An Argument That There Must Be Something Good In Itself

In the Republic, Plato suggests that things of value can be sorted into three exclusive and exhaustive categories:

- Those things that are good only because of what they cause or produce (i.e., only because of their consequences)
- Those things that are good only because of what they are like in themselves and not in any way because of what they cause or produce.
- Those things that are good both because of what they produce and because of what they are like in themselves.

This taxonomy of value has had an incredible impact on thinking about value ever since.

People have no trouble coming up with examples of things that are good because of what they cause or produce, but they are often suspicious of the suggestion that these or other things might also be good in themselves. So there is a temptation to think that everything that is good at all is good only because of what it causes or produces.

Here is an argument for thinking that IF anything is good at all, then something must be good in itself (and not merely good because of what it produces). Keep in mind that the question is NOT whether there is anything that is ONLY good in itself, just whether there is something that is good not ONLY because of what it produces.

The argument:

Suppose something is good in some way. Almost no one has trouble coming up with things that are good in some way-- thing that enhance life, or are worth trading time or money for, or are worth wishing those you loved have.

Think of some such thing. When it comes to that good thing, there are two possibilities: either it is good in itself, or it is good ONLY because of what it produces. Since the worry is that there may be nothing that is good in itself, let us suppose the thing in question is good ONLY because of what it produces. That is to say (i) that it (the thing in question) does cause something, (ii) that the thing it causes is good, and (iii) that the only reason the original thing is good is because it causes this other thing.

Consider the good consequence, the thing that is caused or produced by the thing originally in question. This second thing, which makes the first good, must itself be good. And it must either be good in itself or good only because of what it produces. Let us suppose the latter. Then it is good because it causes some third thing, and this third thing must be good -- otherwise the fact that the second causes it would not matter to the value of the second thing, and if the second thing produced nothing of value, and wasn't good in itself, then the fact that the thing we began with, that we supposed was good, would not be good because it produces the second, valueless, thing.

The third thing, then, must be good, if the fact that it is caused by what came before is to explain the value of those prior things. It will have to be either good in itself or good ONLY because of what it produces.

But this cannot go on for ever and make any sense. At some point there must be something that is good in itself. Otherwise, nothing at all could be good because of what it causes (that is, because of its consequences). To think nothing is good in itself (and so have to think also that nothing is, after all, good because of its consequences, because none of its consequences are actually good, is to have to think that nothing is good at all (since everything that is good must be either good in itself or good because of what it causes). This leaves us with only two possibilities: nothing whatsoever is good or something is good itself.

To be convinced by this argument, of course, doesn't require that one have any particular view about what it is that is good in itself. If anything at all is good in any way, then something must be good in itself, but it is an open question just what might be good in it itself. There might be just one thing, or one kind of thing, or many.

Different people have come to different views about what might be good in itself. Some think that feeling pleasure is good in itself (that even if nothing of value was caused by that feeling, to have the feeling is to have something that is valuable), others have thought happiness filled the bill, others have suggested love, still others God, or truth or beauty.

In each case, to think of the thing in question as good in itself if NOT to think the thing has no good consequence, nor to think it has no consequences at all. It may have many consequences and they may (or may not) be good consequences. To think of the thing as good in itself is to think that EVEN IF it had no good consequences, it would be valuable. To think otherwise is to think that, in the absence of good consequences the thing in question would be valueless.

* …or at least good independent of its consequences (if there is anything good at all).