**Ideas We Judge By: TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY**

**Real and Apparent Goods, The Range and Scale of Goods, and The Ultimate and Common Good,**

**Real and Apparent Goods**

**SKEPTICISM WITH REGARD TO TRUTH reared its head in antiquity. Confronted with it, the ancients came up with its refutation. Not so with regard to goodness.**

**Skepticism about value judgments—about the validity of our attribution of goodness to objects and about the truth of any statement that contains the words “ought” or “ought not”—begins in the modern world. Without having been confronted with that brand of skepticism, the ancients provided us with clues enabling us to separate that aspect of the good that has the objectivity of truth from that aspect that is entirely subjective and relative to the individual.**

**At the dawn of modern thought, Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza advanced the view that “good” was merely the name we gave to those things that in fact we happened to desire or like. Goodness is not a discoverable property of the things themselves. We simply call them good because we desire them. If we had an aversion to them instead, we would call them bad.**

**Since desires and aversions are matters of individual temperament, nurture, and predilection, there is nothing that all human beings agree upon as deserving to be called good or bad. Just as the skeptic concerning truth says that what is true for me may not be true for you, so here the skeptic says that**

**what is good for you may not be good for me.**

**A century or more later, David Hume, as we have seen, added another arrow to the quiver of skepticism about values. He pointed out that from our knowledge of the facts about nature or reality (as complete as one might wish it to be), we cannot validate a single value judgment that ascribes to the object a goodness that makes it true to say that all men ought to desire it. Those who, before or after Hume, identify the good with pleasure or the pleasing, do not avoid the thrust of his skeptical challenge. Rather, they reinforce it, for what pleases one individual may not please another; and, in any case, the goodness that is identified with pleasure does not reside in the object but in the emotional experience of the individual.**

**Hume’s challenge is further reinforced in our own century by a group of thinkers whose names are associated with a doctrine that has come to be called “noncognitive ethics.” They use the word “ethics” to refer to the whole sphere of moral judgments about good and bad, or right and wrong, especially in the form of prescriptions about what ought and ought not to be sought or what ought and ought not to be done. Their dismissal of ethics as “noncognitive” is their way of saying that statements that assert an ought or an ought-not cannot be either true or false.**

**Not capable of being either true or false, such assertions are noncognitive. They do not belong to the sphere of knowledge, even in the weaker sense of that term, which connotes verifiable or supportable opinion. Thrown out of the sphere of truth, they are relegated to the sphere of taste. They are at best expressions of personal predilection or prejudice, entirely relative to the feelings, impulses, whims, or wishes of the individual.**

**If we ask why judgments about what ought to be desired or done are totally incapable of being either true or false, the answer appeals to an understanding of what truth and falsity consist in—an understanding first formulated in antiquity and one that these twentieth-century exponents of a noncognitive ethics adopt. Once we conceive the truth of a statement as residing in its correspondence with the facts of the matter under consideration, with the way things really are, we are led to the conclusion that only statements that assert that something is or is not the case can be either true or false—true if they assert that which is in fact the way things are, false if they assert the opposite.**

**All such statements can be characterized as descriptions of reality. Statements that contain the words “ought” or “ought not” are prescriptions or injunctions, not descriptions of any thing. If our understanding of truth and falsity conceives them as properties that can be found only in descriptions, then we cannot avoid the skeptical conclusion that prescriptive statements cannot be either true or false.**

**A moment’s reflection will lead us to see that the only way that this skeptical conclusion can be avoided is by expanding our understanding of truth. Can we find another mode of truth, one that is appropriate to prescriptions or injunctions, just as the more familiar mode of truth is appropriate to descriptions, or statements of fact? How can oughts and ought-nots be true?**

**For the answer to this question, we must go back to antiquity —to the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle, following Plato, formulated the conception of truth that has been generally adopted in Western thought—the one that is appealed to by the exponents of noncognitive ethics when they maintain that only descriptive statements can be either true or false. However, he did not stop there. Recognizing that that mode of truth did not apply to prescriptive statements or injunctions (which he called “practical” because they are regulative of human action), he proposed another mode of truth appropriate to practical judgments.**

**That mode of truth, he said, consists in the conformity of such judgments with right desire, as the other mode of truth consists in the correspondence of our descriptions of reality with the reality that they claim to describe.**

**Unfortunately, Aristotle did not explain what he meant by right desire. We are, therefore, on our own in pushing the inquiry farther.**

***What is right desire?* It would appear that the answer must be that right desire consists in desiring what we ought to desire, as wrong desire consists in desiring what we ought not to desire.**

***What ought one to desire?* The answer cannot be—simply and without qualification—that we ought to desire what is good. We have already seen that the good is always and only the desirable and the desirable is always and only the good. As Plato’s Socrates repeatedly pointed out, we never desire any thing that we do not, at the moment of desiring it, deem to be good. Hence we must somehow find a way of distinguishing between the goods that we rightly desire and the goods that we wrongly desire.**

**We are helped to do this by the distinction that Socrates makes between the real and the apparent good. He repeatedly reminds us that our regarding something as good because we in fact desire it does not make it really good in fact. It may, and often does, turn out to be the very opposite. What appears to be good at the time we desire it may prove to be bad for us at some later time or in the long run. The fact that we happen to desire something may make it appear good to us at the time, but it does not make it really good for us.**

**If the good were always and only that which appears good to us because we consciously desire it, it would be impossible to distinguish between right and wrong desire. Aristotle’s conception of practical or prescriptive truth would then become null and void. It can be given content only if we can distinguish between the apparent good (that which we call good simply because we consciously desire it at a given moment) and the real good (that which we ought to desire whether we do in fact desire it or not).**

**Up to this point we seem to be running around in circles. We have identified the real good with that which we ought to desire. We have interpreted right desire as consisting in desiring what one ought to desire, which amounts to saying that it consists in desiring what is really good. To say that the truth of a prescriptive or practical judgment, which tells us what we ought to desire, consists in conformity with right desire amounts to saying that a prescription is true if it tells us that we ought to desire what we ought to desire. And that is saying nothing at all.**

**The only way to get out of this circle is to find some way of identifying what is really good for us that does not equate it merely with what we ought to desire. How can that be done? Aristotle provides us with the answer by calling our attention to a fundamental distinction in the realm of desire.**

**On the one hand, there are the desires inherent in our human nature, rooted in potentialities or capacities that drive or tend toward fulfillment. These are our natural desires, desires with which we are innately endowed. Because they are inherent in human nature, as all truly specific properties are, they**

**are present in all human beings, just as human facial characteristics, human skeletal structure, or human blood types are. Not only are they present in all human beings, as inherent properties of human nature, but they are always operative tendentially or appetitively (that is, they always tend toward or seek fulfillment), whether or not at a given moment we are conscious of such tendencies or drives.**

**On the other hand, there are the desires that each individual acquires in the course of his or her life, each as the result of his or her own individual experience, conditioned by his or her individual temperament and by the circumstances of his or her individual life. Consequently, unlike natural desires, which are the same in all human beings, acquired desires differ from individual to individual, as individuals differ in their temperaments, experiences, and the circumstances of their lives. Also, unlike our natural desires, of which we may not be conscious at a given moment, we are always conscious of our acquired desires at the time they are motivating us in one direction or another.**

**The quickest and easiest way to become aware of the validity of this distinction between natural and acquired desires is to employ two words that are in everyone’s vocabulary and are in daily use. Let us use the word “needs” for our natural desires, and the word “wants” for the desires we acquire. Translated**

**into these familiar terms, what we have said so far boils down to this: that all human beings have the same specifically human needs, whereas individuals differ from one another with regard to the things they want.**

**The use of the words “need” and “want” enables us to go further. Our common understanding of needs provides us at once with the insight that there are no wrong or misguided needs. That is just another way of saying that we never need anything that is really bad for us—something we ought to avoid. We recognize that we can have wrong or misguided wants. That which we want may appear to be good to us at the time, but it may not be really good for us. Our needs are never excessive, as our wants often are. We can want too much of a good thing, but we can never need too much of whatever it is we need. We can certainly want more than we need.**

**One thing more, and most important of all: We cannot ever say that we ought or ought not to need something. The words “ought” and “ought not” apply only to wants, never to needs. This means that the natural desires that are our inborn needs enter into the sphere of our voluntary conduct only through the operation of our acquired desires or wants. In other words, we may or may not in fact want what we need.**

**Almost all of us want things that we do not need and fail to want things that we do need.**

**In the statement just made lies the crux of the matter. We ought to want the things we need. We ought not to want the things we do not need if wanting them interferes with our wanting—and acquiring—the things we do need.**

**The distinction between needs and wants enables us t o draw the line between real goods and apparent goods. Those things that satisfy or fulfill our needs or natural desires are things that are really good for us. Those that satisfy our wants or acquired desires are things that appear good to us when we consciously desire them. If we need them as well as want them, they are also really good for us.**

**However, if we only want them and do not need them, they will nevertheless appear good to us because we want them. Beyond that, they may either turn out to be harmless or innocuous (in that they do not impede or prevent our acquiring the real goods we need) or they may turn out to be the very opposite (quite harmful or really bad for us because they somehow deprive us of one or another of the real goods we**

**need).**

**We cannot ever be mistaken about our wants. No one can be incorrect in saying that he wants something. But it is quite possible for individuals to be mistaken about their needs. Children are frequently given to thinking or saying that they need something when they should have said that they want it. Adults are prone to making the same mistake.**

**If we can be mistaken about our needs, does not that weaken the underpinning of our argument so far? To avoid this, we must be able to determine with substantial accuracy the needs inherent in human nature. Since their gratification often re quires the presence of certain favorable environmental circumstances, we must also be able to determine the indispensable external conditions that function instrumentally in the satisfaction of needs (e.g., a healthy environment is instrumentally needed to safeguard the health of its members).**

**Success in these efforts depends on the adequacy of our knowledge and understanding of human nature in itself and in its relation to the environment.**

**It is by reference to our common human needs that we claim to know what is really good for all human beings. Knowing this, we are also justified in claiming that we can determine the truth or falsity of prescriptions or injunctions. As Aristotle said, prescriptions are true if they conform to right desire.**

**All our needs are right desires because those things that satisfy our natural desires are things that are really good for us. When we want what we need, our wants are also right desires.**

**The injunction to want knowledge, for example, is a true prescription—the true statement of an ought—because human beings all need knowledge. As Aristotle pointed out, man by nature desires to know. Since the acquired desire for knowledge is a right desire, because it consists in wanting what everyone needs, the prescription “You ought to want and seek knowledge” is universally and objectively true—true for all human beings—because it conforms to a right desire that is rooted in a natural need.**

**No one, I think, would question man’s need for knowledge or the truth of the prescription that everyone ought to want and seek knowledge. That truth comes to us as the conclusion of reasoning that rests on two premises.**

**The first is a categorical prescription or injunction: We ought to desire (seek and acquire) that which is really good for us.**

**The second is a statement of fact about human nature: Man has a potentiality or capacity for knowing that tends toward or seeks fulfillment through the acquirement of knowledge. In other words, the facts about human nature are such that, if we are correct in our grasp of them, we can say that man needs knowledge and that knowledge is really good for man.**

**Now, if the foregoing categorical prescription or injunction is true and if in addition the foregoing statement of fact about human nature’s involving a need for knowledge is true, then the prescriptive conclusion, that everyone ought to want and seek knowledge, not only follows from the premises, but is also true—true by conforming to right desire as set forth in the categorical prescription that we ought to want and seek that which is really good for us (i.e., that which by nature we need).**

**The truth of the categorical prescription that underlies every piece of reasoning that leads to a true prescriptive conclusion is a self-evident truth. Anyone can test this for himself by trying to think the opposite and finding it impossible.**

**We simply cannot think that we ought to desire that which is really bad for us or that we ought not to desire that which is really good for us. Without knowing in advance which things are in fact really good or bad for us, we do know at once that “ought to desire” is inseparable in its meaning from the meaning of “really good,” just as we know at once that the parts of a physical whole are always less than the whole. It is impossible to think the opposite just as it is impossible to think that we ought to desire that which is really**

**bad for us.**

**We acknowledge a truth as self-evident as soon as we ac knowledge the impossibility of thinking the opposite. What about the truth of the other premise in the reasoning? That is a factual premise. It asserts a fact about human nature. As I pointed out a little earlier, Aristotle’s observation that man by nature desires to know seems unquestionable. Man’s natural desire or need for knowledge being acknowledged, the factual premise can be asserted as true—if not with certitude, then with a very high degree of assurance. It is beyond a reasonable doubt if not beyond the shadow of a doubt. That suffices for present purposes.**

**What about other natural desires or needs, about which we must make accurate statements of fact if we are to proceed with reasoning that will yield us other true prescriptive conclusions?**

**I have already admitted that, while we can never make a misstatement about our wants, we may be mistaken about our needs, declaring that we need something that we should have said we wanted, or failing to recognize that we need something that we do not want. Such mistakes would result in false rather**

**than true factual assertions about human nature and the desires that are inherent in it.**

**The consequence of this is obvious. The prescriptive conclusions to which our practical reasoning would lead us would then be false rather than true, practically or prescriptively false because the errors we have made about matters of fact prevent the conclusions from conforming to right desire.**

**Therefore, what remains for further inquiry is whether our knowledge of human nature enables us to identify—with sufficient assurance, not with certitude—the real goods that fulfill man’s natural desires or needs. I will undertake to approximate this in the following chapter, concerned with the range and scale of goods.**

**To complete our picture of the matters covered in this chapter, one closing comment must be added. I conceded earlier that David Hume was correct in pointing out that from our knowledge of matters of fact about reality or real existence, *and from that alone,* we cannot validly reason to a true prescriptive conclusion—a judgment about what one ought or ought not to desire or do.**

**In the foregoing statement, I have italicized the words “and from that alone.” Upon that qualification, the correctness of Hume’s point rests. It follows, therefore, that practical or prescriptive reasoning can be validly carried on if it does not rely upon factual knowledge alone.**

**The reasoning to be found in the preceding pages of this chapter relies on factual knowledge but not on that alone. Factual knowledge is represented solely in the second or minor premise—the one that asserts a certain fact about human nature; for example, that man by nature desires to know. The prescriptive conclusion, that everyone ought to want and seek knowledge, does not rest on that premise alone. It rests on that premise combined with the first and major premise—a categorical prescription that is self-evidently true, the injunction that we ought to want and seek whatever is really good for us.**

**Upon this one categorical prescription rest all the prescriptive truths we can validate concerning the real goods that we ought to seek, limited only by the extent to which we can discover, with reasonable assurance, the facts about human nature and its inherent desires or needs.**

**The Range and Scale of Goods**

**ALL THE GOODS THAT FULFILL OUR NEEDS or satisfy our wants belong in the category of human goods, real or apparent. These are things that are good *for* man.**

**When we use the word “good” substantively to call them “goods,” we are using the word in its primary connotation to signify objects of desire. The goods thus named are diverse embodiments of goodness, the idea of which identifies the good with the desirable.**

**Not all the things we call good fall into this category; not all are in one way or another objects of human desire. The adjective “good” has a much wider range of meanings than the notion of goodness that we express when we use the word “good” as a noun to designate this or that particular good to be desired.**

**“Good,” like many other adjectives, enables us to express three degrees of evaluation—the positive, the comparative, and the superlative (“good,” “better,” “best”). But we use “good” more than any other adjective for the purpose of ranking or grading things.**

**The judges who award bronze, silver, and gold medals at athletic contests are engaged in ranking the performances of the athletes, and are, in effect, saying of these performances “good,” “better,” “best.” The same thing is true of the judges who hand out ribbons of various colors at flower shows, dog shows, or cattle shows.**

**It is true also of the professional experts who grade coffee beans, wines, and other products bought and sold in the marketplace. In these cases, as in the international ranking of chess and tennis players, the gradations exceed the three expressed by “good,” “better,” and “best,” but there will always be one that is ranked as supremely good, and, with regard to the rest, one will be ranked as superior to another until one**

**comes to the very bottom of the scale.**

**We have by no means exhausted the extraordinary diversity of things to which we apply the adjective “good” or its higher degrees of “better” and “best.” We speak of a good time and of one occasion as being a better time than another, of good weather and of one climate as better than another. We speak of something as good-looking and of something else as better-looking. There are good and bad reasons, better and worse reasons; good and bad intentions, better and worse intentions. One individual, we may say, has a good memory or a good appetite, and another a better memory or appetite.**

**The things we rank or grade in this way may be judged for their usefulness or for the pleasure they afford us; or they may simply be judged for their intrinsic worth as having the excellence appropriate to that kind of thing. Thus “good,” “better,” and “best” may mean more or less useful, more or less pleasant, more or less excellent.**

**Another set of adjectives is available to us for the purpose of grading or ranking things. We can substitute “fine,” “finer,” and “finest” for “good,” “better,” and “best.” Making this substitution would help us to avoid a use of the word “good” that does not express the judgment that the thing in question has a goodness that is good *for* us, either because we do in fact desire it or because it is something that we ought to desire.**

**All the things we have enumerated as things that can be graded or ranked with regard to their usefulness, their pleasantness, or their intrinsic worth or excellence may of course also be judged by someone to be desirable. Then, of course, it becomes a good *for* him or her. The ranking or grading that was done by someone else, without any explicit reference t o desire on his or her part, does by implication at least involve a reference to desirability.**

**One object ranked as better than another is preferable or more desirable than another. The object ranked as best is most desirable-preferable to all others. Yet a given individual may not in fact desire the better or the best, and so it is not even a good for him, real or apparent.**

**It is interesting to observe that the adjective “true” does not work in the same way as “good.” There are no degrees of objective truth. A statement is either true or false; one statement is not “truer” than another. We may have more or less assurance in claiming that a certain statement is true, but the degree of our assurance does not make the statement more or less true.**

**An elaborate scientific theory or a complex philosophical doctrine may be said to have more truth in it than some other which it is offered to replace. But whatever amount of truth it has consists in the number of elements it contains that are true; the truth of these is not subject to degree.**

**Now let us return to the primary connotation of the word “good” as the name for the desirable thing itself-goods that one wants or needs, all of them goods for man. Confining ourselves for the moment to real goods, we use the word in its primary meaning when we speak of each of the following as a particular kind of good: wealth, health, pleasure, friends or loved ones, liberty or freedom of action, and knowledge and**

**skill in all their forms.**

**The division of the goods for man into real and apparent goods is far from being the only subdivision within that category. We can see this at once if we turn to goods that are subjects of daily conversation-the goods of the marketplace, the so-called economic goods in the production and exchange of which all our commerce and industry is engaged and toward the acquirement of which we work in our effort to earn a living or secure a livelihood.**

**We are all aware that there is a vast plurality and a striking diversity of such goods. When, in the economic sphere, we speak of goods and services, we use the word “goods” in a restricted sense to designate only purchasable commodities that have been produced for sale. Hirable services are also purchasable. Since we seek to obtain by purchase the things we need or want, services no less than commodities are economic**

**goods.**

**Among such goods, economists tell us, some have value in use, some have value in exchange; some are consumable goods, some are instruments or means of production; and one, money, in the form of coin or paper, is solely a medium of exchange-a means of purchasing commodities and services, or instruments of production.**

**This whole set of goods constitutes the category of goods we call wealth. Within that category, we can distinguish the goods that are merely or solely means and the goods that are ends as well as means. Money is obviously nothing but a means. Except for the pathological deviant who is a miser or the equally misguided figure of King Midas with his lust for gold, no one desires money for its own sake. It fulfills no**

**natural need. To want it for its own sake, as Midas did, is to end up starving, deprived of the real goods that money can and should buy.**

**Capital goods-instruments of production-are also mere means, desired for the sake of the consumable goods they can produce. The individual who sought to accumulate only capital goods would be as misguided as Midas or the miser and end up as deprived-bereft of friends, naked, unsheltered, and starving to death.**

**Money, used not as a medium of exchange but as financial capital to be invested or loaned, and physical capital used as instruments of production provide sources of income that confer purchasing power for buying consumable commodities and for hiring useful services. Thus used, they still remain means, and mere means at that.**

**Among economic goods, the only form of wealth that is not a mere means consists in consumable goods, including here services as well as commodities. Some of these fulfill certain of our biological needs (our needs for food, drink, clothing, shelter, and so on), and some satisfy our individual wants.**

**While consumable goods are not mere means, neither are they goods that we desire for their own sake and that alone. We need them for the sake of our bodily health, or we want them as conditions prerequisite to activities in which we wish to engage. Like those consumable goods that fulfill our biological needs, physical health (together with bodily vigor and vitality) is also a real good, but a real good that is desired for its own sake as well as for the sake of other goods, to the achievement of which it is a prerequisite condition.**

**The good, real or apparent, can also be divided into the good we desire to *have*, the good we desire to *do*, and the good we desire to *be*.**

**1. The good we desire to *have* can be further subdivided into possessions or perfections, and into goods of choice and goods of chance. Wealth exemplifies a possession; health a perfection. Each, as we shall see, is in part at least a good of chance. Only such perfections as good habits and knowledge are entirely goods of choice.**

**All possessions are external goods-goods that exist apart from the individual who desires to possess them. In addition to wealth, the category of external goods includes friends or loved ones and also all the external circumstances of the individual’s life that flow from the institutions and arrangements of the society in which he lives.**

**As distinguished from possessions, perfections are internal goods-internal in the sense that they have their existence in the person rather than apart from him or her. As used here, the word “perfection” has a restricted connotation. It means only that which completes or fulfills a potentiality of the human being-a capacity for development of one sort or another. In this sense, health is a personal perfection, the pleasures of sense and aesthetic pleasures are personal perfections, and so are all forms of knowledge and skill.**

**The goods of choice are those which we are able to attain entirely by activities in which we voluntarily engage. If, for example, certain habits are good not only in themselves, but also as means to a good life, we can achieve these perfections through actions entirely within our own power to perform, if we choose to do so. It would appear to be the case that, like knowledge, skill, and other good habits, all goods of choice are**

**internal goods-perfections of the person.**

**All external goods are goods of chance. While the possession of them may in part depend upon actions that we voluntarily perform according to the choices we make, they never depend solely on what we ourselves choose to do. They are all circumstantial goods in the sense that our possession of them depends either partly or wholly on circumstances beyond our control. In that sense, they are goods of chance, conferred on**

**us by what we call “good luck” or “good fortune,” and withheld from us by the misfortunes that befall us.**

**The goods we desire to *have* may be either real or apparent goods, real if they are personal perfections we ought to seek, such as health, good habits, or knowledge; apparent if they are possessions we want but do not need. In contrast, the other two-the goodness that resides in our doing or action and the goodness that belongs to our being-fall wholly on the side of real goods we ought to desire.**

**2. The good we should desire to *do* is either an action on our part that is good for us because it results in our acquirement of an external possession or a personal perfection that we need; or it is an action that results in a real good for someone else, benefitting the other individual or at least not causing injury. As affecting the welfare of others, we usually speak of an individual’s actions as right and wrong, or just and unjust.**

**As we shall see when we come to the consideration of justice, the notions of right and wrong, in the sphere of conduct that impinges on the welfare and well-being of others, are subsidiary to the notions of good and evil. If we did not first know what was really good for any human being, we could not appraise actions as right and wrong – as resulting in benefits or injuries.  
  
3. The good we should desire to be is the excellence of a good man or woman. A good man or woman is one who has achieved the personal perfections that fulfill his or her potentialities or capacities for being human. Preeminent among these perfections is the acquired habit of desiring what one ought to desire and desiring nothing that interferes with obtaining the real goods one needs to lead a good life. While, as we shall see, a good man or woman is one who acts justly toward others, good deeds alone do not make a good human being. That is only one element in leading a good life.**

**A good life is made by accumulating in the course of a lifetime everything that is really good and by wanting nothing that impedes or frustrates this effort. That which appears good to individuals who are good men and women is really good for they are habitually disposed to want what they ought to want, and not to want what they ought not to.  
  
However, being a good person does not by itself suffice for the achievement of a good human life. Some of the real goods a person needs, especially those that are external or circumstantial goods, are goods of change. Even the attainment of certain interior perfections are partly dependent upon benign external circumstances.  
  
That is where the benefactions of a good society come in, providing the necessary conditions for a good life that the good person cannot achieve entirely by the choices he or she makes. An organized community is good to the extent that its institutions and arrangements confer upon its members the read goods that everyone needs but which, in whole or part, depend upon external circumstances beyond the individual’s control.**

**A good human being, a good human life, a good society. How are these three principal forms of goodness related to one another?  
  
It would appear that a good society is an external and instrumental good, one that the individual needs to aid and abet his or her effort to make a good life for himself or herself. It would also appear that having the intrinsic virtue or excellence of a good human being is indispensable to achieving a good life.  
  
Why this is so will become clearer presently. For the moment, suffice it to say that a good human life is the ultimate good toward the attainment of which all other goods are instrumental. But it is not the highest good in the hierarchy or scale of particular goods.  
  
At the lowest end of the scale stand the goods that are mere means – goods that ought never to be desired for their own sake but always for the sake of some other good. They are good only to the extent that they are used to obtain goods that fulfill or satisfy other desires.  
  
In the next rung above, we find goods that not only have the character of ends, in that they fulfill or satisfy certain desires, but also serve as means insofar as they are put to use in trying to achieve still other goods. Such goods, desired both for their own sake and for the sake of other goods, fall below the goods they are used to achieve. Wealth and health typify this level of goods.  
  
The highest grade in the whole scale of particular goods consists of those goods that are desired for their own sake and not as means to obtain other particular goods. Enjoyable pleasure is such a good; so also is wisdom. If in the range of particular goods, there is a single highest good (traditionally called the *summum bonum*), it falls here.**

**It will be noted that at the lowest level of the scale, we find only external goods. At the next level, we find both possessions, such as wealth, and personal perfections, such as health. At the highest level, we find only personal perfections, no possessions or external goods.**

**There is one further good-one that cannot be included in the scale of goods that we have so far considered because it encompasses the whole scale itself.**

**All the goods we have so far considered are particular goods. Each is a partial good, one good among others, not the whole constituted by the presence of all the goods needed to make a whole life good. That whole can only be achieved successively and piecemeal in the course of a lifetime; all the particular or partial goods that contribute to this result are constitutive means for achieving the whole.**

**Even enjoyable pleasure and wisdom among the highest of the particular goods are less than the whole of goods. Though each is desired for its own sake and not for the sake of any other particular good, it does not by itself suffice to satisfy all desires. In addition to being desired for itself, it is desired for the sake of a good life-that whole of which all real goods and some innocuous apparent goods are component parts.**

**There is still another hierarchy or scale of goodness, one that belongs in the realm of the good to *be* rather than the good to *have* or the good to *do*. Here we are confronted with gradations of goodness that are commensurate with grades of being or existence itself.**

**Only absolute nonbeing is absolutely evil. Whatever exists to any degree of perfection has a grade of goodness comparable to the perfection of its being or existence. Accordingly, when God is thought of as the Supreme Being, having an infinite existence that lacks no perfection. God is also thought of as supremely good in the scale of beings. This leaves quite open the question about the moral goodness of God-the benevolence, justice, and mercy of the Deity.**

**St. Augustine’s comparison of the goodness of a mouse and of a pearl helps us to understand the goodness commensurate with being. If asked, “Which would you prefer to have?” Augustine thinks the answer should be a pearl, for it is a more valuable possession than a mouse. That is certainly true of its exchange value, and it is likely to be true of its use value and its enjoyability. However, if asked, “Which would you rather**

**be?” he thinks the opposite answer should be given, for a living organism has more being, more potentialities for development, more power to act, than an inert stone, however attractively coated.**

**As we have seen, the goods we desire to have are either possessions (i.e., external goods) or perfections (i.e., personal goods). The latter increase or amplify our very being through actualizing our potentialities. The man or woman who has become a good human being through acquiring the personal perfections**

**that everyone should desire to have is also the good man or woman that everyone should desire to be. The reason for preferring to be a mouse rather than a pearl is also the reason for preferring to be a good rather than a bad human being.**

**The Ultimate and Common Good**

**FOR SOMETHING TO BE ULTIMATE in any dimension or direction, it must be that beyond which one cannot go. What can possibly occupy that unique place in the realm of goods?**

**We have observed that some goods are mere means, never desired for their own sake, but only for the sake of something else. Other goods, we have noted, are ends as well as means. They are desired for their own sake as well as for the sake of something else. Is there anything that either is or ought to be desired for its own sake and never for the sake of anything else? If so, that is the ultimate good, not just *an* end, but *the***

**end, the final end beyond which one cannot go.**

**In antiquity, the word “happiness” was used as the name of this ultimate good. The ancients paid attention to the obvious fact that according to everyone’s sense of what the word “happiness” means, it names something desired for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. It is impossible for anyone to complete the sentence “I want happiness because ...” except by saying, “I want it.” Of anything else**

**that one wants, it is always possible to say, “I want it because it will contribute to my happiness.”**

**The ancients also observed that, while everyone uses the word “happiness” to name that which is desirable solely for itself and not as a means to anything else, individuals differ in their conception of what happiness consists in. If, for the moment, we put aside our basic distinction between real and apparent goods, there will be as many different conceptions of happiness as there are differences with respect to the apparent**

**goods that different individuals want. Each is purely subjective, entirely relative to that individual’s wants.**

**The miser who wants only money, or King Midas who wants everything that he touches turned into gold, should accordingly count himself happy when he gets what he wants. If he wants money or gold for its own sake and if he wants nothing else, he has achieved his goal. He has reached the end of his striving. He has arrived at his ultimate good-his happiness. The same thing can be said of the individual who identifies his happiness with the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, or of the individual who identifies it with gaining and holding power over others.**

**Once we come back to the distinction between real and apparent goods, the picture changes radically. Far from achieving happiness, the miser, the playboy, and the power hungry individual have achieved only a counterfeit of it. They have got what they wanted, but not what they ought to want. On the contrary, getting what they want may have resulted in their being deprived of many things they need and ought t o**

**want-health, friendships, knowledge, and other goods of the mind.**

**Properly conceived (which means objectively rather than subjectively conceived), happiness consists in having obtained all the goods that everyone ought to want. So conceived, it is the same for all human beings. It is the common good as well as the ultimate good. It is the ultimate good because it leaves**

**nothing more to be desired, as it would if it were just one particular good among others.**

**While life goes on, the pursuit of happiness can be defeated by misfortunes of all sorts, or by mistaken choices on the part of the individual. That is why the ancients placed happiness in a whole life well lived-well lived as a result of the individual’s choosing as he ought for the most part and also as a result of the individual’s being blessed by fortunate external circumstances, again for the most part.**

**Happiness, we now see, is a human life fulfilled by the accumulation of all the real goods that everyone needs. It is, in addition, a life enriched by whatever apparent goods may be innocuously sought by this or that individual according to his or her different tastes or wants. To confirm this understanding of happiness, we must observe a number of negative strictures.**

**The first has already been indicated. Happiness is not the supreme good, the *summum bonum*, the highest or best among the real goods to be sought. Instead, it is the totality of goods, the *totum bonum*, the all-inclusive or -encompassing whole comprised of all the real goods. In this sense, it is not *a* good, but *the* good, in the same sense that the ultimate good is not *an* end, but *the* end.**

**The second negative concerns the character of happiness as *the* end. We usually think of an end as a terminal goal or objective that can be reached and at which, when reached, we come to rest. The end of one’s travels lies at the destination where one’s traveling terminates, where one stops moving and**

**settles down. The same holds for all other strivings that come to an end when they attain what they are reaching for-all except the striving for happiness.**

**Conceived as a whole life well lived, happiness is different from all other ends that we strive for or pursue. It is not a terminal goal that can be reached and rested in, for there is no moment of time in which a whole life well lived exists to be enjoyed or experienced. Every other end can be attained at some time during the course of one’s life and, as attained, its goodness can be enjoyed or experienced. But the ultimate good that is *the* end cannot be attained short of a whole life being lived.**

**A whole life comes into existence only with the passage of time. It does not exist at any interval or moment during the time it is coming to be. When we aim at happiness as our ultimate good, we are aiming at something we can never enjoy or experience, as we can the goals that are terminal ends.**

**If the natural process of human life on earth has a terminal end, it is death, not happiness. Only if there is the hereafter for which religion holds out hope can there be a truly terminal end as the ultimate good and goal of all human striving for the heavenly rest that is enjoyed by the saints in the presence of God. It is certainly understandable why those who yearn and strive for the eternal happiness that is for them the supernatural ultimate good regard as a pale and feeble imitation of it the temporal happiness that is the ultimate good of this earthly life.**

**The third negative adds a qualification to an earlier statement that happiness as the ultimate good of human life is the same for all human beings. That remains true to the extent that happiness consists in a life fulfilled by the accumulation of all the things that are really good for everyone. But it must also be said that, in another respect, the happiness of one individual is not the same as the happiness of another. Each, according to his individual temperament, nurture, and circumstances, may want quite different things. Consequently, the enrichment of the individual life by the addition of those apparent goods that are innocuous will produce a good life that is somewhat different in its content for one individual and another.**

**The fourth and final negative calls attention to the fact that happiness is not the same for all in still another respect. Happiness as the ultimate good-the goal at which everyone should aim and toward which everyone should strive-is an ideal that is seldom if ever completely realized.**

**A terminal goal that we could not reach would be an illusory will-of-the-wisp at the end of the rainbow. Because it is not a terminal end, happiness is not an illusory goal, even though we can achieve it only in some measure or degree that falls short of completeness or perfection. In this respect, one individual may be more successful than another in the pursuit of happiness, either through his own good choices and efforts or through being facilitated in those efforts by the benefactions of good fortune. Accordingly, one individual may achieve a greater measure of happiness than another.**

**One question remains. We understand that temporal happiness, being a whole life well lived, cannot be a terminal end goal that can be reached, enjoyed, and rested in. How, then, can it be an end at all, much less *the* ultimate goal of all our striving?**

**The answer lies in a function that is performed by any end, whether it is terminal or not. Given an end to be sought or pursued, we are under an obligation to employ whatever means are called for to achieve it, preferring of course the most efficacious of the means available. If we wish to achieve the end in view, we must make use of such and such means.**

**The imperative here expressed is hypothetical. We must or ought to employ certain means *if*-and *only* if-we desire the end they serve, the goal they can help us to reach. A categorical, not a hypothetical, obligation is imposed on us by happiness as an end or goal. We do not say, “If we wish to achieve a good life, we ought to do this or that.” On the contrary, we acknowledge that we ought to aim at a good life, consisting as it**

**does in the attainment of everything really good. This acknowledgment follows from recognizing the self-evident truth that real goods ought to be desired.**

**Even though it cannot be a terminal goal reached and enjoyed, the ideal of a good life functions as all other ends do by prescribing certain means that we must employ and proscribing other things that we must eschew in order to pursue the ultimate good of our lives effectively. Happiness cannot be achieved by any means whatsoever, but only by choices and actions that add real goods to our life and that avoid apparent**

**goods that interfere with the attainment of real goods.**

**To think, as is so widely believed today, that happiness consists in achieving whatever apparent goods an individual happens to desire according to his wants, without regard to the difference between right and wrong desires, leads to opposite conclusions all along the line. The ultimate good ceases to be the same ideal for all human beings. It ceases to be the common good of mankind. It functions as a terminal goal that can be completely achieved at some moment of one’s life, not just approximated in some measure or degree in the course of a whole lifetime.**

**In addition, it becomes difficult if not impossible to understand how a good society, through the justice of its institutions and arrangements, can serve to promote the pursuit of happiness by all its members, differing as they do in their individual wants and more often than not brought into conflict with one another in their effort to satisfy them. It becomes meaningless to say that the state and its government should**

**serve the common good of its people, for the happiness they strive for is no longer a common good.**

**No government or society can undertake to fulfill the obligation expressed in the maxim “To each according to his individual wants.” The pursuit of happiness can be aided and abetted by just laws and institutions only to the extent that the state can do whatever may be necessary to provide all its members with the conditions requisite for fulfilling their common human needs. Over and above this, it should also permit them to satisfy their individual wants if doing so does not impede or frustrate others in their pursuit of happiness.**

**A single marvelously succinct statement by St. Augustine puts all of this in a nutshell. “Happy is the man,” Augustine said, “who, in the course of a complete life, has everything he desires, provided he desire nothing amiss.”**

**That kernel of wisdom calls for some expansion to make fully explicit the insight it contains. To desire nothing amiss is to desire only what one ought to desire and to refrain from desiring what one ought not to desire. The pursuit of happiness, properly conceived, puts us under the categorical obligation to seek everything that is really good for us and nothing that interferes with the attainment of all the real goods that fulfill our human needs.**

**To discharge this obligation, we must form the habit of choice that consists in desiring aright and desiring nothing amiss. We must aim at happiness, which is the ultimate good of our lives, and choose aright the means of achieving it. That right aim conjoined with that right habit of choice constitute what the ancients called moral virtue. This is only one of the two indispensable factors in the pursuit of happiness. The other is the good fortune of being blessed by external circumstances that facilitate rather than frustrate its pursuit,**

**especially with regard to the goods of chance partly or wholly beyond our control.**

**Aristotle’s definition of happiness includes both of these factors and indicates that they are complementary: “Happiness consists in a complete life (i) lived in accordance with virtue *and* (ii) attended by a moderate supply of external goods” (or whatever goods depend in whole or in part on good fortune).**

**The individual may be a good person in the sense of being virtuous. But a good person does not always succeed in the pursuit of happiness-in making a good life for himself or herself. Virtue by itself does not suffice for the attainment of the ultimate good. If it did, mankind would have little or no reason to carry on its age-old struggle for a good society, with liberty, equality, and justice for all.**

**From Truth and Goodness to Beauty**

**IN DEALING WITH TRUTH, and in response to an extreme skepticism that treated truth as if it were totally subjective and relative to the individual’s opinions, we distinguished an objective aspect in which truth is universal and immutable from a subjective aspect in which individual claims to have a hold on the truth vary from individual to individual and from time to time.**

**In addition, we separated the sphere of truth from the sphere of taste. In the former, agreement is to be sought and engaging in argument can serve this purpose. In the latter, differences of opinion should be tolerated and there is no point in arguing to overcome them.**

**In dealing with goodness, and once again in response to an extreme skepticism that treated goods as if they were totally subjective and relative to the individual’s desires, we found a parallel to the objective and subjective aspects of truth.**

**Real goods, we found, are relative not to individual desires, but to desires inherent in human nature and so are the same for all human beings. To the extent that human nature is everywhere and at all times the same (that is, as long as the species persists in its specific characteristics), real goods have the universality and immutability that gives them objectivity. The sameness of human nature at all times and places is usually**

**concealed from us by the overlays of nurture and culture, but these can be stripped away and the common underlying nature laid bare.**

**Another way of making the same point is to say that, while many value judgments belong in the sphere of taste, some belong to the sphere of truth. Prescriptive judgments about the real goods that ought to be desired because they fulfill our natural needs have a truth that differs from the truth of descriptive judgments about the way things are in reality. About these value judgments, we should seek agreement, and when we disagree, we should try to overcome our differences by resorting to argument-by appeal to evidence and by reasoning.**

**The evidence will be drawn from and the reasoning will be about our knowledge of human nature and our understanding of it.**

**The subjective aspect of goodness falls on the other side of the line that divides real from apparent goods. Apparent goods are relative to individual desires and are, therefore, subjective. When, wanting something, the individual calls it good, that is an expression of taste on his part, not a judgment that he should expect others to agree with or about which he should engage in argument with others.**

**Two things emerge from this review of ground we have been over. One is the sovereignty of truth in relation to goodness and, as we shall soon see, also in relation to beauty. The discovery that oughts can be true enables us to draw the line between the objective and subjective aspects of goodness. It places our judgments about real goods in the sphere of truth, and our opinions about apparent goods in the sphere of taste.**

**The other thing to emerge is the reason there is an objective as well as a subjective aspect of both truth and goodness. It is not the same reason in both cases.**

**The objectivity of truth derives from the existence of a reality that is independent of our minds and of our thinking about it. Since we attain truth by bringing our thought into agreement with the reality we try to know, that reality provides the standard whereby our thought is measured and is found true or false. The subjectivity of truth derives from the fallibility and deficiencies or inadequacies of human thought.**

**Goodness does not have objectivity in the same way, for our judgments concerning the good do not have truth by agreement with the reality we seek to know. With regard to real goods, what takes the place of objectivity is the intersubjectivity of human needs, which is to say their sameness for all human beings because they are inherent in human nature. Here it is human nature (which, of course, is a reality to be**

**known) that provides the standard whereby our value judgments- our oughts-can be found true or false.**

**When we come to beauty, the same interest persists-the concern with what is objective and what is subjective in our attribution of beauty to things. That is the focal concern with regard to all three of these great ideas, but we can anticipate encountering greater difficulty in our effort to treat beauty in a manner that parallels our treatment of truth and goodness.**

**The reason for this should be immediately apparent. In the case of truth, one and the same reality measures our success in trying to arrive at true judgments about what does or does not exist or about the characteristics of that which does exist. In the case of goodness, one and the same human nature measures our success in trying to arrive at true judgments about the goods everyone needs and therefore the goods that everyone ought to desire. But, in the case of beauty, where shall we look for the common measure of our success in trying to arrive at true judgments about what is or is not beautiful?**

**There is still another reason for puzzlement. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” it has been said; “that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” We have also been told, “Take care of truth and goodness, and beauty will take care of itself.”**

**These remarks suggest that beauty is so related to truth and goodness that these other ideas should be able to guide us in our consideration of beauty. Despite the poet’s vision of the matter, beauty is not identical with truth, at least not in the sense in which we have considered truth so far-as a property of propositions or statements.**

**Beauty would appear to be more intimately related t o goodness. The reason for thinking so lies in the fact that beauty, like goodness, is a quality we attribute to things because of a relation they have to us. Both the good and the beautiful please us. Beauty may be a special type of goodness or it may be radically distinct from goodness.**

**We must find out which is the case. Only after we have discovered how the reason for our attribution of beauty to things differs from the reason for our attribution of goodness to them, can we proceed to the more difficult question about the objectivity and subjectivity of beauty.**

* Mortimer J. Adler *Six Great Ideas*, Part Two. Ideas We Judge By: Truth Goodness and Beauty