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## REAL AND APPARENT GOODS

**Mortimer Adler**

As we have seen, one way in which desires go wrong is wanting more than you need—more than enough for any human being regardless of individual or racial differences, differences in nurture and in external circumstances. But that is not the only way in which our appetites can go wrong. We may also want what only appears to be good, but is not really good for any human being under any circumstances.

The distinction already made between needs and wants as two distinct modes of desire is indispensable now to understanding the differences between real and apparent goods. To see that this is so, one should entertain the supposition that all our desires are of the same sort—all wants, no needs—all acquired desires that differ from individual to individual, as well as from time to time, and vary with variations in the circumstances.

On this supposition, would it not follow that each of us would call good whatever it was that we happened to desire at a particular time and under particular circumstances. That which we actually desired at a given moment would, at that moment, appear good to us. At some other time and under other circumstances, we might not like it and desire it. We might even be disappointed by it later after we managed to get what we desired, or even regret ever having wanted it. But at the time we wanted it, it would, in fact, have appeared good to us. It could not have been otherwise.

Hence if all desires were wants and all goods were merely apparently so, changing from time to time for the same individual and differing from individual to individual, the only persons who might call a desire wrong would be persons who actually desired it earlier and then later thought it a wrong desire, wishing that they had not attained what they had wanted. They might say that they had made a mistake in wanting something that they later did not like or enjoy having. But no other individual could make that judgment. No one else could say they were wrong in their earlier desire. In short, there would be no objectively valid and universally applicable criterion for distinguishing between right and wrong desires. All goods would be apparent, none real.

## 2

What, then, makes some desires objectively and universally right and others wrong? I must repeat what I have said before on this subject. The obvious answer to the question is that right desire consists in desiring what everyone ought to desire. But what should every human being desire? That which is really good for all of them in accordance with their common human nature.

One more question remains. What is really good for all human beings in accordance with their common human nature? If it is not something that only appears good because it is actually wanted, then it must be something that satisfies a natural need that all of us are born with; as, for example, our need for food and drink. No animal can long survive being deprived of these goods. It is precisely because they are indispensable goods, that they are really good.

The difference between real and apparent goods can be perceived in another way. In the case of apparent goods, the actual desires that each of us has causes the objects actually desired to appear good to us at the time we want them. In the case of real goods, the

order is reversed. We ought to desire them, whether we actually do or not, because they are really good for us.

What makes anything appear good to us is the fact that we actually want it. What makes anything really good for us is the fact that we naturally need it. But we may not want what we need. We may not actually desire what we ought to desire. The fact that something is really good for us is the reason—the *only* reason—why we ought to desire it.

In the seventeenth century, Benedict de Spinoza asked the question whether we called something good because we desired it or desired it because it was good. His question cannot be clearly answered without first distinguishing two senses in which the good is the desirable and the desirable is the good: (a) the sense in which something is desirable if it is actually desired, and (b) the sense in which something is desirable if it ought to be desired. Apparent goods are good in sense (a); real goods, good in sense (b).

In the one case (a), goodness is attributed to the objects. Calling something good because it is actually desired is an *extrinsic* denomination. In the other case (b), goodness inheres in the object. Calling it good is an *intrinsic* denomination.

It is, of course, possible for us to want what we need. Then the needed real good will also appear good to us. We not only ought to desire it; we also actually desire it. But it is equally possible for us not to want what we need or to want what we do not need. We may not actually desire what is really good for us, or actually desire what is not really good for us.

The only wants that are intrinsically right desires for real goods are the wants identical with our needs. When we actually want what we naturally need, then our wants are right desires. But they are not acquired as all other wants are. They come into existence by an act of will—an act of the intellectual appetite, after rational deliberation, discipline, and decision to want what we ought to desire.

In the sphere of our desires, the distinction between right and wrong is applicable only to our wants. Wants can be right or wrong, but needs are always right desires, never wrong. How could any living organism, brute animal or human, need something that was really bad for it? That is just as absurd as needing either more or less than enough.\*

\* If the need is truly a natural desire, inherent in human nature, the absurdity of saying that our natures have appetitive inclinations toward things that are injuri-

ous to them is clear. But we are cognizant of the fact that those suffering from drug or alcohol addiction genuinely need injurious substances. Their substance abuse arises from a craving that is a pathological, not a natural, need and requires therapy.

## 3

We cannot go immediately from understanding what has just been said to a simple statement about right and wrong desires in the case of our wants. It is not sufficient to say that wanting what we need—things that are really good for us—is right desire. With respect to both our needs and our wants, there are further complications to be considered.

In the first place, not all our human needs are of the biological sort already mentioned. They are not all needs that we share with other animal organisms—not all needs for real goods that we cannot live without. In the case of all other animals, there is no distinction between living and living well, but in the case of humankind, living—mere subsistence—falls short of living well.

For a human being, merely to subsist or survive is not to live a decent human life—one that is characteristic of the human species and of no other. As food, drink, and sleep are necessities of life itself, so sufficient wealth, freedoms of various sorts, loves and friendships, knowledge far beyond anything needed for survival and, beyond knowledge, understanding and wisdom, are needed for a good life—for living well as opposed to Just living. These are, for human beings, real goods in the same sense that food, drink, and sleep are real goods.

In the second place, we must distinguish between primary natural needs and those that are secondary and instrumental. The primary natural needs are those that are inherent in human nature and so are the same for all human beings everywhere and at all times. Having a capacity for knowledge, man has a natural need for it. As Aristotle said, “man by nature desires to know.”

To acquire knowledge, human beings do not need schools as now constituted and operated. At other times and under other circumstances, the need for knowledge was served by parental instruction, indoctrination and discipline by the elders of the tribe, pedagogues and tutors, and so on. There are many different means to serve the acquisition of knowledge by the young. At different times and under different circumstances, each of these different means may be required to implement the acquisition of the real good needed.

These secondary and instrumental needs can be called „natural” only in the sense that they are means for implementing needs that are natural. They themselves are not natural in the sense of being inherent in human nature and so common to all human beings everywhere and at all times.

Keeping this distinction in mind helps us answer the question often asked: “Do not natural needs change from time to time and with variations in the surrounding circumstances?” The answer is both no and yes. No, primary natural needs never vary. Yes, the instrumental needs that we call “natural” because they are needed to implement our natural desires, do change.

In our present society, people think schools are needed; that was not always the case. In our urban society, people think that public transportation is needed to serve the need to earn a living by those who live at a distance from their place of work. That was not the case in tribal life or in rural agricultural communities. Health is a primary natural need, but it is only in an environment being polluted by the effects of advanced technology that we now need, secondarily and instrumentally, environmental protection for the care of our health.

When the word “need” is used with reference to whatever may be needed to implement our natural desires, we must remember that, unlike our primary natural needs, the secondary instrumental needs are variable. New needs come into existence; needs that once existed disappear. Such variation in needs violates the sense of the word “natural” when it is applied to primary needs. The secondary needs can be called “natural” only in the sense that the goods needed serve to implement genuinely natural needs.

In the third place, it is a mistake to think that wanting what is not needed is always wrong desire. While it is true that wanting what is needed is always right desire, the apparent goods we want but do not need fall into two groups.

On the one hand, they may be innocuous apparent goods; on the other hand, they may be noxious. Clearly, wanting noxious apparent goods is wrong desire. Wanting innocuous apparent goods is right desire, but not in the same sense that wanting real goods is right desire. The latter is right in the sense of being *permissible*; the former, in the sense of being *obligatory*.

What makes an apparent good innocuous or noxious? Something that we want is innocuous if our wanting it or the degree to which

we want it does not prevent or seriously impede our attaining one or more of the real goods we need. Noxious apparent goods do just that. They displace or attenuate our desires for the real goods we ought to want; or they come into conflict with such desires and interfere with our wanting the real goods we need. Hence, we can correctly say that wanting apparent goods that are innocuous is permissible right desire and wanting apparent goods that are noxious is wrong desire.

## 4

The distinction between ends and means that is involved in the distinction between primary natural needs and the needs called secondary and instrumental brings us to still one more criterion for Judging desires to be wrong. To desire what is merely a means as if it were not a means but *the* end is wrong desire.

In the order of means and ends, there are (a) some objects that are to be desired merely as means and never as ends, and (b) some objects that are to be desired as ends as well as means to further ends. The third possibility is (c) an object of desire that is desired wholly for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Such an object of desire is never desired as *an* end, as are all the objects that are desired both as ends and as means. On the contrary, it is desired as *the* end—the last or final end for which all other things are desired as means.

It may be asked why there must be a final or ultimate end; and, if so, what desirable good has this status.

To the first question the answer is that, in the sphere of desire, we begin by desiring ends. That precedes our desiring means, just as our desiring goods precedes the actions involved in obtaining them. Hence if the series of means and ends had no last end, it would also have no beginning. Every end being a means to some further end, neither desire or action could ever begin. There must be something regarded as the last and ultimate end, which is the first principle of both desiring and acting, if desire and action are to occur.

What desirable good has the status of a final and ultimate end? Obviously, it must be something that leaves nothing more to be desired.

Desired how? Needed or wanted? Is the final end something that everyone actually desires or something that everyone ought to de-

sire? As I have already pointed out, one criterion for judging desire to be wrong is desiring what is a means as if it were the final end. What we are concerned with here is right desire for the ultimate end that everyone ought to desire. The only desirable object that omits nothing that ought to be desired is that whole the parts of which are all the real goods that ought to be desired; in short, the *totum bonum*.

Here, then, is the only self-evident principle in the sphere of desire, the only truly categorical imperative. *We ought to desire everything really good for us and nothing else.*

A self-evident truth is a truth the opposite of which is unthinkable and undeniable. We can test the self-evidence of the categorical imperative just stated by trying to think that we ought to desire what is really bad for us, or trying to think that we ought not to desire what is really good for us.

The two phrases “really good” and “ought to be desired” complicate each other in the same way that the words “part” and “whole” complicate each other in the axiom about finite wholes; namely, that a finite whole is greater than any of its parts and that each part is less than the whole to which it belongs. No other understanding of the relation of parts and wholes is possible.

With respect to each of the goods that is a component of the *totum bonum* (the whole that includes all real goods), there are imperatives stating that we ought to seek them, but these imperatives are conditional or hypothetical, not categorical. For example, that we ought to seek health, wealth, liberty, or knowledge follows from the principle that we ought to seek everything that is really good. But in each case the conclusion requires another premise, namely, that as a matter of fact our human nature is such that inherent in it is the need for health, wealth, liberty, and knowledge, and so these are real goods that ought to be desired.

In each case, it is the factual premise that makes the imperative hypothetical or conditional (i.e., only if some wealth is needed and hence is really good for us, ought we to desire it). Only with regard to the *totum bonum* is the imperative categorical; for no factual considerations of any kind enter into the self-evident truth that we ought to seek everything that is really good for us.

Does this mean that the final and ultimate end is the same for all human beings? No, because in addition to the real goods that we

are all obliged to seek, there are innocuous apparent goods that each of us is permitted to seek.

The final end for one individual will be the same as the final end for every other individual only with respect to its component real goods. Since individuals differ with respect to the innocuous apparent goods that we are permitted to seek, the final end that individuals do, in fact, actually seek will have components that differ from individual to individual as well as components that are the same for all.

## 5

Everyone uses the word “happiness” for that which leaves nothing more to be desired and which, therefore, is the final or ultimate end of all desire. That everyone uses the word in this sense is attested by the fact that no one is able to complete the sentence “I want to be happy because. . .” No one can think of happiness as a means to something beyond itself. No one can think of a reason for wanting to be happy.

But, while this is true, it is also true that people use the word “happiness” in two quite different senses. Most people, including many who in modern times call themselves philosophers, use the word for a psychological state of contentment that consists in getting what they want, i.e., for the satisfaction of all their wants, wrong or right desires.

Happiness, thus conceived, is experienceable and enjoyable. It varies, as apparent goods do, from individual to individual. For any one individual, it can be attained or not attained from day to day—attained in one period of life, but not in another. We are at one time contented as a result of getting what at that time we want, while at another time we are discontented because at that time our wants are frustrated.

When happiness is so conceived, there is nothing right or wrong about differing individual pursuits of it, for there is nothing objectively and universally right or wrong in the sphere of desire if all desires are wants and there are no desires that are needs.


However, there is another meaning of happiness to be found in antiquity, especially in Aristotle’s *Ethics*. This happiness is conceived as a whole life well lived by reason of the fact that it involves the successive, not simultaneous, attainment of everything that a human being needs, everything that is really good.



This is the ethical, not psychological, conception of happiness. Happiness so conceived is not experienceable, enjoyable, or attainable at any moment in one's life. It is the final end all of us are morally obliged to seek, whether we actually do or not.

The categorical imperative that we ought to seek everything that is really good for us expresses our obligation to try to live well and to make morally good lives for ourselves. On this ethical conception of happiness, the pursuit of happiness is not only a right but a duty. The natural rights related to happiness are rights to life, liberty, and to everything that anyone needs in order to discharge the obligation to pursue happiness, but only, of course, if the state's duty to secure such rights is within the power of its government to discharge.\*

\* If, for example, moral virtue is among the goods needed to pursue happiness, no state or government can facilitate the acquisition of moral virtue by its citizens. But it can do so with respect to such real goods as wealth, health, liberty, and so on. These are among the needed real goods to which citizens have a natural, human, and unalienable right and that a just government has an obligation to secure. This holds true only if the ethical conception of happiness prevails. On the psychological conception of happiness, no government could have the duty to facilitate the pursuit of happiness, because citizens would come into conflict with one another with regard to their unlimited wants for apparent goods. The pursuit of happiness would be competitive, not cooperative, and no government could prevent some from failing while others succeeded.

We can now return to the point of departure of the foregoing analysis of the final and ultimate end in the sphere of desire. It started by noting that desires can be judged wrong if they convert anything that is a means (whether it be a real good or an apparent good) into a final end. To this it must now be added that the only right desire for an end that is final and ultimate is the desire for the happiness we are morally obliged to pursue throughout the course of our lives. To see anything else as a final and ultimate end is either to convert means into ends or to conceive happiness as the psychological state of contentment that results from our getting the apparent goods we want. In either case, the pursuit of happiness is motivated by wrong desires. 

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