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Mr. Cunningham

Great Ideas - 4th/8th Period

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<div align="center">How Do We Determine What is Good and Evil?</div>

According to *Psychology Today*, the term 'good' means "the ability to empathize with other people, to feel compassion for them, and to put their needs before your own… it means benevolence, altruism, and selflessness, and self-sacrifice towards a greater cause- all qualities which stem from a sense of empathy." 'Evil' people are considered as "those who are unable to empathize with others, and as a result, their own needs and desires are a paramount of importance. They are selfish, self-absorbed, and narcissistic." I believe that the majority of us do in fact follow this ethical code. We're taught from a young age the 'golden rule' of treating others how we wish to be treated, and we carry this principle with us for many years beyond our youth.

David Foster Wallace, an American author, supports this notion by making a connection between morality and open-mindedness in his "This is Water" speech. He first suggests that you look past what is virtue and what is not, stating that, "it's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self"(Wallace 3). He highlights the idea that growing one's base of knowledge means growing their viewpoints and perspectives as well, stating that, "people who can adjust their natural default setting this way are often described as being 'well-adjusted'"(Wallace 3). By saying this, Wallace emphasizes the distinction between right and wrong actions. He determines the most moral and heroic things about a person to be their awareness and compassion for others, even

when they feel their most defeated, while evil is to maintain a close-minded and self-centered perspective.

In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's *The Concept of Evil,* Eve Garrard, a moral philosopher, promotes an enthralling ideology in contrast to Wallace's. Garrard believes the differentiation between good and evil has an indefinite answer. She highlights that "some people believe that to say someone performed an evil action implies that the person responsible acted out of malevolence, while others believe wrongdoings can result from many different sorts of motives, even good ones", and given this ambiguity, a misjudgement can only result in bad consequence. Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, supports this theory by adding the idea that "the concepts of good and evil contribute to an unhealthy view of life which judges relief from suffering as more valuable than creative self-expression and accomplishment." Both Garrard and Nietzsche make it clear that seeking out a universal truth of right and wrong only begets turmoil, and that it's the understanding of the motivations behind actions that may be able to one day get us the answer.

While all three philosophers' takes on the concept of what is 'ethically good or bad' are in contrast, their approaches to this conundrum are fairly similar. They support the idea that determining what is right and wrong stems from awareness and consideration for others by separating both actions and underlying intentions. I, too, would have to agree with each author, believing that retaining compassion and focusing one's growth within interpersonal relationships is the idealistic "good", while the opposite results in "evil". For example, we could consider religion to be a crucial factor when determining an ethical code to live by. In Christianity, we see Jesus Christ as a perfect being who did no wrong during his lifetime, and if we were to dissect this term of 'perfect', we can see that it heavily relates to Jesus' ideology of always treating his

peers with compassion, no matter the circumstance. In my opinion, there really is no definitive

answer in finding the right and wrong ways to live. However, I believe whether we carve it out

of our religion or find our own personal morals to aid us in seeking the answer, the notion of

mutual respect and empathy proves to be a prominent factor.

Works Cited

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