



HOW TO THINK ABOUT GOOD AND EVIL

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Today we are going to consider the Great Ideas of Good and Evil. In the time we have, we cannot consider everything these terms include nor comprehend all the problems that they raise. We should be concerned largely if not exclusively with the human good, the good for humankind, and, more specifically, human happiness.

Let me enumerate quickly for you some of the ways in which these terms *good* and *evil*, particularly the term *good* are used. For example, in economics we talk about goods. We often say goods and services. And by economic goods we mean commodities, the things that people buy and sell. And such things we speak of as having value. The word *good* has the other meaning here of something that has value. We speak of goods as having value in use or value in exchange. And in politics we speak of a good society or a good government. And here the meaning of the word *good* very

often has the connotation of justice. For a good society is a just one and a good government is a just one. Then in ethics we use the term *good* often to mean the character of a man. We speak of a good man, we speak of a man leading a good life.

But here there are two further points worth paying attention to. Sometimes when we speak of a good man, we have in mind that he is a happy man. And sometimes we put the emphasis a little differently, on the fact that he is a virtuous man or even more strictly, a righteous man. And this calls our attention at once to the possible shift or change in meaning, that shade of difference in meaning when we use the word *good* and when we use the word *right*.

Good and evil on the one hand and right and wrong on the other are not strictly synonymous. For example, we apply right and wrong only to human acts. We speak of them as right acts or wrong acts, and we don't speak of right things or wrong things, whereas we do use the word *good* and *evil* for everything in the universe. Anything that we can talk about we can speak of as good or bad.

And this brings us to the third or the fourth major use of the term *good* as it is used in metaphysics, where everything in the world is spoken of as good. And here the word *good* has the meaning of perfection. Some things are better than others because they are more perfect in their being or their reality than others. Here the grades of goodness in things is the same as the grades of perfection in them. All the way from the least perfect things in the universe, the things with the least being or reality, atoms and molecules, through the scale of living organisms, up to God.

MORAL GOOD AND MORAL EVIL

In this discussion I would like to spend all of our time on good and evil as they are discussed in ethics, the moral good and the moral evil. And here the great problem, certainly the one I think it's worth our time to concentrate on, is the question about our judgments concerning good and evil. When we say something is good, when we call something bad, is that judgment we make an expression of knowledge on our part or just our personal opinion?

Here there are two answers to this question that represent two extreme views. On the one hand there is the answer that Hamlet gives, and that Montaigne also gives when in almost the same phrases they say, "There is nothing good or bad, but thinking

makes it so.” And what they mean when they say that is, it’s just a matter of opinion. You may think something is good and I may think it is evil; it’s only my thinking that makes it good or evil.

The opposite view holds that we can have knowledge about what is good and evil, and that it is even possible, that the knowledge is so precise, that we can have a science of ethics just as we have the science of physics. We can have the science of ethics that gives us clear-cut knowledge concerning what it is good for man to seek, what it is good for man to do.

This issue between those who say that there is nothing good or evil, that thinking makes it so, and those who think there is a science of ethics is the central question about the objectivity or subjectivity of these fundamental values: good and evil.

I should like then as we go on to consider first this problem of the objectivity or subjectivity of good and evil as it concerns these terms themselves, then extend the consideration to the question of the objectivity or subjectivity of our conceptions of human habits.

Both of these problems, the narrow ones and the broader one about good and evil, the narrow one about happiness, I think, are serious and important, practically significant problems. Because as individuals take one or another stand with respect to the objectivity or subjectivity of good and evil, they take different attitudes toward life, they act differently, and they judge their fellow human beings differently.

What do we mean when we call anything good? What would be the full answer to that question? One thing is certainly clear. Anything we call good we regard as desirable. The good is the desirable; the desirable is the good. The good is the object of our desires.

So much is this the case, that it really is a self-evident truth to say that we seek the good. Anything we seek, we seek because it is good and there is nothing else in the world we would seek except the good. So one could almost say as a matter of fact that all men do seek the good. This is something that Socrates said many, many centuries ago. He said, “No man ever seeks or craves for or pursues that which he deems harmful or injurious to himself, but rather he only seeks that which he regards as to his advantage or benefit.”

APPARENTLY GOOD AND REALLY GOOD

You may ask me, "What about some people, neurotics, who look as if they were seeking to be hurt or harmed?" There is no problem there really because their very neurosis, their pathology, amounts to making them regard what we would think of as pain or hurt as something pleasant or advantageous. So as they seek it, even though it looks abnormal, they are seeking something they deem pleasant or advantageous. But you may ask, "Don't persons ever seek what they deem to be advantageous though it is in fact an injurious thing? Don't they ever make a mistake about what they seek?" Here, of course, we face a very difficult question that leads us to the first consideration we can have of the distinction, a very important distinction, between the real and the apparent good. Let me see if I can make that distinction for you.

Suppose you say that something is only *apparently good* or is an apparent good, if it is that which people suppose is to their advantage or benefit, something which they in fact do desire. And let's call something really good, not just apparently good, if it is something which is in fact to their benefit or advantage and something which they should desire even if they do not. Now when you make the distinction this way you are entitled to come back to my original statement about the good being the desirable. Because if the good is the desirable, how can we call something good if men should desire it but in fact do not desire it?

The answer to that question depends on the answer to an even deeper question, the question that Spinoza put many centuries ago when he asked, Do we call something good because we desire it or do we desire something because it is good? Now it makes all the difference in the world whether you say we merely call it good because we desire it—that puts the emphasis on the desire first—or if you say we desire it because it is good. And as you answer the question one way or the other you really are taking sides on this fundamental issue about the objectivity or subjectivity of good and evil.

Let's look at the two sides of this issue a little more closely. There is the side which says the good is simply that which we in fact desire. It is that which pleases us because it satisfies our desires. And that being the case, the good is entirely relative to our desires. That is good for you which satisfies your desires, that is good for me which satisfies my desires, and there's no distinction at all between the real and the apparent good. This is the position which is often called hedonism, the position which identifies the pleasant, that

which satisfies desire, with the good. Whatever pleases me is good, whatever pleases you is good. Whatever pleases me may, of course, be something different from that which pleases you.

Let me read you three statements of this position that I think are worth hearing. Spinoza says, “The terms *good* and *evil* indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves. One and the same thing may at the same time be both good and evil or indifferent according to the person who makes the judgment. The good is merely that which individuals regard as useful to them, that which satisfies or pleases them.” And Hobbes says, “Pleasure is merely the appearance or sense of the good, as this pleasure is the appearance or sense of evil.” And Locke says, “What has an aptness to produce pleasure in us, that we call good. And what is apt to produce pain in us we call evil.”

And one other great writer, John Stuart Mill, in his essay on utilitarianism also identifies the pleasant with the good, that which satisfies us as the good. But Mill raises a further question. Mill asks, Are all pleasures of the same quality or are there not some higher and some lower pleasures? And shouldn't we be concerned with persons of higher and lower quality, a cultivated person and a less cultivated person? And if so, doesn't one introduce at this point into the order of pleasures some criterion other than pleasure itself for talking about the better and the worse?

For example, Mill will say, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” And this sounds as if one could not hold completely to the simple statement that the good is whatever pleases you or me because this doesn't give us a way of distinguishing between the human being and the pig or Socrates and the fool.

The opposite side, the side which maintains the objectivity of good and evil, insists upon the distinction that I began to suggest to you between the real and the apparent good. And it uses this distinction in the following way: it says that the real good is the objective good. The real good is something I have knowledge about. The apparent good is something I merely form my own personal opinion about. And moreover this distinction between the real and the apparent good goes as follows: it says that the apparent good, the good which is merely an expression of my personal judgment or opinion, is the object of my conscious desire. What I consciously desire from moment to moment is that which appears to me to be good, whereas the real good which I can know to be good, and

which is good even when I do not consciously desire it, is something which is the object of my natural desire as opposed to my conscious desire.

What is this distinction between conscious and natural desire? Well, my conscious desires are the particular cravings I may have in mind at any moment. I may want a fountain pen of a certain kind, I may want a large automobile, these are conscious desires. Natural desires are the cravings, shall I say, the tendencies, the appetites that are built into my human nature. For example, I have hunger as a natural appetite and therefore food is a real good because it satisfies a natural appetite. I have a mind that seeks to know and therefore knowledge is a real good because it satisfies my natural desire to know. And I have a social nature that craves friendship in society and so friends are real goods because that satisfies my natural desire for companionship. And whether I consciously desire these things or not, these things are naturally good for me. So that a miser who seeks only gold is actually seeking that which is not really to his advantage- and is frustrating himself because he does not consciously seek those things which are needed by him to satisfy his natural desires and fulfill his natural capacity. If this is understood, then you see at once that the real good, because it corresponds to the things which satisfy our natural desires, the desires that are constant on a human nature, must be the same for all human beings everywhere at all times.

According to the view I've just been describing, the real good is what a man naturally does desire and consciously should desire. And therefore one can measure his conscious desires as themselves either good or evil according as they conform or do not conform with his natural desires or in other words, with the things he should desire.

WHAT IS THE HIGHEST GOOD?

There is one other problem we have to face considering good and evil and that is the question about the highest good. What is the highest good in human life or what is sometimes called in the tradition of ethical discussion the *summum bonum*, which is Latin for the highest good and sometimes simply means the ultimate goal, the end, the final objective of all human seeking?

When one considers the *summum bonum* or the ultimate goal or end of human life, one must begin to consider goods as means and ends. Some things we seek not for themselves, but as conditions of

getting something else—they are means. I think most people recognize that money is not an end but a means. We want money for the things it purchases, the goods and services. We do not want it for itself. We want health for the most part, not for its own sake but because health is a condition of good activity. We are able to do the things we want to do when we're healthy as we can-not do when we are ill.

So the question arises, what is that which is good ultimately in itself, that which we seek for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, whereas all of the things we seek for the sake of it? Now this is a common understanding that everyone has of happiness. Everyone, I think, uses the word *happiness* to name that which he seeks for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Now I would defy you to try to complete the sentence I'm going to begin now. I want to be happy because—now you fill the rest in, because why? Why do you want to be happy? The only answer any-one can ever give to that question is simply because I want to be happy. There is no “because” for happiness except itself. One wants to be happy because happiness is the ultimate good that everyone seeks.

There is general agreement on this, by the way, in the history of European thought. Again if I turn to the Great Books, I can read you a series of classic statements that indicate how wide the agreement is on this conception of happiness as the ultimate goal which every man seeks. Aristotle says, “We call ultimate without qualification that good which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else. Such a thing, happiness, above all else is. For this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of some-thing else.”

And then Pascal, centuries later says, “Man wishes to be happy and only wishes to be happy and cannot not wish to be so, and wishes happiness for its own sake.” And John Locke says, “What ultimately moves our desires?” “Happiness,” he answers, “happiness and that alone. It is the utmost pleasure of which men are due.”

And finally still later in time as we come down through the centuries, John Stuart Mill says, “The utilitarian doctrine .is that happiness is desirable and that the only thing desirable as an end is happiness, all other things being desirable only as means. Each person so far as he believes it to be attainable desires his own happiness. That is enough to prove that it is a good. To show that it is *the* good, not just *a* good but *the* good, the ultimate good, it is necessary to show that not only do people desire happiness, but they

never desire anything else.” And this is not too hard to show, I think, because if we examine what we mean by happiness, I think we see that the meaning contains this fundamental note or insight: that a man is happy if he is in a condition which can be described as desiring nothing more. Happiness is that state which leaves nothing more to be desired, nothing can be added to it, no additional good can be enriched. That is why John Stuart Mill sometimes refers to it as the sum of all satisfaction. And if it is the sum of all satisfaction, it clearly is-being the sum of all satisfaction, it is an ultimate good, there is nothing beyond it for us to seek.

As the sum of all satisfaction, it is the complete good, it is the whole good, and all other goods are parts of it. And one might say because all other goods are only partial goods, whereas happiness is the whole of good. Happiness consisting in all good things, those parts are like means in our quest or pursuit of happiness as the whole which is the end. Each part we accomplish, each part we obtain means it is a little nearer to the object of our pursuit, the whole good, which is happiness.

Now again, we face the same old problem we faced earlier in this discussion: Is happiness something that is objective or is it just subjective? Is it the same for all men or does each man seek happiness differently, seek it according to his own desires and his own judgments? This is a very important question because on this question rests the whole validity of the science of ethics, so far as ethics is concerned with happiness. Is the content of happiness the same for all persons or does it vary from individual to individual?

Here again, we face the position of the relativist, the subjectivist, who says that to each individual his happiness is whatever he thinks it is. Each person views his happiness differently from every other person and judges it according to his own temperament, his own desires. For example, John Locke says, “Though all men’s desires tend toward happiness yet they are not moved by the same object. Men choose different things and yet all choose right.” Locke here quarrels with the philosophers of old, who in his opinion vainly sought to define the *summum bonum* or happiness in such a way that all men would agree on what happiness is. And according to Locke, the greatest happiness which each man seeks for himself consists in having those things which produce the greatest pleasure. “And these,” says Locke, “to different men are very different things.”

The opposite view here relies once more on the distinction between

the real and the apparent good. The real happiness is the happiness that persons should seek. And this happiness is the same for all human beings. The apparent happiness is the happiness that in fact people do seek and this may vary from person to person. But you may say to me, "What does the real happiness consist in?" And I will say in answer, "Since happiness is the whole of goods, the sum of all good things, real happiness must consist in the sum of all real goods, which is the same for all men."

THE FOUR GOODS


Well, you may think, can you answer that question? Can you say what all real goods are? I think I can. If I look at human nature and consider natural desires, I think all the goods that constitute happiness fall into these four major classes. First, external goods, the things we call wealth, all the economic goods and services we employ, all the commodities. Second, bodily goods, things like health and physical pleasure and rest. Third, the social goods that satisfy our human social nature, our friends and the society in which we live. And finally, fourth, the goods which are especially goods to the soul: knowledge, truth, wisdom, and the moral virtues. Now these correspond to all of our natural desires and the happy man is the man who has all these goods, some wealth, health, some pleasure, friends, society, wisdom or knowledge, if you will, and the virtues.

But among these goods there is one basic distinction. In the first three categories, there is an element of chance in all these goods. Whether I have wealth, whether I have health, whether I have friends in society even, depends not entirely upon me but upon some external accident, so that in varying degrees these are all goods of fortune. I can lose them, through no fault of my own. And I may even fail to gain them without my being at fault. The goods in the fourth category are the only goods that are entirely within my control, entirely within my power of choice and action. And so these goods are the specifically moral goods, the goods upon which the possession of all these other goods depend. This is the view that sees happiness, or the pursuit of happiness, as dependent very largely on the amount of knowledge and virtue we possess, because upon the amount of knowledge and virtue we possess depends our pursuit and gaining of these other goods, into the possession of which some element of chance or fortune enters.

I cannot close this discussion without telling you of the attack upon the theory of happiness that I just expounded for you. This attack

comes from the Stoics in the ancient world and from the great German moral philosopher Immanuel Kant in the modern world. The Stoics say that all the goods in the first three categories, goods that I have called the goods of fortune, goods into which some element of happenstance enters, are indifferent, that they really are neither good nor evil. And the Stoics go on to say that the only thing which is really good in the whole wide world is a man's own good will. And this consists in obeying the law and doing one's duty.

Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor who was a Stoic, says, "We should judge only those things which are in our power to be good or bad. Suppose that men kill thee, cut thee in pieces, curse thee; what can these things do to prevent thy mind from remaining pure, wise, sober, just?"

Now Immanuel Kant elaborates a little bit on this Stoic view. He points out that happiness can be regarded as the *summum bonum* or highest good but that moral conduct is not conduct that is involved in seeking it as an end. Moral conduct is conduct that involves doing our duty. He agrees with the Stoics that the only really good thing in the universe is a good human will which is a dutiful will. But Kant goes on to say that though we should be doing our duty and though the only thing that is important is to have a good or a righteous will, happiness enters the human life in the following way, "It is not right," he says, "for men to seek happiness or to wish to be happy, rather they should wish so to conduct their lives that they deserve to be happy." And that is quite a different kind of statement. 

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[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)

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