Value and the Quest for the Good

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When we ask foundational questions about the nature of ethics, one of the first questions asked is usually, “What is the goal or purpose of ethics?”

When you think about it, this makes perfect sense. If ethics is an arrow, how will we know where to aim it if we don’t first identify the target?

The Good
The goal or purpose of ethics is generally referred to as “the Good.” The Good is the highest value – the ultimate goal of life – and ethics is the means to reach it.

Another tool ethicists use to describe this purpose or goal is the concept of “the good life.” By this they mean a life that is well-lived or morally sound – a model life, if you will. They don’t mean what your friend Janet means, when she says that her brother Stuart is “living the good life,” relaxing in a hammock with a cool drink in his hand on the beach of a Caribbean island. If we can describe “the good life,” then it can become a goal toward which ethics and moral behavior move us.

It’s important to understand that different moral theories arise from different concepts of “the Good.” That’s why establishing the nature of the Good should be done before one moves on to determining what actions are morally acceptable.

For example, a hedonist would argue that the highest value is pleasure. The Good (or the goal and purpose of ethics) is simply to maximize pleasure. So, for the hedonist, an action is only morally good if it produces more total pleasure than other possible actions. Utilitarianism is an example of an ethical theory that’s based on hedonism.

For a Christian, on the other hand, The Good is God Himself. It’s not just that God’s commands are good, or even that He is good, but that He is The Good. For example, Acts 17:28 in the New Testament says, “in Him we live, and move, and have our being.” God is understood as the Source of all being or existence, thus all of Christian ethics is concerned with living a life that reflects the character of God, especially in the way we relate to other people. This has some similarities to Virtue Ethics, which is discussed later in the course.

Values
In order to identify the Good, it’s common to begin by identifying the things that we value in life. This list might include things like: joy, love, health, kindness, freedom, justice, faith, beauty, and knowledge, among many others.

As we consider a list like this, we can categorize each item according to whether it has intrinsic value, instrumental value, or both.
If we say that something has **intrinsic value**, we’re saying that it’s valuable in its own right, apart from anything it can give us. For example, some might say that *joy* has intrinsic value, because just having joy, in and of itself, is a good thing.

On the other hand, something has **instrumental value**, if it’s a tool that is useful in acquiring something else, usually something with intrinsic value.

For example, “money” might be on your value list. Money is generally seen as having *instrumental* value, because of what it can be used to buy. However, most people don’t see money as having *intrinsic* value. For instance, if no one accepted money as payment for goods or services, then would it still have value to you? Probably not.

Some things can have both intrinsic and instrumental value. Kindness, for example, could be seen as having instrumental value, insofar as being kind to others helps one have positive relationships, which can lead to other things of value, such as love and joy. However, kindness may also have intrinsic value. Even if being kind gained you nothing, would being kind be better than being unkind? If so, then kindness has intrinsic value.

**Values and the Good**

It’s by examining these values, and, in particular, determining which ones have *intrinsic* value, that ethicists often seek to make their way along the path toward discovering the Good.

Returning to the example of hedonism from earlier, the hedonist would argue that all of the items on anyone’s list of values are ultimately only of *instrumental* value, because they help one achieve the only thing with *intrinsic* value, namely *pleasure*.

One thought experiment that helps determine whether you agree with hedonism is the “Happiness Machine.” Imagine that you could be attached to a machine that would create a virtual reality in which you could live a long life in a constant state of pleasure. Once attached to the machine, the virtual reality would all seem completely real to you. You would only experience pleasure, and would never want to disconnect from the machine of your own choice. Your body would stay in one place, never moving or interacting with the real world. Would you choose to be attached to the Happiness Machine?

If you answered “yes,” then you probably agree with hedonism – believing that pleasure is the ultimate goal of life – the Good.

However, most students answer, “no” to this question. They feel that such a life would be missing key, essential elements of *intrinsic* value, such as freedom, meaningful action, and interaction with others. They often say that it’s how we respond to the *difficulties*, as well as the pleasures, of life that forms our character, shaping us into the people we are, and that they wouldn’t want to give that up.

**Values and the Good: Objective or Subjective?**

The debate regarding moral objectivism and ethical relativism (or subjectivism), as discussed earlier, finds expression in the discussion concerning value and the nature of the Good, as well.
Moral objectivists believe that there are intrinsic values that are universal. They apply to everyone, regardless of whether a particular individual recognizes them. So, for example, an objectivist might say that it is better for a person to love, even if that person disagrees and prefers to hate. Love has value in and of itself, independent of the one who values it.

A subjectivist, on the other hand, believes that all values are relative to individuals. In other words, an object receives its value only from the individual who values it. If a person does not value love, for example, then love has no value. For the subjectivist, love (or any “good” for that matter) has no value in itself. All values, and ultimately the Good itself (whatever that may be for an individual) only receives its meaning and value from the person who values it.

Your Task
Before moving forward in the course, it’s very important that you take the time to wrestle with this question of your values and identifying “the Good.” You should be able to describe your intrinsic values, as well as the Good (the ultimate intrinsic value) which you see as the goal or purpose of your life. This is the Good – the target toward which you are aiming – the goal which your ethics (or behaviors and actions) should help you achieve. This is the foundation upon which you will build your ethics and by which you will determine how each ethical theory and issue we discuss in the course relates to your own personal moral philosophy.