

The Good

Given that we believe in and are committed to values, what has the highest value? As the Greeks put it – what is The Good? The Good is a concept or principle which has an undisputed positive value, and which creates motivations and duties. Concepts of the Good range from cautious and limited views (that it depends on human desires and circumstances) to much bolder claims (that the Good is eternal, unchanging, and an absolute fact of nature). In the past the common view has been that **nature is good** in itself (because it is harmonious, and perhaps divinely created), but in modern times the standard view of nature is more neutral and value-free.

The **idealised** version focuses on the Form of the Good, which is the most important concept at the heart of nature. It is the controlling principle which produces the order and beauty of the world, and may be seen in religious terms. The Good may not even be valuable in itself, because it is the source of value. If some feature of nature, such as pleasure or knowledge, is claimed as the Good, then it is said to be an ‘open question’ as to whether pleasure and knowledge are themselves necessarily good, thus proving that goodness is a higher ideal than any aspect of nature. To identify the Good with a natural phenomenon has been labelled as ‘the naturalistic fallacy’.

The idealistic view still has supporters, but goodness is now more often seen in **worldly** terms. If we focus on human (rather than universal) good, we distinguish between what is good as a means to something (such as money or transport) from what is intrinsically good. Things which we all want for their own sake are candidates to be the good for humanity. However, we all want good health and high intelligence, but they are not enough for a good life. Some goods that are merely **means** (such as cars or wealth) can also be loved for themselves. The good for humanity is something which gives complete satisfaction if it is achieved, so it might be fame, pleasure, honour, love, virtue, power, victory, knowledge, or happiness. A self-sacrificing parent might even see the good in the success of their children, with no interest in their own life. Although there are many goods which we all desire, the highest good for each of us might be something very individual, such as growing beautiful roses.

The traditional view of morality bases it on a conception of human good, and devises rules and strategies to achieve it. However, the good in modern times is often seen as very individual, so that specifying the good for humanity is a denial of individual freedom. In that case the highest good is not some end we all want to achieve, but is instead our right to achieve whatever end we each choose. This liberal political view gives priority to what is **right**, rather than to what is good. In very restricted societies the good becomes the battle for rights, and in very free societies the concept of The Good almost vanishes (because it is so individual and variable).

In the ancient world the most common view was that the Good for humanity is excellence of character – having the social **virtues**. These are admired qualities such as honesty, courage, common sense, determination, and so on. It was generally agreed that virtues are essential for a happy and successful life, but it was sometimes said that other goods are also needed (such as health, money and respect) as well as virtue. A stronger view said that virtue is the *only* good for humanity, so that a virtuous life is the Good even if the person is unhappy or dies young. A different view was that since we all like to know things, and we are attracted to knowledge for its own sake, then maybe **knowledge** is the good for humanity. The theory is more plausible if morality is understood as a form of knowledge, and evil is understood as a sort of ignorance. Criminals are then best understood as foolish, rather than wicked.

If we should try to achieve the virtues because that will make us happy, it may be that the good is **happiness**, rather than virtue. Maybe it wouldn't matter if we were short of virtues, provided we were all happy. The aim here is being happily situated in life, rather than feeling happy, because someone might only feel happy because no one has yet told them that their house has burned down. The Greek word is *eudaimonia*, which is best translated as ‘flourishing’. This theory of the good must say *how* we achieve flourishing. For example, no one wants to have their intelligence surgically reduced in order to achieve happiness, and undeserved happiness is not ideal. Perhaps the good for a person is the achievement of their potential. Some thinkers have suggested strategies for achieving happiness, such as becoming detached from life, or achieving total freedom, or controlling one's life, or satisfying all desires.

For many people it is obvious that **pleasure** is the Good (even though priests and philosophers tend to disapprove). The standard objection is that pleasure can't be the good, because some pleasures are obviously bad (such as enjoying another person's pain). It is also obvious that excessive love of pleasure can be stupefying, addictive and harmful, but that continuous pleasure also becomes boring. On the other hand, any alternative worthy activity is improved if it also gives pleasure, and a life without pleasure has few attractions. We are certainly motivated by desires for pleasure (and avoidance of pain). It is often held that there are superior and inferior pleasures, usually depending on whether they involve the intellect, or are mere ‘animal’ pleasures. But if pleasure really is the Good, then it seems that only its intensity and duration should matter.

If the aim of morality is to achieve goodness (in whatever form) then it seems that only the consequences of an action matter, and not its intentions or methods. This controversial view is called **Consequentialism**. In favour of the view is our respect for ‘white lies’, if a good outcome justifies the bad action. Against it is the use of ruthless ends to achieve desirable means (such as cruel medical research). There seems to be more to morality than just achieving a good state of affairs (such as everyone being happy, or knowledgeable, or having a good character, or just having fun). We might try to forget the wicked history of how our good state was achieved, but that makes it even worse.

The gap between whether an action is moral and whether the outcome is good is particularly clear in the case of **moral luck**. If someone lobs a brick over a high wall and kills someone, that was obviously immoral and a crime. But if only the consequence mattered then there would be nothing at all wrong if the brick had missed, yet we all agree that this is also morally wrong. If someone is killed that makes a big difference to our moral judgement, but if the perpetrator was extremely unlucky we might even let them off, because the intention matters for justice, just as much as the consequences.