

DIVINE ESSENTIALISM AND THE DEFINITION OF GOOD

Introduction

John Stuart Mill once penned, “From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum* [greatest good], or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject.”¹ This project is an attempt to join the battle. It is an attempt not to discover *what* is good, but instead what *is* good. That is, what does the term “good” mean, what is the definition of good or goodness. Yet, the two are related, and indeed they are inseparable. This project, however, seeks to discover an adequate definition of good with the realization that this can only be done by noting *what* things are good. G. E. Moore, who himself did not think that good was definable, remarked, “That which is meant by ‘good’ is, in fact, except its converse ‘bad,’ the *only* simple object of thought which is peculiar to Ethics. Its definition is, therefore, the most essential point in the definition of Ethics.”² That is, the defining characteristic of an ethical system is its definition of good.

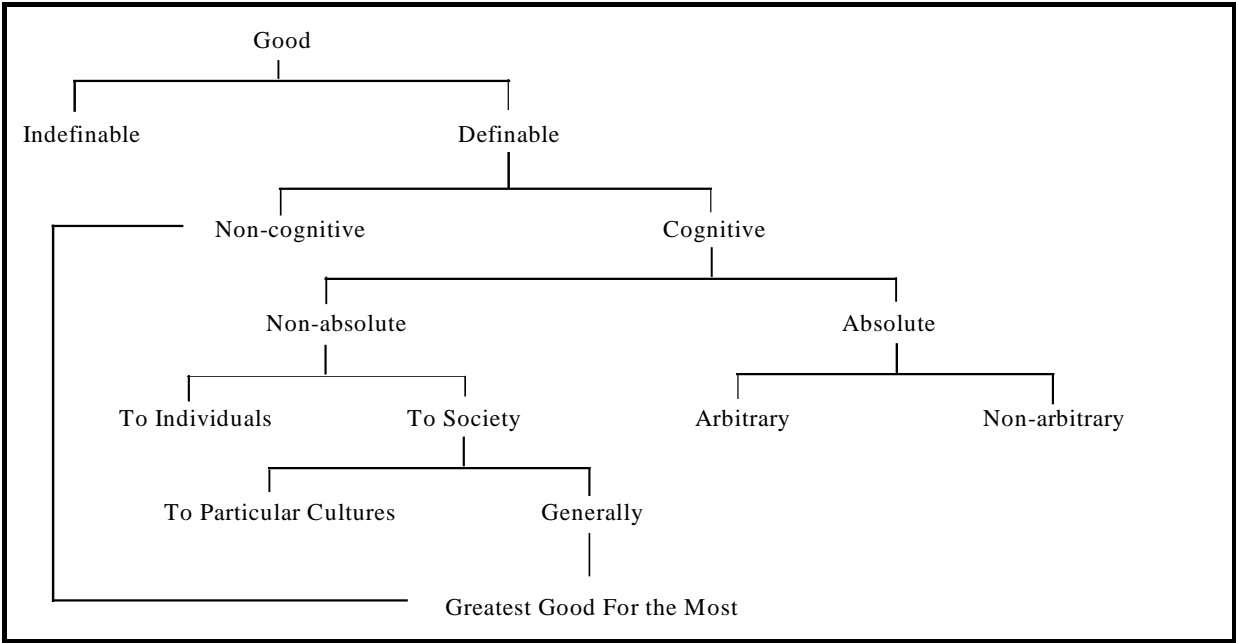
¹John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1979), 1.

²G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1903; reprint, 2000), 57 (page citations are to the reprint edition, emphasis in the original).

What follows are the different categories that will be briefly explored. “Goodness” may be definable or indefinable. If it is definable, then the definition is either cognitive or non-cognitive. If it is cognitive, then the definition is either absolute or non-absolute (i.e., relative). If it is relative, then it is relative to individuals or to society. If it is relative to society, then is it relative in only particular cultures or to the human race in general. If, on the other hand, the definition is absolute, then the definition is either arbitrary or non-arbitrary (i.e., essential).

Figure 1 may help illustrate the options.

Fig. 1. Categories of the Definition of Good



This project will attempt to demonstrate that goodness is definable, cognitive, absolute, and essential. A grandiose goal to be sure, but nonetheless achievable. This project will proceed as follows: briefly explore the alternatives to an essential, absolute, cognitive, definable notion of good; then, explore the notion of goodness to discover in what way goodness is definable and absolute; finally, common objections will be answered.

Historical Perspectives Through the Chart

Definable vs. Indefinable

G. E. Moore is the most popular opponent to a definition of good. If Moore cannot be answered then this project never “gets off the ground” as it were. Norman Geisler expresses Moore’s contention well, “Every attempt to define good commits the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ of assuming that since pleasure can be attributed to good, they are identical. . . . Attempting to define good in terms of something else makes that something the intrinsic good.”³ Moore states, “Propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic.”⁴ Since propositions about the good are not analytic they are not definitional, thus good cannot be defined. Henry Veatch notes, “[Moore] did not deny that goodness was at least in some sense real . . . [but] goodness could not be equated with or understood in terms of any of the ordinary properties . . . that might actually . . . characterize things in the real world.”⁵ As Moore declares, “That a thing should be good, it has been thought, *means* that it possesses this single property: and hence (it is thought) only what possesses this property is good. . . . Yet what is meant by [this] is self-contradictory. For those who make it fail to perceive that their conclusion ‘what possesses this property is good’ is a significant proposition: that it does not mean either ‘what possesses this property, possesses this property’ or ‘the word “good” denotes that thing possesses this property.’ And yet, if it does *not* mean one or other of these two things, the inference

³Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 21.

⁴Moore, 58.

⁵Henry B. Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals: A Critique of Contemporary Ethical Theory* (Evanstone: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 19.

contradicts its own premise.”⁶ Veatch is helpful in understanding Moore’s position, “Moore’s view of the logic of definition was such that if a putative definition were even so much as open to question, then it could not properly be a definition in the first place. And the reason Moore thought this was that he supposed that any definition must be an analytic truth. However, an analytic truth is one the opposite of which is simply inconceivable because [it is] self-contradictory. But for a proposed definition to be open to question means that its opposite is at least conceivable, with the result that the proposed definition turns out not to be analytic, and hence not a definition.”⁷

Moore’s view, however, is subject to severe criticism. As Geisler notes, this view “provides no content for what good means. If there is no content to what is right or wrong, then there is no way to distinguish a good act from a bad one.”⁸ Further, “Just because the good cannot be defined in terms of something ultimate does not mean that it cannot be defined at all.”⁹ Without content for what good means it is difficult (nay impossible) to build an ethical system. If one accepts Moore’s thesis, then one ultimately can never give any reason why something is valuable.¹⁰ For as soon as you begin to note *why* it is valuable then you would be committing the “naturalistic fallacy.” But if there can be no genuine position on moral values,

⁶Moore, 90 (emphasis in original).

⁷Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 104.

⁸Geisler, 21.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 21 (emphasis in original).

then a consequence appears to be that ethics is not a matter of rational knowledge at all.¹¹ For what cannot be conceptualized cannot be under the purview of rational discourse. Veatch insightfully notes, “When asked why he considers those things to be intrinsically good which he in fact takes to be so, namely, friendships and aesthetic enjoyments, Moore in effect replies that he has no reasons of any kind to support such judgments; instead, he just sees or intuits the goodness of such things. Somehow, one wonders whether the early readers of *Principia Ethica*, when they reached this high-water mark of Moorean wisdom, would not have been suddenly struck by the fact that the emperor had no clothes.”¹² Perhaps the most embarrassing consequence of Moore’s thesis is that no definitions of any kind other than analytic are possible. For to define good in such a way that Moore accepts it is to put it in a form that is not a definition.¹³ Veatch remarks, “If any definition of the good must commit a fallacy, then on the same principles just about any definition of anything must also commit a fallacy. If one defines A as A, this is merely a tautology, not a definition. On the other hand, if one defines A as B or C, then one is defining A in terms of what is other than A, and this violates the principle that everything is what it is and not another thing. However, one must define A either in terms of A or in terms of something other than A. Hence, on such principles, it would seem impossible ever to define anything. And this is far more than Moore himself ever bargained for.”¹⁴ Thus, if Moore is correct definitions of any kind are impossible, but this appears to be plainly absurd.

¹¹Ibid., 19.

¹²Ibid., 22.

¹³Henry B. Veatch, *Rational Man: A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962; reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003), 140 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁴Ibid.

Further, if definitions of any kind are impossible then so too is Moore's definition of the "naturalistic fallacy," but to define a position that makes definitions impossible is self-defeating. Therefore, Moore's thesis is a novel notion. What remains is to discover an adequate definition of good.

Cognitive vs. Non-cognitive

While good may be definable, there is also the question of whether its definition (whatever that may be) has any cognitive value. This is similar to Moore's position, and in fact retains many of the same implications. The major difference being that one can define good, but it has no rational content. That is, good is known by way of emotion or experience and not intellect. Veatch sums up this position well, "While of course there might be various causes for the moral judgments and value judgments that we make, there could not properly be any reasons for such judgments."¹⁵ This position would be characterized by ancient and modern hedonists. A. J. Ayer, and C. L. Stevenson are modern examples of holding this position which is sometimes called emotivism. Good is usually associated with pleasure and generally defined as such, but since it has no cognitive element it is more of an emotional ejaculation.¹⁶ For example, if one says "giving to the poor is good" this really means "giving to the poor, hooray!" Mortimer Adler remarks, "The content of noncognitive ethics, consists of mere opinions of this sort, is neither true nor false. What holds for mere opinions of any kind holds for mere opinions about moral values and about oughts. They are entirely subjective and relative to time and to changing

¹⁵Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 24.

¹⁶A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 103.

circumstances.”¹⁷ As A. J. Ayer states, “Our contention is simply that, in our language, sentences which contain normative ethical symbols are not equivalent to sentences which express psychological propositions, or indeed empirical propositions of any kind.”¹⁸ As such, non-cognitivism generally reduces to the position that good is what brings pleasure.

Like Moore’s position, non-cognitivism is subject to severe criticisms. As Geisler notes, “Not all pleasures are good (e.g., sadism), and not all pain is bad (e.g., warning pain).”¹⁹ Further, “What kind of pleasure should be used as the basis of the test?”²⁰ There are many kinds of pleasures, such as, immediate or ultimate pleasures, pleasures for the individual, group, or race.²¹ Adler contends, “The popular and vulgar version of hedonism leads its exponents to the subjectivists and relativists about moral values. Identifying the good with pleasure, it is an easy step to conclude that what is deemed good by one individual because it gives pleasure may not be deemed good by another.”²² Further, “To say that the *only* good is pleasure is to say that wealth, health, friends, knowledge, and wisdom are not good.”²³ A sophisticated hedonists may object and say that these things *do* in fact bring pleasure and thus are good, however, these things, according to hedonism, would only be good if in fact they bring pleasure. Thus, these things cannot be intrinsically good in their system simply because it is possible for them not to

¹⁷Mortimer J. Adler, *T en Philosophical Mistakes* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1985), 118.

¹⁸Ayer, 105.

¹⁹Geisler, 20.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Adler, *T en Philosophical Mistakes*, 112.

²³Ibid., (emphasis in original).

be good if or when they cease being pleasurable. An interesting objection to the hedonists and emotivists claim is noted by Adler, “If a life that includes both pleasure and wisdom is more desirable than one that includes pleasure alone, then pleasure is not the *only* good.”²⁴ That is, if a hedonist desires a life that has more than simple pleasure, then there are other goods than simply pleasure. Veatch’s criticisms of non-cognitivist claims are short and to the point, “If ethical judgments are in principle incapable of ever being reasoned judgments, then either there is no such thing as ethics, or ethics is itself no better than a fraud.”²⁵ If non-cognitivism is true then ethical judgments and systems are impossible, for there would be no intellectual object in which to discuss. Further, if non-cognitivism is true, then “one cannot appeal to such norms and standards of value as one finds in the world, simply because these are no more than the free and arbitrary projections of ourselves as transcendental subjects and hence cannot be invoked as standards of which the authenticity or inauthenticity of such projections are to be judged.”²⁶ In other words, if non-cognitivism is true then anarchy is the only consistent option available. For no value judgment can be expressed as authoritative since it would merely be an emotional expression of the individual. With the problems associated with non-cognitivism it is appropriate to consider whether a cognitive definition of good is absolute or non-absolute.

Non-absolute: To Individuals vs. To Society

Within the non-absolute (i.e., relative) strain there are several positions that can be

²⁴Ibid., 113 (emphasis in original).

²⁵Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 26.

²⁶Ibid., 74.

individually identified. If the definition of good is applied by each individual then the ethical system is appropriately titled “man is the measure.” About this, Adler notes, “The relative is that which varies from time to time and alters with alterations in the circumstances. In contrast, the absolute is that which does not vary from time to time and does not alter with alterations in the circumstances.”²⁷ However, with a “man is the measure” type of ethic there is no objective standard on subjective taste. Within this strain comes the ethical theory that “might is right.” For if standards are all subjective, then nothing objective prevents one from imposing his will on another.

Several criticisms are in order. Geisler states the most damaging, “If this theory were put into practice, society would be rendered inoperative.”²⁸ If everyone, literally, does his own thing then no society would actually exist. Anarchy would reign. If moral values are subjective, then this is no better than non-cognitive emotivism with all of its results and difficulties. Geisler further argues, “This view implies that an act is right for someone, even if it is cruel, hateful, or tyrannical.”²⁹ Indeed, if this view is correct there is no one to say otherwise. Inconsistently, subjective moralists say we should be good by the standards of human nature, but they cannot point to which aspect of human nature to be the standard.³⁰ To those that simply wish to impose their will and call it good they fail to note the difference between power and goodness. Hitler had power, but may it never be said that he was good.

²⁷Adler, *T en Philosophical Mistakes*, 111.

²⁸Geisler, 18.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

Non-absolute to Particular Cultures vs. Generally

A non-absolute understanding of good when applied to society can be understood in two ways: particularly and generally. This position is sometimes broadly classified as “morals are mores,” or what is good is determined by the culture. This position fares no better than individualized morality. A relative morality, whether individual or social, is still relative. Extrapolating cultural norms and making those the basis of moral values has serious problems.

Applied to particular cultures one is confronted with the obvious problem that this commits the “is-ought” fallacy.³¹ Just because someone does something does not mean it *ought* to be done. Veatch notes, “To base ethics on no more than institutional facts is thereby to condemn it to a seemingly ineradicable relativism. . . . One has only to renounce the institution, and one is thereby freed from all obligations internal to that institution.”³² That is, simply because your culture frowns upon rape does not make rape really wrong, and in fact it may be permissible in another culture. Likewise, we are not obligated to play by the rules of our individual culture based on our language. Again, Veatch notes, “If the moral obligation to keep our promises were no more than a function of our playing the language game of promising, then all we would need to do would be to refrain from playing that particular game, and the attendant duties and obligations would no longer be incumbent upon us.”³³ Applied to society at large if each culture is a law unto themselves then how does one adjudicate conflicts between different

³¹Ibid.

³²Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 48.

³³Ibid., 78.

cultures?³⁴ If cultures determined for themselves what is good, then the occasion may occur in which opposite ethical principles may both be true!³⁵ However, this is absurd - the opposite of true is false.

Greatest Good for the Most

Extrapolating from the position that culture determines what is good and also from the non-cognitivist hedonism comes utilitarianism.³⁶ John Stuart Mill is the most popular proponent of this position and he presents it well. Similar to the position that this project will defend, Mill asserts, “All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient.”³⁷ We act for an end, but what is this end? Mill answers, “Every writer from Epicurus to Bentham, who maintained the theory of utility meant by it, not something to be contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain.”³⁸ Further, “‘Utility’ or the ‘greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain.”³⁹ By “right” Mill means “good.” Mill again adds, “Pleasure

³⁴Geisler, 18.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶It is acknowledged that utilitarianism is not “born” out of non-cognitivism in the modern sense as such, but rather, the ancient non-cognitivist hedonistic tradition.

³⁷Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 2.

³⁸Ibid., 6.

³⁹Ibid., 7.

and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends.”⁴⁰ Mill, however, holds there are levels of good, that is, good should be understood qualitatively. He states, “A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy . . . it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”⁴¹ However, it is important to remember that for Mill there is no objective good, “The ultimate sanction, therefore, of all morality (external motives apart) being a subjective feeling in our own minds.”⁴² Since good is subjective, we each must determine what is to be desired, “Questions about ends are, in other words, questions what things are desirable. The utilitarian doctrine is that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end.”⁴³

Mill’s position, though powerful and influential, is subject to severe criticism. The most prominent is explained by Veatch, “In most if not all varieties of utilitarianism, it is commonly held that the source of moral and ethical distinctions, not to mention values as well, is to be located not in the object but in the subject.”⁴⁴ Since good is individualized, there is no standard on what it means to say the greatest good for the most. Geisler rightly points out, “There is no agreement on how good should be understood.”⁴⁵ Though Mill tries his hand at answering what

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 9-10.

⁴²Ibid., 28.

⁴³Ibid., 34.

⁴⁴Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 139.

⁴⁵Geisler, 20.

it means to be good, he can come to no resolution. Veatch observes, “We do not know ourselves, we are forever deluding ourselves, making ourselves believe we are something which we are not, . . . [and] the source of this self-blindness, which utilitarianism so often seems to foster, can be located in that very tendency on the part of utilitarian moralists to try to erect an ethics merely on the basis of human pleasure and happiness, and not on the basis of human nature or the moral order of nature as whole.”⁴⁶ The Achilles heel of utilitarianism is that it cannot see what a result is in the long run, and since no human can see the future, utilitarianism is essentially useless.⁴⁷ Geisler notes, “It begs the question to say that moral right is what brings the greatest good, for then we must ask what is ‘good.’ Either right and good are defined in terms of each other, which is circular reasoning, or good must be determined by some standard beyond the utilitarian process.”⁴⁸ Adler comments, “Mill cannot long maintain the simpleminded view that the only good is pleasure. He, too, distinguishes between pleasures that are more or less desirable.”⁴⁹ By uttering, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.”⁵⁰ “Mill utterly betrayed his own utilitarian principles.”⁵¹ Even though Mill identified higher and lower values Adler comments, “We cannot find in . . . Mill the basis for ordering goods as higher and lower, or for showing that what some individuals deem to be higher goods should be deemed so by

⁴⁶Veatch, *Rational Man*, 133.

⁴⁷Geisler, 20.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Adler, *T en Philosophical Mistakes*, 113.

⁵⁰Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10.

⁵¹Veatch, *Rational Man*, 135.

everyone else at all times and places and under all circumstances.”⁵² Utilitarianism suffers the same criticisms of the non-cognitivists and accordingly should be rejected. Veatch insightfully comments, “The hallmark of any properly moral or ethical judgment is that it must be a reasoned judgment. . . . It must be a judgment to which reasons are in principle relevant, even though the person making the judgment may not have thought much about such reasons or even be able to produce any such on demand. . . . When it comes to mere likes and desires, reasons are not relevant to these at all, but only causes.”⁵³

Absolute: Arbitrary vs. Non-arbitrary⁵⁴

What remains on the other side of the chart will occupy the next section of this project. It is the ongoing controversy between voluntarism and essentialism. Geisler sums the positions up well, “A voluntarist believes that something is good simply because God wills it. An essentialist, on the other hand, holds that God wills something because it is good in accordance with his own nature.”⁵⁵ What follows is an account defending an essentialist understanding of goodness.

Goodness

Metaphysical Starting Points

⁵²Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, 115.

⁵³Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 141.

⁵⁴A notable exclusion. Immanuel Kant’s work, though speaking directly to this topic, has been omitted due to space. Suffice to say, he would fall under an absolute understanding, but as an arbitrary voluntarist. Criticisms of voluntarism and an explanation of essentialism will have to do as a response to his categorical imperative.

⁵⁵Geisler, 22.

Why start with metaphysics? Because, if metaphysics can tell us something about all of reality, and moral values are a part of reality, then metaphysics may give us a clue to understanding moral value. Veatch observes, “What is requisite by way of providing a proper foundation for morals and ethics is not any mere investigation of the language of morals, or even a phenomenology of morals, so much as an ontology of morals.”⁵⁶ He adds, “For a judgment to the effect that *X* is good or right to be warranted, it does not suffice that by our language rules we must call *X* good or right, or that our subjective dispositions and activities are such that we cannot but experience *X* as good or right; nothing else will do but that *X* should be good or right.”⁵⁷ That is, we call something good, not because of taste, cultural peculiarities, language, or any other such reasons. We call something good because it is *in fact good*. Veatch notes, “For we propose to challenge directly the initial separation of values from facts, and we should like to suggest, instead, that all facts, if not identical with values, at least have value aspects.”⁵⁸ Thus, as a response to Kant’s fact/value dichotomy he admits, “Thus to anyone who feels it simply incredible that facts should ever imply values or that ‘is’ should ever imply ‘ought,’ our reply is that it is far more incredible that these two should ever have been separated in the first place.”⁵⁹ Only by accepting a fact/value dichotomy does one even question whether something can be good or not.

“At the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle flatly declares that the good is that

⁵⁶Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 99.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Veatch, *Rational Man*, 145.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 146.

at which all things aim, as if in his very definition of what the good is objectively he was concerned to build right into it a reference to the aims, the desires, or the ‘objectives’ of the subject.”⁶⁰ What would be a way in which to determine these “objectives”? Veatch offers a solution, “What is directly relevant to the ontology of morals and ethics is not the cause-effect relation, but rather the relation of potency to act.”⁶¹ For Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics “the act-potency distinction is a basic pervasive category. Things as we know them in the everyday world of common-sense reality are at once universally and radically subject to change.”⁶² While morals themselves do not change, our interaction and understanding of them does, thus it is proper to understand moral values in terms of act and potency. It is important to remember, however, that, “Any and all . . . potentialities are correlated with actualities.”⁶³ That is, actuality precedes potentiality in the order of ontology, but potentiality limits actuality to the type of act that it is. Veatch notes, “Since a thing can hardly be other than the kind of thing it is, its very nature or ‘what’ or quiddity is no less than a built-in, objective standard in terms of which that particular thing’s shortcomings or, as the case may be, its ‘full-comings’ may be objectively judged and determined.”⁶⁴ Thus, we can determine that something is good when it is the type of thing it *should* be.

This being the case Veatch remarks, “It would seem that goodness or value was itself a

⁶⁰Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 112.

⁶¹Ibid., 133.

⁶²Ibid., 107.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., 138.

kind of relational property, just in the sense that it points up the objective properties of the object as being themselves the termini of a relation: they are but the fulfillment or actuality of a prior potentiality which was ordered to those properties just insofar as they constitute the fulfillment or perfection of such a potentiality. Indeed, Aquinas even goes so far as to understand potency or potentiality as a kind of *appetitus* - an appetite or desire for the relevant perfection or actuality.”⁶⁵ Since things should be a certain way, and things are “aimed” in that direction, things tend to desire their ends (goals). Aristotle states, “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”⁶⁶ But this immediately raises the question what is the good of each thing? The answer seems to be that for which all things aim.⁶⁷ For, “We call complete without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.”⁶⁸ As Aristotle commented, “If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else, . . . clearly this must be the good and the chief good.”⁶⁹ But that which is desired for its own sake is actuality. For actuality is the perfection of some potentiality. Perfection is good, since a thing is what it should be. Thus, the argument looks like this: all act (in our experience) is the perfection of a potentiality; all

⁶⁵Ibid., 112-3.

⁶⁶Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a1.

⁶⁷Ibid., 1097a16.

⁶⁸Ibid., 1097a35.

⁶⁹Ibid., 1094a19.

perfections are good; therefore, being in act is good. However, if the five ways of Aquinas are correct, then we know that there is a being that is pure Act with no potentiality. As pure Act, this being would be the ultimate good for it could be nothing other than what it is because it would have no potential to be otherwise. Thus, a grounding for goodness is located in the nature of God. A divine essentialism.

Thomas Aquinas remarks, “Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea . . . The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. . . . It is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual . . . Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really. But goodness presents the aspect of desirableness, which being does not present.”⁷⁰ Aquinas continues, “Since goodness is that which all things desire, and since this has the aspect of an end, it is clear that goodness implies the aspect of an end. Nevertheless, the idea of goodness presupposes the idea of an efficient cause, and also of a formal cause.”⁷¹

George Klubertanz and Maurice Holloway clarify this position, “The transcendental good is being inasmuch as it is in act. Consequently, good is not something really distinct from being and added to being, but in the real order is identical with being itself. But the conception, *good* is not identical with the conception, *being*, for the very intelligibility of *good* adds to being the relation to some tendency or appetite. Therefore, the transcendental good adds to being the

⁷⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I. Q.5.Art.1.

⁷¹Ibid., I. Q.5. Art.4.

relation to appetite and so is distinct from being by a minor distinction of reason.”⁷² Goodness, then, is that which all things aim (or desire), but what things desire is being (act), and the greatest being is pure Act. Therefore, all beings - whether they recognize it or not - desire God. God is an appropriate stopping point, for as Joseph Owens remarks, “Only the good that is infinite absolutely terminates all appetite.”⁷³ God is the most desirable since no other is infinite. Only in God are our desires (i.e., needs) met perfectly.

The Supervenient Property of Goodness

G. E. Moore’s fundamental mistake was making goodness a property like redness or tallness. Goodness, properly speaking, is not a property at all. One does not possess goodness like one possesses brown hair. Goodness is a state of being, not an addition to ones being.⁷⁴

Veatch comments, “It is in virtue of the properties that a thing has *tout court* that we judge it to be good. And so goodness turns out to be solely a supervenient or consequential property, and not at all the sort of property that a thing may be said to have *tout court*.”⁷⁵ This is why Moore had such a problem defining good. Moore was considering “good” to be something that was added to an object and not part of the object itself by the fact that it simply existed. Therefore, “Given a definition of goodness . . . , in terms of a thing’s actuality of perfection, it becomes

⁷²George Klubertanz and Maurice Holloway, *Being and God* (Publisher Not Known; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 208 (page citations are to the reprint edition, emphasis in original).

⁷³Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985; reprint 2003), 122 (all page citations from the reprint edition).

⁷⁴Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 108.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 109.

possible to give an intelligible explanation of just how or why the properties of a thing can be the sources of its goodness or value: they are so just insofar as they are properties that evidence the perfection or complete actuality of the thing in question.”⁷⁶

A Proposed Definition of Good

Given what has been discussed about goodness above, Veatch observes a difficulty, “It must be acknowledged that goodness, so far from being subsumable under any one category or genus, is rather to be found in all the categories, just as being is. But then it is impossible that goodness, any more than being could ever be defined *per genus et differentiam*.”⁷⁷ However, Veatch adds, “Even though goodness is in the strict and proper sense indefinable, this still does not preclude Aristotle, or at least Aquinas (see *De Veritate*, Qu. I, Art. I, and Qu. 21 and 22), from indicating what sort of a thing goodness is and, in this broad sense, from “defining” it.”⁷⁸ How does Aquinas define good? The same way as Aristotle. And as an objective definition it is appropriate. Goodness is that which all things aim (or desire), or good is that which is desirable for its own sake.

Knowing the Content of Good

The biggest problem with this definition is that it lacks content. How do we know in

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid., n. 106.

⁷⁸Ibid., n. 106-7.

what sense things should aim? Aquinas offers guidance, “In idea being is prior to goodness. For the meaning signified by the name of a thing is that which the mind conceives of the thing and intends by the word that stands for it. Therefore, that is prior in idea, which is first conceived in the intellect. Now the first thing conceived in the intellect is being; because everything is knowable only inasmuch as it is in actuality. Hence, being is the proper object of the intellect, and is primarily intelligible . . . Therefore in idea being is prior to goodness.”⁷⁹ Since being is prior to goodness in our intellect we can evaluate what things are and what their natural goals are. Veatch comments, “Ontologically, . . . natural laws are but rules or measures of actions that specify and determine the order of potentialities to their actualities.”⁸⁰ This dependence on the nature of things is often called natural law ethics. That is, we recognize good and bad based on their nature of being what they should be. “If distinctions between good and bad, and right and wrong, should turn out to be objective distinctions or distinctions in actual fact, and if moral laws should prove to be on the same footing as natural laws, then surely the implications would be that men could actually observe and learn from experience what they ought to do and how as human beings they ought to act.”⁸¹ Adler adds, “The fact that we are not conscious of a natural need should not lead us into the mistake of thinking that the need of which we are unaware does not exist.”⁸² This natural law exists whether we recognize it or not. It is not created by man,

⁷⁹Aquinas, I. Q.5. Art.2.

⁸⁰Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 124.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 125.

⁸²Mortimer J. Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1978), 86.

rather it is discovered by man through his reason and intelligence.⁸³

What exactly is this natural law? Veatch explains, “For it is precisely from a consideration of man - of the particular kind of being that man is - that a natural-law moralist thinks that he can show both that man is subject to moral laws and what these laws are.”⁸⁴ The natural law informs us of the content of goodness, because it is based:

Directly out of the ontological structure of potency and act, which, . . . provides the rationale for understanding the ontological status of goodness and value. Of course, when one defines law in terms of the notion of a rule and measure of actions, a distinction would seem to be implied between the source of such a law, in the sense of a law-giver, and the law itself, which thus comes to given and prescribed. However, when it comes to determining the exact ontological status of laws as they exist and are operative in the real world, we may happily disregard the question of the origin of law - i.e., law as it is the mind of God or of the lawgiver (*in mensurante*) - and confine our attention simply to law as given and hence as it exists in fact and in nature (*in mensuranto*). Here the relevant notion is simply that of potency-act, or rather of the fact of a potency’s being ordered to its appropriate act. For natural law is nothing but this order of potency to act.⁸⁵

Aristotle wrote about this stating, “For all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function.”⁸⁶ In regards to what the good of man is, he wrote, “Human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete.”⁸⁷ This reduction of potency to act is summed up best by Aristotle, “Happiness, then, is something complete and self-sufficient, and is the end of

⁸³Veatch, *Rational Man*, 79.

⁸⁴Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 92.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 122-3.

⁸⁶Aristotle, 1097b26.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 1098a16.

action.”⁸⁸ This may be reminiscent of Mill’s statement above, however, it is important to distinguish that the happiness proposed here is objective and not subjective. Our end is to be happy, but happiness can come only in the recognition of the foundation for happiness and goodness - a holy and just God whom all desire.

Doing the Good

Knowing the good and God is one thing. Acting on such knowledge is another. In the reduction of potency to act we know what are good and bad actions from God’s revelation, both general and special. Good and bad actions are the purview of moral and ethical philosophy. However, this project is concerned with general revelation. A fundamental error in philosophy is the belief that to know the good is to do the good. “In defending an ontology of morals, we would be the first to admit that a mere knowledge of what moral and ethical distinctions are in fact by no means entails that we will act on such knowledge.”⁸⁹ The good, when acted upon, is commonly called virtue, for one is doing what they should. Aristotle remarked, “The activity [virtue] cannot; for one who has the activity will of necessity be acting, and acting well.”⁹⁰ Further, “Of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity.”⁹¹ He also states, “Excellences [virtues] we get by first exercising them.”⁹²

⁸⁸Ibid., 1097b20.

⁸⁹Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 121.

⁹⁰Aristotle, 1099a2.

⁹¹Ibid., 1103a26.

⁹²Ibid., 1103a31.

Only by doing what we should in accordance with the natural law can we be virtuous and be good.⁹³ This act and potency relation in regards to morality determines moral goodness.⁹⁴ Thus, goodness is expressed in a virtuous life.

Objections

Goodness Cannot Be Defined

This objection has already been dealt with in answering G. E. Moore. However, in regards to definitions in general, Veatch comments, “Any definition that purports to be a real definition is in principle capable of being doubted. For whatever it is in the real world that we may happen to want to know about, in the sense of wanting to know what kind of thing it is and what pertains to it essentially, it is always possible that we may have thought to be of the very essence of the thing in question may not really be so at all.”⁹⁵ A true definition may be capable of revision, but that should not call into question that a definition is incapable at all. For, “What we might have taken a given thing to be may not be what it really is. Accordingly . . . so far from its being impossible for a definition ever to be open to question, a real definition is always open to question.”⁹⁶ Likewise, the definition proposed within this paper is subject to change, but appears to be the best there is so far.

⁹³Good in this sense is not meant to be taken that we can work for our salvation. This is meant to be taken in a normal everyday sense of the term good, not in a divinely perfect sense.

⁹⁴Owens, 121.

⁹⁵Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, 104-5.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 105.

This Definition of Good Has No Content

As a straight definition itself, this objection is correct. Good is that which all things aim, has no content in and of itself in determining what individual things should be good. The solution to this problem is not in the definition itself, but in the way the definition is applied. Understood in an act-potency relationship under the purview of natural law, this definition is adequate. Further, due to the act-potency model one is not left “in mid-air” but rather has a firm ground for moral statements and values in the very nature of God Himself. There is certainly plenty of content in the revelation that God has given, both general and special.

Just Because Something Is Desired Does Not Mean It Is Good

This is perhaps the greatest objection to the proposed definition. Usually, this objection is supported by statements such as: Good cannot be that which is desired, since we often desire that which is evil, and it is easy to confuse what is desired and what is desirable. For, “One’s desires and likings are notoriously whimsical: what pleases me at one time may very well repel me or leave me quite indifferent the next time.”⁹⁷ Further, “If the goodness of things - and the same would hold for all other ethical or value predicates as well - were no more than a function of their being desired, then it would be no more possible to give reasons for judging something to be good than it would be for judging it to be liked or desired.”⁹⁸ Again, this is probably the most common objection to the proposed definition. However, this objection fails for several reasons.

⁹⁷Ibid., 142.

⁹⁸Ibid., 144.

Veatch comments, “Not only do we call things good because they are desired, but in addition we can and often do desire things simply because we recognize them to be good. Thus from the standpoint of a natural-law ethic, the mere fact that an end is natural - that it is the actuality or perfection of a corresponding potentiality - does not preclude it from being good.”⁹⁹ Adler clarifies this position stating, “The good is the desirable and the desirable is good. But a thing may be desirable in two different senses of ‘desirable,’ just as it may be good in two senses of ‘good.’ We can call something desirable because at a given time we do in fact desire it. Or we can call something desirable because we ought to desire it whether, at a given time, we actually desire it or not.”¹⁰⁰ Adler continues, “What is desirable in one sense may not be desirable in the other. We may actually desire what we ought not to desire, or in fact fail to desire what we ought to desire. That which is really good for us is something we always ought to desire because we need it, and we cannot have wrong needs.”¹⁰¹ The distinction between what should be desired and what we actually desire, is really a distinction about what we want and what we need. “Needs are inborn or innate desires - desires inherent in our human nature because we have certain natural capacities or tendencies, capacities or tendencies common to us all because we all have the same human nature. We all have a biological capacity for nourishment.”¹⁰² However, the counterpart to needs are actual wants, “In contrast to the things you want, which appear good at the time you want them but may turn out to be the opposite of good at a later time, the things

⁹⁹Ibid., 148-9.

¹⁰⁰Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody*, 88.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 89.

¹⁰²Ibid., 85.

you need are *always* good for you. Because they are really good for you, they are not good at one time and the opposite at another.”¹⁰³ Someone cannot have a wrong or mistaken need, unlike a want. We cannot mistake things that we really need.¹⁰⁴ Adler comments, “Reflection on these facts of common experience and common speech led Aristotle to the common-sense conclusion that the two notions - the good and the desirable - are inseparably connected.”¹⁰⁵ Coming from the perspective that actuality precedes potentiality Veatch notes, “So far from the goodness of a thing being constituted, or actually created or brought into being by the *appetitus* to which it is related, it is well to keep in mind that goodness is to be understood in terms of actuality, and actuality is never in any sense brought into being or constituted by the potency that is ordered to it.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, whatever desires we may bring to the table are secondary to our innate natural desires. Veatch concludes, “If one understands goodness as being but the actual as over against the potential, or the perfect toward which the imperfect is ordered, then while goodness is indeed understood as the actual or perfect, precisely insofar as it is desired or aimed at by that which is still only potential, it still does not mean that such actuality and perfection are what they are only by virtue of their being desired or aimed at.”¹⁰⁷ That is, our desiring something does not make it good, it is good in and of itself and therefore we desire it if we really need it.

¹⁰³Ibid., 87-8.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 88.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 83.

¹⁰⁶Veatch, *For an Ontology of Morals*, n. 116.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 115.

What Appears to Be Good in Itself Is Not Always Really Good

This objection is very similar to the previous, but slightly different. Whereas the previous objection stated that goodness is not dependant on our desire, this objection states that what we think may be good may not be. Adler states this objection well, “Though what is really good for one human being is the same for all, what appears to be good to one individual, according to his wants, may be quite different from what appears to be good to another individual.”¹⁰⁸ While the precaution is appreciated in practice, the definition this project proposes remains completely unaffected by this objection. Adler comments, “Apparent goods are the things we call good because we do in fact consciously desire them at the time. We want them. Because we want them, they appear good to us and we call them good. In contrast, real goods are things we need, whether we are conscious of the need or not. Their goodness consists in their satisfying a desire inherent in human nature.”¹⁰⁹ Real goods in the act-potency model are not a matter of individual taste, but, rather, the actual makeup of the universe.

Conclusion

Having explored different explanations for the definition of what is good, this project has come to the conclusion that “Good” is definable. This definition has positive cognitive content, and is absolute. This absolute good is rooted in a divine essentialism as the very being of God Himself. Good may be known apart from God since it pervades all of reality, but as to whom all desire, we are incomplete until we reach our ultimate goal - God. Since God is whom all things

¹⁰⁸ Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody*, 90.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

aim and desire, He is the appropriate one to communicate to us how we should treat each other and live virtuous lives. As Adler remarks, “If we seek all the real goods that we ought to possess in the course of our lives, we will be pursuing happiness according to the one right plan of life that we ought to adopt.”¹¹⁰

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