

**STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY
PREPARED IN COMMEMORATION
OF THE SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY OF
GEORGE HOLMES HOWISON**

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Studies in Philosophy Prepared in Commemoration of the Seventieth Birthday of George
Holmes Howison by Various

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I

THE SUMMUM BONUM

EVANDER BRADLEY MCGILVARY

Before discussing the question of the nature of the highest good we must first ascertain what is meant by 'good' in the positive degree. But unfortunately there are very few conceptions the definition of which has been more disputed than that of 'the good.' It has even been maintained that the conception is unanalyzable, and hence that no definition can be given of it. It is my purpose in the first part of this paper to clear up the difficulties in connection with the definition of this conception, and to that end I wish to call attention to the fact that 'good' is an ambiguous term. It is this ambiguity that has led to so much discussion, and the recognition of this ambiguity is essential to any clarifying treatment of the problem. It is useless to insist upon some one definition or upon the undefinableness of 'good,' when as a matter of fact the term is used in many senses. One might as well say that 'horse' always means some one thing, and therefore rule out such things as clothes-horse and saw-horse, as lay down categorically some one meaning of 'good,' and say that what is not this kind of 'good' is really not 'good' at all. It is of course proper for anyone to choose which meaning he will adopt, but to insist that when everyone else uses the word he always uses it in this sense—or at least ought so to use it—is to endeavor to make one's own preferences override the facts of actual current speech. Let us now examine the several meanings of 'good.'

The first of these that must be noticed is that which identifies it with 'pleasant.' It is idle to ignore the fact and propriety of this usage. Often the word actually does mean just 'pleasant,' and to deny the fact is as futile as to deny the propriety of

any current acceptation of any term. A pertinent question, however, in this connection is whether the pleasant as such is good, or whether it is good because it is *desired*. There seems to be no way of answering this question dogmatically. If one insists that for him the pleasant is good, just because it is pleasant, that puts a stop to all discussion. It is well therefore to recognise the ultimateness of this definition of the 'good' as the pleasant, and the justifiability of this usage.

The second meaning of 'good' is 'desired.' Whatever we wish for, is in so far 'good' in this signification of the term, which is likewise very common and should no more be criticised than the actually current signification of any other term in general use. It may also be pointed out that it is quite possible to reconcile the definition of 'good' as 'pleasant' and that of 'good' as 'desired,' by referring to the psychological fact that what is pleasant is generally also desired. Now whether we say that a thing is 'good' just because it is pleasant, or whether we say that the pleasant thing is 'good' because as pleasant it is desired, is, as we have already indicated, to be decided only by an arbitrary choice in favor of one or other of the two possible definitions. Personally I must confess that I prefer to merge the first meaning of 'good' as 'pleasant' into the second meaning of it as 'desired,' for the reason that the second can easily be made to include the first by reference to the psychological fact just stated. Thus our list of the various meanings of the term is shortened, and we get a more comprehensive conception, including both the 'pleasant,' because what is pleasant is desired, and also things not pleasant which may likewise be desired.

If, however, it be said that nothing is desired unless the idea of it is pleasing, it may be answered that into the psychological question thus brought up it is not necessary to enter here. It is a much mooted question, and there are many who cannot accept the statement that pleasantness and unpleasantness are the only incentives to desire. When psychologists of the standing of James deny the universal prevalence of the law that motives of action are pleasant or unpleasant, it were well to be cautious in committing ourselves to the acceptance of the law as

universal. "So widespread and searching is this influence of pleasures and pains upon our movements," writes this psychologist, "that a premature philosophy has decided that these are our only spurs to action, and that wherever they seem to be absent, it is only because they are so far on among the 'remoter' images that prompt the action that they are overlooked. This is a great mistake, however. Important as is the influence of pleasures and pains upon our movements, they are far from being our only stimuli. With the manifestations of instinct and emotional expression, for example, they have absolutely nothing to do."¹ Again, "I cannot help thinking that it is the *confusion of pursued pleasure with mere pleasure of achievement* which makes the pleasure-theory of action so plausible to the ordinary mind. We feel an impulse, no matter whence derived; we proceed to act; if hindered, we feel displeasure; and if successful, relief. Action *in the line of the present impulse* is always for the time being the pleasant course; and the ordinary hedonist expresses this fact by saying that we act for the *sake* of the pleasantness involved. But who does not see that for this sort of pleasure to be possible, *the impulse must be there already as an independent fact?* The pleasure of successful performance is the *result* of the impulse, not its *cause*. You cannot have your pleasure of achievement unless you have managed to get your impulse under headway beforehand by some previous means."² It is true that here Professor James is speaking of "motives for action," rather than of "motives for desire." And yet, in the same connection, he criticises Bain for maintaining that pleasures and pains are the only "genuine impulses of the *will*."³ At present I cannot lay my finger on any passage in which he maintains that *desires* are also prompted by other motives than pleasantness and unpleasantness. This may be due to the fact that he does not give any detailed discussion of desire. Whatever he may say as to the motives for desire, there are other psychologists who would deny, what Professor James by implication denies, that the only things we desire are relatively pleasant things or things the idea of

¹ *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II, p. 550.

² *Op. cit.*, Vol. II., pp. 556-557. The italics are the author's own.

³ *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 554. Italics here are mine.

which is relatively pleasant. If we may have an instinctive action without the motivation of pleasantness or unpleasantness, why, when we afterwards come to think of the object that such an action attains, may we not desire that object without reference to the pleasantness involved in the obtaining of it? Is not desire simply an impulse *consciously* directed toward an object? The differentia of desire, distinguishing it from a mere impulse, is that in desire we know what we are making for.

Of course such a definition of desire would involve the acceptance of the fact that a man on the edge of a precipice, who has an unpleasant impulse to throw himself over, and knows what the result of that impulse if unchecked would be, desires that result. This seems to be a forced use of the term 'desire.' But is it? Is it too paradoxical to speak of this object as desired in so far as it is known that it would satisfy the impulse, but to speak of it as the object of aversion in so far as there are other impulses that make against it, as for instance the impulse of self-preservation? At any rate it is perfectly natural for a man under these circumstances to say, "I *want* to throw myself over." Would it not sound as natural if he were to say, "I have a *desire* to throw myself over?" The writer has heard just such expressions coming from 'plain men,' showing that at least in the common acceptance of the term 'desire' there is no necessary reference to the pleasantness of the idea of the object desired.

But suppose we accept the definition of desire as an impulse consciously directed toward an object. Would it be in accordance with usage to speak then of every object of desire as 'good?' Most persons would probably say not. Surely, they would claim, it cannot be 'good' for a man to throw himself over a cliff, when he has such an impulsive desire. I am inclined to think that this objection is due to the fact that 'good' is here used in another sense, to be treated later. If there were no other desire in the man, or if it accorded with the general system of his desires to cast himself headlong, then such a plunge would be 'good' for him. We are prone to deny the goodness of it, because we have an eye to the various other desires, generally more strong and more permanent, which would be defeated if this desire were carried out. In so far as