

What is the “Highest Good”
in Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic thinking?

For Plato, the Highest Good is the knowledge of the Form of the Good. When this is known, an individual will know good from bad, right from wrong. The Forms are known through the Divine *Nous* and they alone are real, eternal and immutable. They are archetypes in the realm of the gods, hence, every person has the potential to access them although, according to Plato, it is rare for humans to reach this transcendent epistemological consciousness. This transcendent consciousness of the gods is where “souls are rich in nature” (Edel, Flower & O’Connor, 1989). Since the divine consciousness level transcends the lower soul level of the appetites, only these people are fit to rule the masses. In Platonic thought, only these philosopher kings, who know and love wisdom, who know the Form of the Good which alone is real, should govern. According to Plato, as voiced through Socrates, “to know the Good is to do the Good”, thus, only those who know the Forms will be compelled to be moral and ethical for the individual, society and the body politic. In Plato’s *Symposium* (Plato, 1990), the Highest Good that the soul desires is to Love the Good forever. To love the Good is ontological transcendence, thus, Platonic theory is, essentially, a treatise of the transcendent Psyche where epistemology implies ontological transcendence.

The Highest Good, according to Plato in *The Republic* (Rouse, 1984), can only exist for the individual, the society and the state if each exhibits the highest virtue: justice. The three levels of consciousness or three levels of the Soul are: 1. lower appetites which seek happiness through bodily pleasure, 2. the political which seeks happiness through

power and, 3. intellectual which seeks happiness through the love and practice of wisdom. Since only the intellect can attain the knowledge of the Forms, only this level of consciousness is real. Thus, Platonic thought conveys that “the masses are pursuing unreality” (Edel, et al., 1989, p. 35).

In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates argues that things have virtue by their function and that the function of the soul is to govern and advise a person through life. He states that justice is a virtue of the soul and injustice is its vice. If the soul is deprived of its proper function, it cannot perform well. This results in the evil soul which governs badly versus the good soul which is governed by justice and governs well. Virtue is the health of the soul whereas vice is the disease of the soul.

Aristotelian philosophy is less ethereal and metaphysical than is Platonic philosophy. For Aristotle, the Highest Good is to live the good life. Only this can bring happiness which is the end of all pursuits. This involves a life where contemplation is the ideal and virtuous activity brings about the Highest Good. Aristotle believed that only a few people ever attain the life of contemplation of the gods, thus, he developed a systematic theory which was far more practical for the majority of people.

To achieve a virtuous character, according to Aristotle, requires intellectual and moral virtues. Intellectual virtue is taught through experience and time; moral virtue is formed by habit (Edel, et al., 1989). Moral virtue means practicing the middle of extremes, what Aristotle referred to in his Doctrine of the Mean in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1998). Virtues are understood to be the harmonic balance, or mean, between vices which are extremes. Practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, is the apogee of intellectual virtue; however, it can only be attained through experience in life.

Morality is not a script of rules to follow or academic learning (Edel, et al., 1989), rather is a process of moral development through lessons in life.

For Aristotle, like Plato, justice is the quintessential moral virtue and is the natural outcome of the virtuous person who desires to live the good life. Justice is the end and means of happiness. In writing of the virtuous man, Aristotle talks of the proper function of man which is someone whose soul operates through intellect or reason. Since the activity of God is reason which is the highest activity (Wardman & Creed, 1963) in Aristotelian thought, the most virtuous person makes moral decisions through intellect and reason. Since happiness is an outcome of a soul that is virtuous, only the man who functions through the rational element of his soul can lead a virtuous life. For a man who functions through the irrational part of his soul, his life will be unhappy because he has no courage or self-control over his bodily appetites (Edel, et al., 1989).

For both Plato and Aristotle, the Highest Good through the actions of the soul has a reciprocal effect throughout the community and the state. The health and happiness from the soul which is focused on justice versus the unhappiness and ill health of the soul whose focus is injustice will be reflected directly into the social and political arenas.

For the Stoics, the goal of life was to live in a state of internal serenity. Only through the use of reason, which all persons had as a capacity, could people live a moral, virtuous life immune to life's vicissitudes. Morality was seen as a natural law that existed and in which every person needed to follow, thus, Stoics believed in the universality of moral law rejecting relativism. Led by its founder, Zeno, Stoics believed that our inner nature is virtuous and we are to live according to this. Virtue will lead to happiness if it directs the individual to have a harmonious soul. Things are as they are

and by accepting this and internalizing it, one could maintain a serene inner life. In the pursuit of virtue and inner wisdom, a person could defend against the vicissitudes of life, no matter the external circumstances. Stoics, believing that all people have the equal capacity to use reason, advocated for equality of all people.

Arguments of Support and Opposition

Platonic epistemology is based on the premise of eternal, immutable universals called the Forms of which the greatest is the Form of the Good. If it can be assumed that Socrates was virtuous and the wisest man who lived during his time, then in that sense, Plato's metaethics is ideal. However, by his own and Aristotle's admission, there are very few who will ever attain this transcendent knowledge, therefore, one can argue Platonic morality is impractical since it is unintelligible to the masses. That which is unintelligible cannot be put into practice or, at best, its application is inconsistent. It is in this sense that Aristotelian ethics is most useful since it is accessible to more people and is practical.

Additionally, Plato's societal structure of slavery as a necessity is inconsistent with the ideal of justice since a social, legal and political system cannot be just if it is founded on the injustice of slavery. While Plato's ideal of equality for women is commendable and is consistent with social justice, his theory of the necessity of a society built on slavery is not. When understood from a Maslowian hierarchy, when masses of people operate at the lower two levels of consciousness (vying for food, shelter and safety), morality is relative based upon the biological instincts of survival not on the ideal of "do no harm" or the Golden Rule. Thus, when being virtuous means being just, in Plato's and Aristotle's world, justice is simply unachievable to any large degree except

within the Sophist Thrasymachus' worldview, where those who are stronger (meaning those who are in power) have a narcissistic meaning of justice. As Aristotle would later say, since there really are only the few rich and the poor masses, then this translates into the dominant group defining what is just relative to their own narcissistic needs.

One last point to make about Platonic ethics is the idea of the immortality of the soul. If a person believes in reincarnation of the soul, then would not some argue that there is no incentive to be moral and ethical in this current life because there are infinite opportunities to return and be so?

Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean is practical and compelling although his hermeneutics of the choice between courage and cowardice as being a choice between that which is excessive and deficient may be perceived by another as a choice between right and wrong depending upon the social context and how a person defines courage. To some within a certain social context, for example, when a leader advocates war under pretext, courage might best be exemplified by being passive and not following the deceitful instructions of authority. To Aristotle's credit, morality cannot be simply a list of rules to follow like a medicine script or by attending an academic class and learning it intellectually. To some, morality is learned by the hard knocks of life, a kind of karmic lesson whereby one's experiences present opportunities to learn practical wisdom of life. However, Aristotelian and Kantian teleological ethics cannot account for: 1. those people who are in the two lower Maslowian hierarchical levels struggling for food, shelter and safety, nor 2. varying social, cultural and religious contexts. As the Sophists, Hobbesians and Machiavellians argue, some people are motivated narcissistically and not toward the common good. If these people are in power, to what extent are those in subjugation

supposed to allow themselves to be wronged by those in power? Also, there are times when performing an immoral act is actually a precursor to attaining a higher good in the example of killing a murderer so as to prevent them from killing someone else.

Teleological ethics ignores complex and changing social contexts, is indifferent to cultural and religious values and is silent on the evolution of human consciousness, thus, it cannot be the whole of an ethical or moral theory.

Stoicism has a noble ideal of simply accepting what fate brings our way. Implicit in this is a definition of moral virtue which entails simply accepting injustices perpetrated on us. Certainly there are times when psychological reframing is a tool to cope and to guide our actions; however, under this ethical philosophy, people do not hold unjust people accountable. Rather injustice is merely tolerated and permitted. Their ethic, along with Platonic and Aristotelian, assumes that the use of reason, or intellect, is a guarantee of right actions and that if only we were to utilize this humankind would choose good and avoid evil. However, we have seen heinous acts of genocide in the Holocaust and now in Darfur carried out under an ethic of intellectual idealism totally devoid of any compassion or kindness, so surely this is not a complete ethical theory either. Stoics opposed the Aristotelian idea that there is a mean virtue between two extremes insisting in a kind of either/or ethic; there were only goods which are virtuous and their opposite which are vices. This seems simple enough in theory, but too simple for the multitude of “grey” that exists in life.

To what degree is there “moral knowledge” of “the right” and “the good”?

Twentieth century ethics and moral philosophy was a century of further division, difference and digression away from ontological concerns into epistemological morality. In other words, moral philosophers continued to distance themselves from a debate of what it means to “be” moral, to be “good” and “right” and “virtuous,” and into the domain of contentious ethical epistemological debate of how one “knows” what is “good”, “right,” and “virtuous.”

Moore began the 20th century ethical debate in his *Principia Ethica* (1903) by arguing that the proper sphere of moral philosophy is metaethics, not normative ethics. He stated that good cannot be known empirically, rather only through immediate intuition when the person relates good to the object of thought (Edel, Flower & O’Connor, 1989). Moore did say good was self-evident, but that did not equate to being empirically proved. Positing that good is “a simple, indefinable, unanalysable object of thought” (Edel, et al, 1989), Moore tells us that good cannot be empirically validated because it is a simple quality that is what it is, similar to the word “yellow.” Who can say what yellow is? We cannot, rather it is only possible to discuss its characteristics or derivatives. Moore (Edel, et al., 1989) states:

If I am asked, ‘What is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and this is all I have to say about it (p. 495).

Moore said that good can only be discussed in terms of whether an object is good, to what degree it is good or what causes something to be good. To him, it was the consciousness of beholding the good, not just the good itself, that had primary value stating that “by far, the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain

states of consciousness” which he believed to be “the pleasure of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects” (MacIntyre, 1996, p. 258). As Keynes states in his *Two Memoirs*, the good states of mind “consisted in communion with the objects of love, beauty and truth” and this was a “matter of direct inspection, of direct unanalysable intuition” (Edel, et al., p. 502). Taking a different approach, Moore did agree that descriptive ethics, the actual moral behavior of people, could be empirically validated.

Logical positivists, rejecting metaphysical and epistemological arguments, held that only scientific knowledge through empirical validation, not personal experience, is meaningful (Edel, et al., 1989). Only by examining the methods of validating truth or falsity could any statement be made and only the method of observation and experiment were valid. Philosophical and religious theories were meaningless if they could not be tested and empirically validated. Metaphysics was considered meaningless because of its lack of scientific validity and insoluble questions. Only the mathematical abstract truths were logical and real, thus, only these had philosophical significance. Logical positivists distinguished a difference between analytic statements which are self-evident versus synthetic statements which must be verified through observation.

Emotive theory begun by Ayers in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) and more fully developed by Stevenson in *Ethics and Language* (1944), posits that moral judgments can be divided into three classes: logical, factual, and emotive (MacIntyre, 1996). According to the emotivists, we cannot know what is good or right through logic analysis such as how we know mathematical truths, nor can we know them as being empirically factual. Instead, we only attribute moral knowledge to the emotional opinions of whether an action is good or bad which is based upon needs, desires and

interests of the holder. There can be no one universal understanding of good or right, no universal, absolute truth. Both philosophers believed that metaethics is the domain of moral philosophy (Edel, et al., 1989).

Ordinary language analysis rejected the emotivist approach and focused instead on the actual moral discourse itself, that is, the language, terms and verbal expressions used in discussing morality and ethics. Further, they stated that linguistic hermeneutics of moral knowledge was historically and culturally based. Moral knowledge of what is good or right was further diluted into a linguistic analysis of moral and ethical terms on which this theoretical model turned. Austin in *A Plea for Excuses* (1956-57) argued against the use of formal logic and advocated an analysis of ordinary language. Thus, critics argue that this is distorting and perverting the original aim of moral philosophy and not moral philosophy in the strictest sense. In the study of moral linguistics, there was an agreement that morality was individual, contextual and relative based on the social and cultural context.

The pragmatists such as William James and Oliver Wendell Holmes focused on the human experience and the resolution of moral dilemmas in a world of change. Rejecting dogma, doctrine and absolutes, this theory holds that only in the experiential world, in action, can one know what is good as it will either be validated or invalidated. Stated simply, pragmatists argue that moral and ethical truths are what is most effective and has the most utility within the changing world. Only through the observed consequences of a moral choice can one empirically validate a moral or ethical choice.

The phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger focused on immediate experience, the consciousness of the here and now, as being what is factually true. By

virtue of the fact that we have an inner world of experience, it is self-evident truth. Opposing the reductive and relativistic ethics of the positivists and empiricists, the phenomenologists describe the subjective world of the human as far richer than those who attempt to base moral truths on facts and values. Heidegger was the primary postmodern philosopher to attempt to turn philosophy back to its ontological origins. The existentialists such as Sartre took the analysis of those structures of existence, i.e., pain, loneliness, anxiety, etc., as the starting points in evaluating how we know good and bad, right and wrong. It is the human predicament, the human dilemma of being thrust in a world full of risks and uncertainties, that awakens in humankind the need to determine good and bad, right and wrong. Deeply religious, Kierkegaard spoke of the inner, subjective world of truth in relation to God's will that provides humankind with the will to choose the good that guides our moral choices. Sartre, the atheist existentialist, argued against any divine compass or divine knowledge. There is no absolute or universal good. He speaks of how man is "condemned to be free" (Edel, et al., 1989) and makes of himself as he wills it, since there is no original good. Man can only know what is good or bad as he discovers his forlorn existence. It is up to man to choose ethically for both himself and all men. To realize man's utter and absolute freedom is to, paradoxically, make him responsible for the difficult moral choices that arise as part of that freedom.

Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty are four prominent postmodern moral philosophers who sought to deconstruct modern philosophical views of metaphysics, absolutism and universalism. They rejected normative perspectives of moral knowledge and attacked the modern premise that there is a detectable historical continuity underlying how we come to know what is good and right. For a postmodernist, difference, dissent

and discontinuity is at the heart of all moral knowledge; there is no transcendent knowledge or intuitional access to absolute truths of good. Everything is contextual, socially and culturally derived. Pluralistic morality is all that humankind can count on, all that can be known. There are no epistemological unities as it relates to morality. In the view of Habermas, the postmodernists, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty, have developed a theory that fails to present a coherent model of morality. They certainly have done well at deconstructing, but what have they constructed in its place? If the theory posits that there is no unity, then what possibility for collaboration and interdependence could exist for humankind other than one of complete and immutable differences? Is the evolution of human consciousness doomed to end in complete disagreement and acrimony over what is good and right? Is it not possible that this is not an “either/or” question, rather a “both/and” one? Is it possible that there are certain underlying, embedded universal notions which unify humankind such as the Golden Rule, yet are also ever evolving situational interpretations based on cultural and social realities which make for nuanced changes in ethical decision making?

When considering the actual consciousness of postmodernists, it is a moment in time in which we can actually see the Collective Psyche of humankind, caught up as it is in a vitriolic war between metaphysical and universal truths on the one hand and a pluralistic, individualistic mixed bag of needs, desires and interests in how we behave as a race. Since virtually all Western moral philosophers for five millennia have been male (it appears that 99% of them have been), it seems logical to assume that their positions and models are derived from a masculine bias of morality. To what extent is the bifurcation of moral knowledge mostly attributable to a bifurcated Western masculine

Collective Psyche? Worded differently, were 99% of all Western moral philosophers female for the past 5,000 years, to what extent would females find a common answer to the question: To what degree is moral knowledge of the good and right? Only Eastern ethics and Platonic moral philosophy speak explicitly of feminine concepts of “love” and “wisdom” when it attempts to find answers to moral dilemmas. Conversely, Western male philosophers emphasize intellectual aspects of morality instead of what we intuitively understand to be aspects of the heart such as love, care and compassion for one another. Since a theoretical model is as much a testament to the *consciousness* of the theorist, what does this say about Western moral philosophy for 5,000 years and, hence, about the Western male psyche?

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