

The Goodness Ethic

Copyright © 2010 William Meacham, Ph. D. Permission to reproduce is granted provided the work is reproduced in its entirety, including this notice. Contact the author at <http://www.bmeacham.com>.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Goodness Ethic.....	1
Method.....	3
The Nature of the Good	4
Goodness as Virtue and Intention.....	6
Revision History	7

Introduction

One of the points of this whole exercise is to provide an intellectually rigorous answer to the question, *How should a moderately rational person behave in order to maximize his or her satisfaction and well-being?* In the chapter on [The Good and the Right](#) I describe the difference between an ethical approach that focuses on goodness and one that focuses on rightness and give reasons for preferring the former. In this chapter I describe a particular ethical approach within the goodness paradigm, an approach I call the Goodness Ethic.

The Goodness Ethic

In order to know what is good for something or somebody, we need to know some facts about that thing or person. One of the basic facts about all things and persons is that everything is related to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. A change in an organism affects its surroundings, or environment, and a change in the environment affects the organism. This is easy to see in the case of living beings. It is also true of non-living things, but the timescale is longer.

Given that everything is related to everything else, it makes sense to try to maximize the good in all situations, that is to maximize what is good for all concerned. Another way of saying this is that it is good to be of service, to help everybody, as best one can. This is so because as one maximizes the good of everybody and everything in the environment, one thereby promotes one's own health as well. This is enlightened self-interest, as opposed to unenlightened self-interest, which seeks to maximize one's own welfare without regard to the effects on one's actions on others. Commonly called "selfishness," such an unenlightened approach is actually self-defeating.

This view is different from the classical Utilitarian argument that one should act to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. For one thing, it is not clear that pleasure is always good and pain is always bad. For another, classical Utilitarianism, even though expressed in terms of consequences, is actually a form of rules-based ethics. For the

Utilitarian, the moral rightness of action is a function of the amount of pleasure or pain that it produces. One is supposed to calculate the net long-term outcomes of all of the available options (the "hedonic calculus"), and then choose the option that will yield the greatest pleasure. This, of course, is often not practical; at what point does "long-term" end?

The goal of the Goodness Ethic is to maximize the good for all so far as one can determine at the time, without excessive conscious calculation.

The Goodness Ethic may be stated in a number of ways. The simplest is this:

- **Work for the good in all things.**

Other ways of saying this are these:

- Live with an intention to maximize what is good for all concerned.
- Align yourself with what is good all around, for everyone.
- Act for the benefit of yourself and your environment.
- Do the best you can to maximize goodness for all.
- Act for the benefit of the whole.
- We are all in it together, so let's make it good for everybody.

This is not altruism, if by that term we mean acting for the benefit of others without regard to one's own benefit. Nor is this selfishness, acting for one's own good alone. It is a false dichotomy to think of self-interest being opposed to the interest of a larger whole. For example, one is happy when one's spouse is happy. It is a win-win situation. The motivation is both for one's own happiness and one's spouse's happiness. Another example: one profits when one's company benefits all the stakeholders, customers, owners and neighbors. Again, a win-win. The motivation is both for one's own profit and for the other stakeholders' benefits.

The goal is for *both* oneself and one's environment to survive and thrive. If you focus on your own benefit alone (selfishness), you will not thrive as much because you will likely neglect to feed things that give you nourishment. If you focus on your environment alone (altruism), you not thrive as much because you will likely become stressed and exhausted.

If you adopt these principles then you find yourself in an environment in which things work out well for everyone. If they work well for the benefit of all elements of the environment, and you are one of those elements, then they work out well for you. And you get to be thankful to have had a good effect.

Method

The method for putting the Goodness Ethic into practice is this:

1. Pay attention.
2. Intend to benefit.
3. Think about it. Figure out how to benefit what is around you and yourself, as best you can determine at the time.
4. Act. Do what you think will benefit you and your surroundings.
5. Do this cycle repeatedly.

Pay attention. This is the fundamental precursor to any form of effective action in the world. One has to have accurate knowledge about what one is acting on, and in order to have it, one must pay attention to what is going on,

Intend to benefit. This step is unique to the goodness approach to ethics. One could act effectively while intending to harm, and some people whom we call evil do just that. Many act effectively while intending to be morally obedient to the rules of right and wrong. The goodness ethic asks us to intend to benefit all elements of whatever situation or predicament we find ourselves in.

Think about it. One of the things human beings do well is to plan, to envision states of affairs not currently present and think about how to bring them about. Exercising this function is essential to achieving our goals, including the goal of benefiting all concerned. The goodness ethic asks us to think about will benefit us and our surroundings, as best we can determine at the time.

Act. In order to be effective it is not enough merely to have an intention. One must act as well. Only by acting will you achieve any effect, and only by acting will you find out what works and what does not.

Repeat the cycle. Having acted, pay attention to the results, compare them to what you intended to accomplish, adjust your tactics if needed, and act again. This cycle is essential to any form of process improvement, including the process of being of benefit to yourself and your world.

The Nature of the Good

The idea of maximizing the good for all is close to the utilitarian notion of the greatest good for the greatest number, but the difference is that (a) it is not justified as being a moral duty to maximize the good, but is justified only because on average we (each one of us) will be better off if we try for it; and (b) it does not matter that it is impossible to calculate all possible effects in all possible futures. One just needs to do one's best in any given situation to make a decision on this basis and then move on. And one needs to pay attention to the results of one's decisions and become more skillful over time in maximizing goodness.

But what is this goodness? The Good, as I define it here and in the chapter on The Good and The Right, is not an abstract entity, universally applicable. I am not saying that there is an ultimate purpose to nature as a whole. (Although a mystical approach to life might assert that there is, for the purposes of this discussion it is not a necessary premise.) I am saying that in any situation there are aspects that are good, or beneficial, for the people and other beings involved, and there are aspects that are less good, or even harmful. It is rare to find unmitigated goodness. What's good for the owl is not so good for the mouse. My point, working within the Goodness paradigm, is that it makes sense to try to maximize the amount of goodness while recognizing that (a) we might not entirely succeed, but we will do better than if we don't try; and (b) we will never produce all goodness and no badness.

Goodness is not binary, black or white, on or off, present or absent. It is analog, present in different degrees and to greater or lesser extents. A diet of corn crisps, soda and ice cream, for instance, would be good enough to keep a person alive, but not good enough for maximum health. I am not saying that if something is good in a particular time and place it is therefore universally or absolutely good in all times and places. I am not saying that if something has good consequences it therefore has no bad consequences. I am only saying that there are always consequences and that we can observe and evaluate them and choose good ones.

The good is certainly knowable. One of the benefits of the goodness approach to ethics is that we can find out by observation what benefits a person or organism and what does not. It is not hard to tell if someone is happy and at ease or anxious, angry or in some other way not at ease, just as it is not hard to tell whether a landscape or garden is flourishing and producing abundance or not. In either case, of course, with training one becomes better able to discern nuances and details, but the evidence is not hidden. In order to determine whether something is beneficial or promotes health or sound functioning, one needs only to observe its effects. The effects may be entirely personal and subjective, observable only by oneself, or public, observable by others.

Here is a small example. One day while hiking in the park I straightened a bent frond of a saw palmetto near the creek. The frond snapped into place and I felt a sense of satisfaction. The view was more harmonious and the plant looked more whole; but more to the point, the frond could now catch more sunlight than it could before. I submit that this is an unambiguous increase of goodness in the world, both for the plant and for myself. I say this because of three things that are quite observable:

- The view was more harmonious. This is largely subjective. It looked more harmonious to me, but another person might not see it that way. Nevertheless, it was an observed fact (observed by me) that there was more harmony in my experience.
- The plant looked more whole. This also is largely subjective, but could more easily be verified by somebody else. The frond used to droop and now it stood upright. Anybody could see that.
- The frond could now catch more sunlight than it could before. This is a publicly-observable fact. I could get any number of people to agree that in fact the straightened frond exposes more surface to the sun. Getting more sunlight is beneficial to the plant, enabling it to increase its photosynthesis and get more nourishment, and thereby be more able to survive and thrive.

Again, I am not saying what I did was absolutely good, only that it had a better outcome than if I had not done it. Perhaps I stepped on an insect and harmed it while adjusting the frond. Nonetheless, on balance I increased the amount of goodness – I provided benefits that were not there before – in the world.

Goodness as Virtue and Intention

Instead of asking what one should do in particular circumstances or types of circumstances, one can ask what kind of person one should become, what character traits one should cultivate. This is the domain of Virtue Ethics, and the Goodness Ethic plays an important role here as well.

Virtues are character traits – what we might call habits of character – that elicit the approval of others, and vices are those that elicit disapproval. We need the approval of others, particularly those closest to us or with whom we interact frequently, because we are social beings and cannot function well in isolation.

Here the goodness approach to ethics intersects the rightness approach. Human beings need other human beings; we all need to live in groups. Being a member of a group provides benefits but also imposes duties, with rewards for doing one's duty and penalties for disobedience. The fundamental duty is to act for the welfare of the group. From this point of view, living according to the Goodness Ethic is a virtue, and dedicating one's life to the Good is a noble, excellent and praiseworthy thing to do. (Of course there is the very real possibility that the group may be shortsighted, just as individuals are, and that what it takes to be its good is actually detrimental to the whole. In practice there are knotty, but not insoluble, problems with hierarchies of goods.)

A virtue (or a vice) is not just a habit, however, because it includes motivation and intention. Strictly speaking, behavior is publicly observable but motivations are not. Nevertheless human beings have a finely-tuned ability to intuit the motivations and intentions of others based on hundreds of thousands of years of evolution in small groups. Motivations and intentions are important because they form the basis of trust.

When other people judge a person, they look at that person's behavior, that person's actions, but also at what they believe are the moral properties of that person's character, his or her motivation. People want to know that one's intention is to benefit the community or society by obeying its rules or living up to its ideals. That gives more assurance that one will be a good member of the community than mere habit would and certainly more than calculated self-interest would. A good member of the community abides by its customs and conventions, the moral rules that constitute its sense of right and wrong. If one does so from calculated self-interest – as a certain reading of the Goodness Ethic might suggest – then there is always the possibility that one's calculations might cause one to defect, to act selfishly or cheat rather than obey the moral rules. If one abides by community morality habitually, then others can have more confidence that one will do so in the future. If one does so because of a motivation or intention to honor and benefit the community that is integral to one's character, then others have the highest degree of confidence that one can be trusted to continue to do so.

This being the case, it is of great benefit to cultivate one's character, to mold oneself to become the kind of person that others will admire and trust because one can be counted on to contribute to the community.

One might question whether the moral quality of an act depends on its effects or on the intention of the actor. This is not a useful dichotomy, because one's intentions have effects, in particular on one's character. I was once driving in heavy traffic on a four-lane divided road and saw a car coming up from behind me on my right. (This was in a nation in which one drives on the right side of the road; slower vehicles are supposed to keep to the right.) I sped up to prevent the car from overtaking and cutting in front of me. As it turned out, the car exited to the right, so my speeding up had no effect on it. But my intention to compete and get ahead rather than relax and be generous had an effect on me. My inner state was contracted and agitated. If one acts on such an ungenerous intention often enough, one's character will become contracted and agitated, less pleasant and happy and contented than it could be.

Just as one observes the effects of one's actions and chooses actions to produce desired effects, one can observe the effects of one's intentions and choose to nurture the intentions that produce the effects one wants.

In the realm of character, motivation and intention, no less than in individual predicaments, it makes sense to work for the good in all things.

###

Revision History

Version	Date	Author	Change
1.0	15 April 2010	Bill Meacham	First publication
1.1	25 June 2010	Bill Meacham	Minor edit
1.2	20 May 2011	Bill Meacham	Fix minor typo