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What is the Highest Good?

Maggie Pfunter
St. John Fisher College

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What is the Highest Good?

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The highest good is something that people have tried to define for a very long time. But the truth is, the definition of the highest good is something that is different for each person, and what the highest good is for an individual person may not be the same as the highest good for its society. In this paper I will further explore what I think the highest good is, what it is for other individuals in societies around me, and finally what scholars have to say on the topic. A. *What is the Highest Good for Me?*"



Maggie Pfuntner

What is the Highest Good?

Introduction

The highest good is something that people have tried to define for a very long time. But the truth is, the definition of the highest good is something that is different for each person, and what the highest good is for an individual person may not be the same as the highest good for its society. In this paper I will further explore what I think the highest good is, what it is for other individuals in societies around me, and finally what scholars have to say on the topic.

A. What is the Highest Good for Me?

In considering what I affirm to be the highest good, I thought about the values in which I most strongly believe. Some of these values are honesty, courtesy, and respect. Of all of the ideas that I considered, the most important value in my life is respect.

I think that I have gathered this belief from several different places. First, my parents raised me to respect others. For as long as I can remember my parents have taught me to respect people around me. This probably started with showing respect through simple actions like saying “please” and “thank you”, but as I grew this expanded into more complex ideas like respecting the views of others, even when I do not agree with their ideas. Next, my faith has taught me the value of respect. Being part of the Christian faith, I was taught the Bible’s Ten Commandments at a young age. It seems to me that many of the commandments relate to, or can be related to, respect. “Not take the LORD’s name in vain” as well as “Remember the Sabbath day” are, in a way, signs of respect to our God. In addition, the commandment which most clearly shows the value of respect is “Honour thy father and thy mother”. Although the wording of this commandment limits respect or honor to one’s parents, I argue that the need for respect does not stop there, and should be shown to all people. Finally, I think that I have been taught the value of respect from those around me. School teachers, family friends, and other community members have taught me to respect others throughout my life.

I think that it is important for individuals to not only establish what they think the highest good is, but also to find ways in which they can ensure that they exhibit this value and to find ways they can pass this value on to others. I think that a way that I exhibit respect is by showing respect to me as well as to the people around me. I show respect to myself by staying true to my own beliefs, by going after my dreams, and by doing things that I am passionate about. I

show respect to others through a variety of ways. Some of these are simple things like letting someone out of the parking lot in front of me, or are on a grander scale like sticking up for a friend in need. Because I am an education major, and plan to teach elementary aged children, I can pass this value on to them. I think that I can do this by making sure that my students learn about respect, how to respect themselves and others, and finally why it is so important to be respectful.

Thinking about what I think the highest good is, leads me to wonder what would happen if people in any society did not value respect. I think that with a lack of respect, any society would fall apart. If there were not respect in a society, who is to say that people would not steal from each other or that society would not fall apart all together? I do not think that it would be possible for any society to function in a just way without respect.

B. What is the Highest Good According to People in Societies around Me?

Now that I have established what I think the highest good is, I feel it is necessary to discuss what the people around me think the highest good is. While every person has different beliefs about what is most important in life, through research and conversation I can find out what many others think is the highest good.

In class recently, we had a discussion about what values people hold most strongly. To begin this conversation, one of our fellow classmates asked us to individually reflect on what core value we feel is most important in our life. In addition, we were asked to decide where this core value came from. I think that this discussion can be related to a discussion about the highest good. The term "core values" can be defined as "the most important thing about you as a person" (Stosny, n. p.). Examples of core values can be honesty, loyalty, love, and compassion. Due to this definition and these examples, I think that what a person sees as her most important core value can be similar to the way in which she see, the highest good. While not everyone in the class shared what core value they feel is most important, the five students who responded listed either honesty or respect as his or her answer. I found it interesting that these students unanimously answered that they learned these values from their parents.

To get another take on what people in our community think that the highest good is, I texted several of my friends, asking for their help. I sent them a message that read "I need your help with my paper for religion class. What do you think the highest good is?" While all of the people I asked needed more clarification about what exactly I meant by "the highest good", they each chose a value that they feel is the most important to them. Several of my friends said that they believe being kind or friendly is most important, one of them stating that "I think that the most important value is being friendly, I think having this value can open your life to endless opportunities". Another friend answered that she thinks honesty is most important, and thinks that she got this value from her family.

To find the perspective of someone of a community outside of ours, I found a blog post written by Greg Garrett. Garrett is a Professor of English at Baylor University, a preacher in the Episcopal Church, and the writer of several books

as well as the faithful citizenship blog on Patheos website, where I found this resource. Garrett writes that “in times past, the highest good for Christians was assumed to be love of and knowledge of God”. At the very end of his post Garrett defines what he thinks the highest good is in his life. He states that in great similarity to Christians of the past that he discussed earlier, he feels the most important value in his life is gaining knowledge of and friendship with God.

Finally, I found a blog post titled “Is Equality the Highest Good?” The article was posted to a blog written by the Benedictine nuns from Holy Trinity Monastery in the U. K. In the article the writer asks her readers “Is equality the highest good?” While the writer never actually answers whether or not she affirms that equality is or is not the highest good, I thought that it raises an interesting question. In considering her query, I can see why she might think that equality is such an important issue that it may be the highest good in the minds of some people. While I do not consider equality to be the most important value in my life, I do feel that it is very important. For example, if we as a society were not working towards more equality, I, as a female, would not be in a position to further my education in college. Just a few generations ago women generally did not go to college, and did not have the same opportunities as I do now.

C. What is the Highest Good According to Scholars?

Questioning of the highest good is in no way a new trend; in fact, scholars have discussed the topic since the time of ancient scholars like Socrates and Plato. Philosophers, ethicists, and theologians have all taken different perspectives and stances on the subject since early in recorded history.

Norbert Weiner wrote an article titled *The Highest Good* that was published by The Journal of Philosophy in 1914. In his article, Weiner discusses what ethicists and philosophers argue the highest good is, or is not. In the very last sentence of his article Weiner writes: “There is no highest good” (Weiner 520). I disagree with Weiner’s final conclusion. In his article he discusses that there cannot be one singular highest good because every person will have his own assessment of what the highest good is. While I think that Weiner is correct with this idea, I do not think that the lack of similarity in the highest good in individuals means that there is no highest good. I think that it is up to each person to determine what she thinks the highest good is, and I do not see an issue with the fact that each person could come to a different conclusion.

In his article *The Platonic Highest Good (II)* published in The Philosophical Review in 1927, Rupert Lodge writes “So far, we have examined the claims of pleasure to be regarded as the highest good. It remains to examine the similar claims of wealth, power, happiness, immortality ...” (Lodge 535). While I do not agree that any of the ideas Lodge mentions is the highest good as I have already discussed that I think the highest good is respect, if I were to choose one of these as the most important, I would choose happiness. The author defines happiness as “dependent upon temperance, courage, justice, and philosophical insight into the true principle of value” (Lodge 538). I agree that these qualities are

very much necessary, and worth striving for. I most strongly disagree with the idea that wealth could be the highest good. I think that having money is not the most important thing that we can achieve in our lives, and I do not think that being wealthy will lead to living a happy life, whereas if a person focuses on living a happy life he or she will not care about the wealth that he or she possesses or lacks.

Another article that explores the idea that happiness is the highest good is the article *The Concept of the Highest Good in Kierkegaard and Kant* written by Roe Fremstedal published by the International Journal of Philosophy and Religion in 2011. In his article the author states: "Getting my will appears to involve that what I want (e.g. water) is brought about or that I bring it about myself. Since what I want can be interpreted as an end, happiness can be taken to consist in reaching my end (e.g. getting water). Happiness in this minimal sense means to succeed in getting my will by reaching my end" (158). I agree with this quote. I think that Fremstedal is correct in saying that in the most minimal sense happiness can be simply getting one's way, but as he hinted to in his writing I think that there is more to complete happiness. I think that a more extensive definition of happiness would have to include not only reaching my ends but also should include being content with my life, enjoying most aspects of my life, and feeling that my life is complete.

In his article, *Kant's Conception of the Highest Good as Imminent and Transcendent*, published in The Philosophical Review in 1959 John Silber discusses Kant's ideas about the highest good. Silber writes: "Even if a virtuous man looks about him, Kant observes, he can never expect to find in nature a uniform agreement—a consistent agreement according to fixed rules, answering to what his maxims are and must be subjectively, with that end [the highest good] which yet he feels himself obliged and urged to realize" (Silber 470). I agree with this statement. I think that the point that Silber is trying to get at is that the highest good is not something that people, even people who are considered to be very moral, are going to agree about.

A final source on the topic is the article *Degrees of Finality and the Highest Good in Aristotle* written by Henry Richardson and published in The Journal of the History of Philosophy in 1992. In his article Richardson discusses Aristotle's beliefs about the highest good and tries to clear up misconceptions about Aristotle's ideas. At the beginning of his article Richardson discusses the highest good and writes:

For some it is to serve as the lodestone by which to orient the regulation of the virtuous soul, for others as the source of value, and for still others as supplying life with meaning or 'point'. Aristotle's conception of the highest good responds to each of these concerns to some extent: the highest good is virtuous activity of the soul, yet it is also the 'principle' or source of goodness in some sense. Further, Aristotle suggests that unless there is a highest good, our pursuits would be 'empty and vain'. (327)

I agree with one part of this quote, but I disagree with another. I think that establishing what one thinks the highest good is can provide a sense of purpose or, as Richardson writes, meaning or point. However, I do not agree with Aristotle's view as discussed by Richardson that without a highest good "pursuits would be 'empty and vain'" (327). I think that any

person can act in ways that are meaningful and not in vain without first establishing what he or she thinks the highest good is. I think that a good example of this is shown through children. Children certainly do not yet have the capacity to think about the highest good, but this does not mean that their actions cannot be meaningful.

Conclusion

It is clear that finding out what the highest good is, is a lengthy process. In this paper I have explained what I affirm the highest good to be, what others around me think about the topic, as well as what scholars have to say. This exploration has shown that there is not now, and there may never be a concrete, universally accepted answer to the question.

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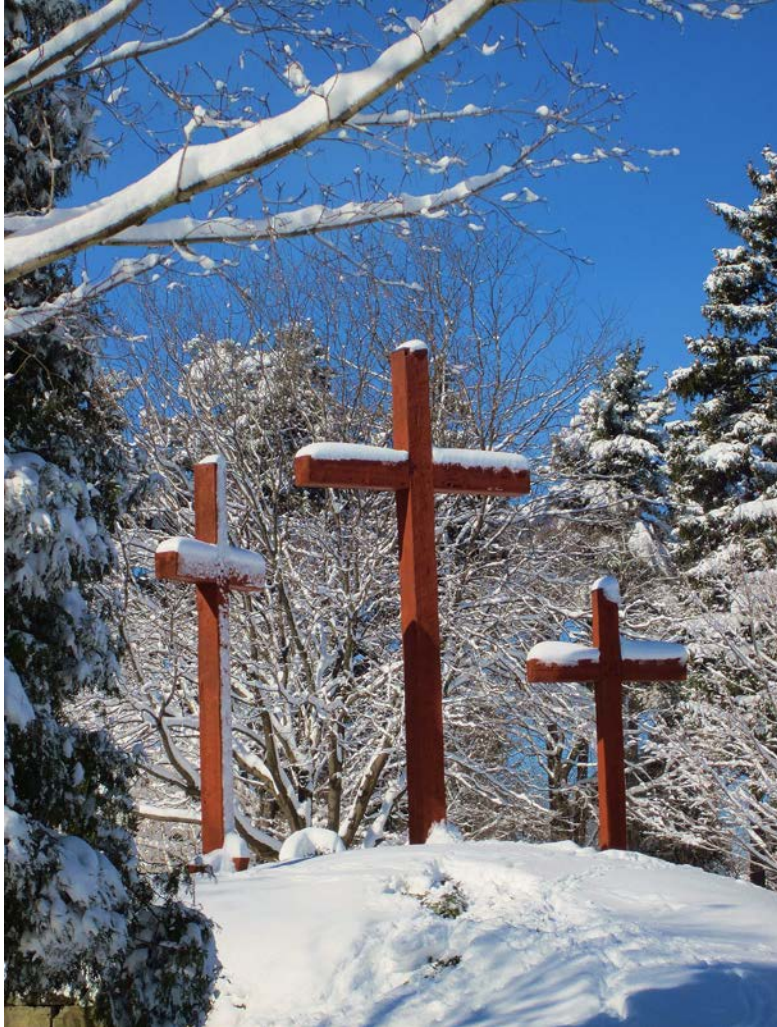
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Aftermath of Nemo
(Photo by Dr. Linda MacCammon)