



Research Paper

Summum Bonum (The Highest Good) from the Point of View of Kant and Schleiermacher

Alireza Hassanpour*¹

10.22080/jre.2024.26568.1192

Received:

January 9, 2024

Accepted:

February 21, 2024

Available online:

March 18, 2024

Keywords:

Highest Good, Virtue, Happiness, Ethics, Schleiermacher, Kant

Abstract

The highest good is the most important concept in Schleiermacher's ethics, which is explained and developed within a theological framework without relying on the theory of the divine command. Contrary to Kant, Schleiermacher eliminated the concept of happiness from the concept of the highest good due to its relevance to sensory desires, and thereby he attempted to extricate the moral act from material motives more than Kant has done. In his earlier views about the highest good, Schleiermacher refers to the concept of inclusiveness to define the highest good, which indicates that the highest good in his opinion is much more comprehensive than what Kant and others imagined and that it cannot be achieved only through our actions. This leads us to his later view of the highest good, in which the Greek and Christian view of God-likeness plays a central role. Here the ensoulment of nature, relationality of the highest good and the role of the individual in relation to the whole and the intertwining of the components of the highest good are emphasized. Finally, as a Christian theologian, Schleiermacher considers Christ as a condition for the realization of the highest good. Unsurprisingly he holds this belief, given that his ethical thinking revolves around religious experience. But since religious people do not share a single religious experience, the highest good is not a fixed thing that can be defined and realized once and for all, but it is experienced subjectively, and people interpret it within the framework of their own religious experience. Therefore, developing a truly religious feelings or intuitions can lead to moral action and the realization of the highest good.

*Corresponding Author: Alireza Hassanpour

Address: Click or tap here to enter text.

Email: a.hasanpour@ilam.ac.ir



Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The concept of "summum bonum/highest good", its nature, and how to achieve it has always been discussed in ethical theories, and in fact, it can be said that the ultimate goal of every theory and ethical system is to determine and identify the highest good and to find a way to achieve it. At the beginning of the history of philosophical thought, Plato spoke of the "good example" which is good and valuable in itself and essence, not as a means to achieve another goal. Happiness (Eudaimonia) according to Aristotle, pleasure according to Epicureans, living according to nature according to Stoics, or the happiness and well-being of the majority according to the view of classical utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, is the good that having it and seeking it are valuable in themselves and regardless of their relationship with other things and should be the highest goal of human actions. Therefore, the highest good is, in short, something that is worthy to be sought and enjoyed for its own sake (Bond, 2001, p 620). Cicero raised the question about the highest good: is the highest good the same as moral good or human welfare? This question can be seen as the origin of the conflict between two great moral theories in the modern era, on one side of which are the utilitarians who believed that happiness means pleasure and well-being, the absence of pain, the ultimate goal, and the highest good. But Kant answers Cicero's question in such a way that moral good, in the sense of obeying the moral law, regardless of the result of this obedience, takes precedence over everything else (Bond, 2001, p 623). In his various works, Kant spoke in detail about this duality of moral good or virtue and human well-being or happiness, and his solution to the union between these two is that the "highest good" can be realized and achieved in

the other world. Therefore, according to Kant, the highest good is neither pure happiness nor virtue alone, but it is realized in the ratio of happiness to virtue. Thus, the highest good has two heterogeneous components of happiness and virtue (Kant, 1999a, p 228 [5:110]). The problem of the highest good was still the concern of many thinkers after Kant, including Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher's opinion about morality in general and the highest good in a specific way is presented in the context of Kant's view of morality and the highest good and mainly in a critical reaction to his opinions. In addition, since Schleiermacher's special understanding of ethics as a science is very different from Kant's and today's understanding of it, in order to understand his view on the concept and nature of the highest good, it is necessary to first point out his special view and its accessories and results, then describe his criticisms of Kant's view, and finally examine and analyze his opinion about the highest good.

2. Method

The research method in this study is analytical-comparative and the primary data was collected by the library method.

3. Findings

In this research, after a preliminary discussion about the importance of the highest good in the history of moral thought, Schleiermacher's perception of the science of ethics and its difference from the common perception was explained. Then, the comparison of Schleiermacher's and Kant's views on the nature of ethics of his critiques on Kant's view was mentioned. In his opinion, by emphasizing the value of acting according to general rules, Kant ignored the importance of differences between people and failed to consider the value of individuality in ethics. The person as an irreplaceable thing with the ability to



communicate is the basis of Schleiermacher's ethical system and one of the goals of ethics is the development of human individuality, and thus, he passes Kant's general reason, which is an impersonal and non-historical thing. Schleiermacher's final opinion, as a Christian theologian and philosopher, about the highest good is that Christ is the necessary condition for the realization of the highest good, and it is only through Christ that all wise people can unite in perfect love and build the society in which the individual can contribute to the realization of the highest good in relation to it and through the influence of his actions on its members. This belief of Schleiermacher is not strange considering that his moral thinking ultimately revolves around religious experience. Since the religious experiences of religious people are not of the same type, according to Schleiermacher, the highest good is not a fixed thing that is realized once and for all, but it is a thing that is experienced subjectively and people interpret it within the framework of their own religious experience. Therefore, cultivating a truly religious feeling or intuition can be a guide to moral action and lead people to the realization of the highest good in this sense.

4. Result

Schleiermacher's opinion about the highest good was formed and elaborated on the one hand, in a critical reaction to the opinions of past philosophers, especially Kant, and on the other hand, in the framework of Christian theology. Unlike Kant, he removed the concept of happiness from the science of ethics in general and from the highest good in particular, due to its connection and relationship with sensory and individual desires, and in this way, he devoted himself to freeing the moral act

from fleeting and partial motives more than Kant. Schleiermacher, in his earlier opinions about the highest good, appeals to the concept of comprehensiveness to define the highest good, which, for him, is free from any connection and relationship with material and personal desires. He also considers a will that is independent of such desires to be a holy will that can lead to the realization of the highest good. The concept of comprehensiveness here indicates that the highest good in Schleiermacher's view is much more comprehensive than Kant's and others' view, and again, unlike other philosophers, it is not possible to achieve it only by one's actions. This leads us to the late Schleiermacher's opinion about the highest good, in which, according to the Greek and Christian point of view, the resemblance to God plays a fundamental role. Here, Schleiermacher emphasizes nature's egoism, in the Greek sense of the word, the proportionality of the highest good, the role of the individual in relation to the whole, and the interweaving of the parts of the highest good. Finally, Schleiermacher appears in the role of a Christian theologian and considers Christ as a condition for the realization of the highest good and the unity of all wise people in a society in which the individual can contribute to the realization of the highest good.

Funding

There is no funding support.

Author's profile

The author of the article is Alireza Hassanpour, and all the responsibility for it lies with him.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.



References:

- Banham, Gary (2003) *Kant's Practical Philosophy: from Critique to Doctrine*, Palgrave Macmillan
- Beiser, Frederick C. (2005) 'Schleiermacher's Ethics' in Jacqueline Mariña (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 53-72.
- Beiser, Frederick C. (2006) 'Moral faith and the highest good' in Paul Guyer (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 588-629.
- Bond, E. J. (2001) 'good, theories of the', *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (eds.), New York and London: Routledge, pp. 620-624.
- Dole, Andrew C. (2009) *Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Grove, Peter (2017) 'Werke: Jugendmanuskripte, erste Predigten' in Martin Ohst (editor), *Schleiermacher Handbuch*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 67-75.
- Kant, Immanuel (1999) *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 133-271.
- Kant, Immanuel (1998a) *Critique of Pure Reason*, edited and translated by Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kant, Immanuel (1998b), *Religion in the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, tr. by Allen Wood & George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kant, Immanuel (1997) *Lectures on Ethics*, tr. by Peter Heath, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press