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**EVANDER BRADLEY MCGILVARY**

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MEMORATION OF THE SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY OF  
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CHARLES HENRY RIEBER  
HARRY ALLEN OVERSTREET  
CHARLES MONTAGUE BAKWELL

TO  
GEORGE HOLMES HOWISON  
ON HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY  
THESE PAPERS ARE  
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED  
BY A FEW OF HIS FORMER PUPILS  
IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE DEBT THEY OWE  
TO THE EXAMPLE OF HIS SCHOLARSHIP AND  
THE INSPIRATION OF HIS TEACHING





## 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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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*."<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II, p. 550.

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

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 554. Italics here are mine.