

What does 'good' mean?

Non-moral usage

Often, when we use the words 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong', we are using them in a way that does not have moral significance. In other words, we are using them in a *non-moral* way.

'good' may mean 'good for' or 'useful' - sometimes this is referred to as *instrumental*¹ good

'good' may mean 'skilled' or 'accomplished'

'good' may be used of a pleasing work of art - sometimes this is referred to as *inherent* good

These are a few examples of non-moral usage of the word 'good'.

In which of these sentences is 'good' being used in a way that has moral significance?
(Examples taken mostly from *Moral Problems*, Palmer, p 10)

- a) That music is good.
- b) Democracy is a good thing.
- c) He is a good footballer.
- d) He did me no good.
- e) This is a good report.
- f) He had a good life.
- g) He led a good life.
- h) That was a good book.
- i) It is good to talk.
- j) It is good to tell the truth.
- k) Did you have a good holiday?
- l) Take a good look.
- m) It is good to see you.
- n) God is good.

Branches of ethics

Consider the following example (taken from Teach Yourself Ethics, Thompson, p 11)

(From a report of the trial at the Old Bailey, London, in March 1990)

A businessman, aged 37, learns that he is dying of cancer. His business is failing, and he is concerned to provide for his wife after his death. He therefore plants six small home-made bombs in supermarkets in Germany. He contacts the supermarket company, claims that 35 devices have been planted and demands £300 000 to reveal their whereabouts. He is

arrested after making telephone negotiations from a call box in London, and admits blackmailing and possession of explosive substances. The bombs cause £100 000 of damage, but no injuries. In court, his defence counsel claims that he acted out of a genuine sense of desperation, and asks that the sentence might be short enough for him to end his life with his family. He is sentenced to a prison term of two and a half years.

There are three main ways of discussing this situation:

through **normative ethics**,

through **descriptive ethics**,

through **meta-ethics**.

In summary, when looking at situations of ethical significance,

I use *descriptive* language when I state the facts about a person or group's ethical behaviour without making a judgement about that behaviour -

in many cultures of the ancient world slavery was not viewed as wrong;

though euthanasia is not strictly legal in the Netherlands, no doctor will be prosecuted for helping a patient to die provided the doctor stick to clear guidelines;

most car crime is carried out by young men in areas of high unemployment;

Muslim men may marry up to four wives, as long as they can provide for them and treat them equally.

I use *evaluative* language when I make a judgement on a particular moral problem and seek to justify my judgement by reference to moral principles -

I think the dying man was wrong to risk the lives of other people since it is never right to do evil so that good may come about; the ends do not justify the means;

though slavery was once accepted as an ordinary part of life, this does not mean it is right; I believe that all human beings have equal dignity in God's sight, and so all should share the same basic freedoms.

The main tradition in ethics involves the use of evaluative language; this branch of ethics is often called **normative ethics** because I am looking to evaluate moral actions with reference to *norms*, or guides for thinking and behaving. Just as descriptive ethics speaks in terms of *is/was*, normative ethics speaks in terms of *ought*.

Related to normative ethics is **meta-ethics**. This is an analysis of the meaning and character of ethical language: what do I mean when I use 'good' (or 'bad' or 'right' or 'wrong') in the moral context?

When I say Mother Teresa was a good woman, is this another way of saying I approve of her, or of saying: 'Hurrah for Mother Teresa!?' Am I implying that others should follow her example? Do I mean by 'good' that she followed God's will for her? ...

Descriptive Ethics

X believes that capital punishment is right for certain crimes ...

Normative Ethics

Capital punishment can never be justified because ...

Meta-ethics

What is really meant by such terms as 'right' and 'wrong' when applied to moral issues like, for example, capital punishment?

Write a descriptive and an evaluative statement about each of the following:

- the taking of human life,

- marriage,

- divorce,

- treatment of enemies.