



# WHAT IS GOOD?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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For the purposes of discussing ethics, the moral atheist might want to define good as benefiting others for the sake of benefiting others, often at a cost to one's self. This is a much more positive position, it still leaves good as the opposite of evil, and it makes good a laudable thing.

The only significant possible drawback is that this definition does not make good a synonym for moral. But even that makes sense, in its way — someone could be perfectly moral because such behavior is philosophically required, but at heart not be a good person. On the other hand, a good person might not be moral, as in the case of someone who steals money from a bank to give to starving people.

In any case, if you get into a discussion of good and evil, be sure to define your terms beforehand. They may not be as cut-and-dried as you think they are.

**W**E ALL AGREE that some actions are good and some are not good, and we all agree that people should strive to do good, but how would an atheist define the philosophical concept "good"? Defining good is not as easy a task as it might at first appear. For example, some theists define good and evil such that good is sort of a benevolent force that is a reflection of God, while evil is simply a lack of that force and has no existence in and of itself (similar to darkness, which is a lack of light and not a separate thing).

Others define good in terms of following God's example or obeying God's laws. Obviously, to an atheist, these are not particularly useful definitions. That's why an atheist needs to stick with a definition of good that is much more mundane.

Perhaps the simplest solution would be to define good as the opposite of bad — anything that is undesirable is bad, and anything that isn't bad is good. That works, but it feels a little hollow. Why strive to be good when "good" is so bland?

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A Question of Moral Atheism

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# QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

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1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on [blog.iamanatheist.org](http://blog.iamanatheist.org). Thanks!

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