, I document only positions and criticisms not to be found in the typical text. Among the better introductory ethics texts are James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999) and Lawrence Hinman, *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1998). An excellent selection of classic papers in "recent" ethics is Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber, eds., *20th Century Ethical Theory*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1995). The contrasts between Utilitarianism and Intuitionism are summarized in a particularly illuminating way in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 19-36. Rawls' definition of 'Intuitionism' differs from my own.

² See Rawls, 143-44, with the references there.

³ *Principia Ethica* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1903).

⁴ W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Indianapolis: Hackett, n.d.; originally published London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1930), esp. chap. 2.

⁵ John Rawls, op. cit. See also David Gauthier, "Why Contractarianism?" reprinted in Cahn and Haber (see note 1), 701-713.

⁶ Recent neo-Kantian texts include Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), and Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

⁷ Two prominent critics of Neo-Kantianism are Anthony Cunningham, *The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), esp. chap. 2, and George Harris, *Dignity and Vulnerability* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997).

⁸ This solution was already offered as an uncontroversial one by William Frankena in his introductory work *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

⁹ See G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, v. 33 (1958), reprinted in Cahn and Haber (see note 1); P.T. Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977); Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices" in her *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), reprinted in Cahn and Haber; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed., (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Anthony Cunningham, "The Moral Importance of Dirty Hands," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, v. 26 (1992), pp. 239-250.

¹¹ See again the works by Cunningham and Harris cited in note 7.

¹² How demanding Utilitarianism can be was graphically illustrated by Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, v. 1 (1972), which has been widely reprinted; see for example, John Burr and Milton Goldinger, eds., *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 215-225. Singer defends Utilitarianism. A particularly telling case against Utilitarianism is mounted by Bernard Williams in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For*

and Against (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963). For other references, consult the bibliographies in Rachels and Hinman, cited in note 1.

¹³Anthony Cunningham, "Kantian Ethics and Intimate Attachments," *American Philosophical Quarterly* v. 36 (1999), 279-294.

¹⁴A pioneering work in feminist ethics was of course Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982). There has since been an explosion of publications in the field. Particularly relevant to my point here is Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984).

¹⁵While I claim no expertise in Continental Philosophy, the astute reader will recognize an affinity between my approach here and that of certain philosophers in the Phenomenological/Existential tradition. The most powerful influence on me in this regard has been Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's, 1970.) I have also benefited from Nicolas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation* (New York: Harper, 1953). William Barrett's *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958) is still, to my mind, the best introduction to Existentialism. An influence from a slightly different direction has been Peter Berger's discussion of "signals of transcendence" in *A Rumor of Angels* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).