

CHAPTER 3

INDIVIDUAL GOOD AS HAPPINESS

The purpose of the next two chapters is to provide an analysis of individual good: that is, for a given person, what is good for that person. This good may differ from what the person ought morally to do or what will achieve some ideal — either one of his own or one which society commends. I will try to show that individual good is identical with happiness, appropriately defined. In subsequent chapters I will argue that there is a central purpose of morality which is (1) to bring about as much happiness for all persons as is compatible with like happiness for all other persons, and (2) to bring about as much happiness for sentient nonpersons as is compatible with (1). Further, I shall argue that an individual ought to do what is strongly required for avoiding hindrance of this purpose,¹ and that the best thing someone can do, morally speaking, is to do what is, of all that is within his power, most apt to advance that purpose. By a “strongly required” action I mean that unless that action is performed it will be difficult if not impossible for the goal in question to be attained.²

Such an analysis clearly puts individual good at the heart of moral theory by claiming that the best we can do is to promote the happiness of persons and sentient nonpersons. The sole restriction I propose is that we may not promote the happiness of some at the expense of keeping others from attaining a like degree of happiness.

But there are those who maintain that morality is not the promotion of individual good, and that what we ought to do is not determined by how much good our actions can accomplish. Others claim that goodness is not the sort of thing that can be measured at all. Still others deny that individual good can be even roughly equated with happiness or with what we want.

There is clearly much that is controversial here. Some of the questions which I will address in this chapter and the next include ‘What, precisely, is happiness?’ ‘What else, if anything, besides happiness — as I have defined it — is part of

individual good?' 'If happiness does not encompass the whole of good, then is there not some other criterion of goodness, and, if so, what is it?' 'Is there a single criterion of individual good, or are there several (the claim of pluralism)?' 'What is the relationship of individual good to desires?' and 'Can goodness be measured?' Later on I shall discuss where the concept of individual good fits into an overall moral theory, including how can we make decisions about distribution or in cases of moral conflict. If the arguments in Chapter 1 are correct, goodness is at least possibly a real property, and sentences claiming that something is good could have truth value. Showing that goodness *is* a real property, however, depends upon providing an adequate realist analysis.

The plan of this chapter is as follows. First I shall discuss the meaning of 'good' in general. Secondly, I shall outline some desiderata for an analysis of individual good — certain requirements that would make sense of what people generally believe about what is good for a person. Then I shall discuss the popular group of theories which equate individual good with what satisfies our desires, or with desires of a certain restricted sort. These theories, unfortunately, have major flaws, but I believe that they are on the right track and that their difficulties are instructive. Subsequently, I shall develop an account of individual good as happiness, which is living in a way that the individual wants to continue. This position can, I hope, combine the advantages of desire and certain non-desire accounts while avoiding their difficulties. In Chapter 4 I will discuss some actual and possible objections to this sort of analysis.

1. 'GOOD' IN GENERAL

When we call a person, thing, or event good, we are saying that it meets some kind of standard to a relatively high degree. It has a high rank on a scale which could go from very poor to excellent. This is a characterization of 'good' which cuts across numerous metaethical views. Thus the prescriptivist Hare and the realist Elizabeth Anderson³ both use it; what distinguishes them is their views of whether the standards themselves are objective.

The overall notion of goodness as meeting standards accords with common usage. Standards for a good tool or appliance are characteristics which enable one to do effectively the jobs for which that thing was intended, so those characteristics are considered marks of goodness in tools and appliances. For example, they do not break down under normal use. The more a thing has these properties, the *better* it is. Thus the more miles you get per gallon from your car, then — other things being equal — the better your car. Animals, too, may be considered good or bad, depending upon what uses we have for them, which uses set the standards. A dog or cat is a good pet if it is gentle and affectionate. Being a good pet may or may not be compatible with meeting other standards of goodness for these animals, such as being a good watchdog or a good mouser.

People, too, are called good X's when they fulfill well certain functions people have. Thus a woman could be a good lawyer or a good mother or a good athlete,

meaning that she performs well in these roles. Alternatively, we often speak of persons as good overall, and by this we usually mean that they are morally good. We wouldn't, for example, call someone a good *person* no matter how good a lawyer she was if she was ruthless in court or neglectful of her family.

Things and people are called good only when they meet standards of functioning and behavior which are themselves at least acceptable. As a rule, fulfilling roles and functions which are considered bad or useless does not entitle one to being called 'good,' no matter how completely one carries them out. Hence there is no such thing as a good murderer or rapist. We sometimes, of course, speak of good — i.e., successful — liars, perhaps because it may be acceptable and useful to lie in certain circumstances — e.g., when trying to escape from enemy territory. Most often, however the expression 'good liar' is used in a tongue in cheek way to deny that a person is one — i.e., has no skill at deception. Thus one may say with some pride, "I'm not a good liar." Occasionally, too, we could speak of someone as good at doing something which is morally bad — but in a context in which it is clear that we mean simply that he is effective.

Events and states of affairs are also considered good when they meet certain standards. Thus a good performance of an opera is one in which the voices, acting, and orchestral accompaniment are skilled and aesthetically pleasing. A good party is one where the guests enjoy themselves — and no one causes trouble for the hosts or neighbors. A man is in a good situation when circumstances are favorable to his advancement — professionally, personally, or economically. A house is in good condition when there are no portions broken or unpainted, the plumbing works, and its roof, windows, doors, and basement are secure against the elements. We say "Oh good!" when we hear of some event or fact that bodes well for an individual — e.g., when a biopsy shows no malignancy or a wayward child has finally graduated. In all of these cases 'good' is appropriately applied because the people, objects, and events meet standards we have for operas, parties, houses, and personal fortunes and character.

Thus the truth that lies behind the pluralists' claims⁴ is that there are a lot of things that are good. Primarily because we desire and enjoy many things for many different reasons, those things and events which bring good to our lives are widely various. There are enormous differences between eating a tasty meal when hungry, listening to a fine performance of your favorite symphony, realizing that you have done an excellent piece of work, and being in love. The characteristics of each of these experiences, and the reasons why they are desirable, appear to have little in common. The first and third are more apt to bring a sense of satisfaction, while the second and fourth more excitement. The first and last are more physical, the second and third more intellectual. Yet they are all experiences that people seek and are glad to have had, as well as apt to enjoy while they are happening. We seek them or try to prolong or repeat them, however, not just because they will satisfy a desire we may have, but rather for certain specific characteristics of those experiences. I go to a concert not because I want to satisfy my desire to go to a concert, but because I want to hear beautiful music. I try to do my best work not because I want to satisfy a desire

to recognize it as good or even to experience it as good, but because I want it to *be* good. Yet while the character of the goodness of one experience, and the reason why it is sought, may differ from the character of the goodness of another, both are good because they have a tendency to a certain degree to meet standards, which standards are determined by our individual or collective goals.⁵

And in general, a fact or event is good *for* someone if certain features it has contribute to the well-being of that person — or perhaps an animal or an aggregate of individuals like cities or ecosystems. In an extended sense things can be good for plants or other inanimate objects — e.g., that watering trees is good for them or that it is good for cars to get their oil changed regularly. Goods for inanimate objects keep their functioning or appearance up to our standards. The characteristics of things called good meet certain standards which are set by the speaker's standards, or those recognized in his or her society, for what is good for individuals, which enable them to fulfill their goals, and which bring them enjoyment or happiness — without accompanying pain or disadvantage. At least whatever drawbacks they may have are significantly outweighed by the advantages. Hence a thing may be good for someone overall through having a greater balance of advantageous features over disadvantageous.⁶ Often we consider the good of some non-human item (usually plants or animals whose existence and well-being we value) as being not so much what is conducive to our uses, but rather what makes that thing flourish. Hence, food that is good for a horse is what makes it strong, energetic, and resistant to disease; in this we are not merely supposing that these characteristics in horses are useful to us (which they generally are), but that they are analogous to characteristics that are good for people, and — by extension — any other living thing. We may also speak rather ambiguously of something's being good for a thing we'd like to be rid of. If, for example, someone says "X is good for tumbleweed," X could refer either to something that will kill these weeds or to something that will make them grow, but it is more likely to refer to the former.

Because our standards of well-being include good health and being educated, hearing of the benign biopsy or the young person's graduation is good news. The standards for houses include those features that make it comfortable and easy to live in; houses that meet these standards are good because anyone would want to live in one. On the other hand, a party where the guests have fun but break up the hosts' furniture and keep the neighbors awake all night isn't really a good party overall, for what may have been good for the guests was not good for the hosts and neighbors.

Thus many things are good for many reasons, but there is a common thread that runs through attributions of goodness. Directly or indirectly, what is good has a tendency to promote the well-being of individuals: i.e., to be *good for* those individuals. Often the connection is tenuous. For example, a good cigar or good chocolate cake is rarely good *for* anyone. They are good in that they have certain characteristics like a rich, smooth taste that contribute to the pleasure of those who enjoy them, but they also have a tendency to undermine the health of people who indulge too frequently. Having pleasures, however, *is* good for people in that having

them makes their lives happier overall. Pleasures are only bad for you if they interfere with this happiness; thus cigars and cake can be good for you when you partake of them sparingly enough to avoid ill effects. Pleasures may thus be good even if they are not good for you, so long as they are not positively bad for you. (Yet on the view I shall defend anything that gives you pleasure, and does not bring pain or preclude deeper or more extended pleasure, is good for you since it is by definition something you want to continue. Once you stop wanting it to continue it is no longer a pleasure for you, or good for you to have it – at that moment.⁷)

There is a difference between what is good for an individual and what is good overall. Just as a thing is not good to the extent that it is bad for the persons affected, it is not good overall if, in spite of being in the best interests of a particular individual, it is morally bad or is contrary to the interests of others. We might say that a particular war was a good thing for General Jones because he distinguished himself in battle, was never wounded, and as a direct result of the war embarked upon a successful military career. But we qualify it by saying it was good *for him*, not good overall. Likewise, something can be good overall without being good for a particular person. For example, the state of the nation's economy may be good overall as a result of increasing technology, but Smith may be worse off by losing his low tech job – although if there is no safety net or retraining provisions, for people like Smith, we might hesitate to say that the economy is good overall.

Overall goodness appears to have a hierarchical structure similar to that of what ought to be done. That is, it meets some particular standard without being against the interests of an individual or morally bad, or it promotes interests of individuals without being morally wrong, or it furthers the realization of moral standards. What is good overall and what is good for an individual share the feature of meeting some standard — the standards being respectively, for the general good and for individual well-being.

In contrast with oughts, if *X* is good, it is *sufficient* for meeting standards to a certain degree, or it helps to meet a standard, while if *X* ought to be or to be done, it is *required* for meeting standards. What is good may go beyond minimum requirements and is looser and more varied. There may be many different ways — none of which is necessary — of obtaining what is good, but if something ought to be or be done, *it* must be or be done to satisfy the standard. Likewise, if something is good for a person it suffices or at least helps to meet a standard of well-being, but may not be necessary, for the standard might be reached to the same degree by other means. On the other hand, if one ought prudentially to do something, that action is required for one's well-being.

The above remarks provide only a schematic account of 'good,' which is consistent with many theories of what is in fact good. What we must now consider is what constitutes correct standards of well-being — the substantive, not merely the formal, content of the concept of goodness.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0687-6>

Moral Beliefs and Moral Theory

Forrester, M.G.

2002, XIII, 293 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0687-6