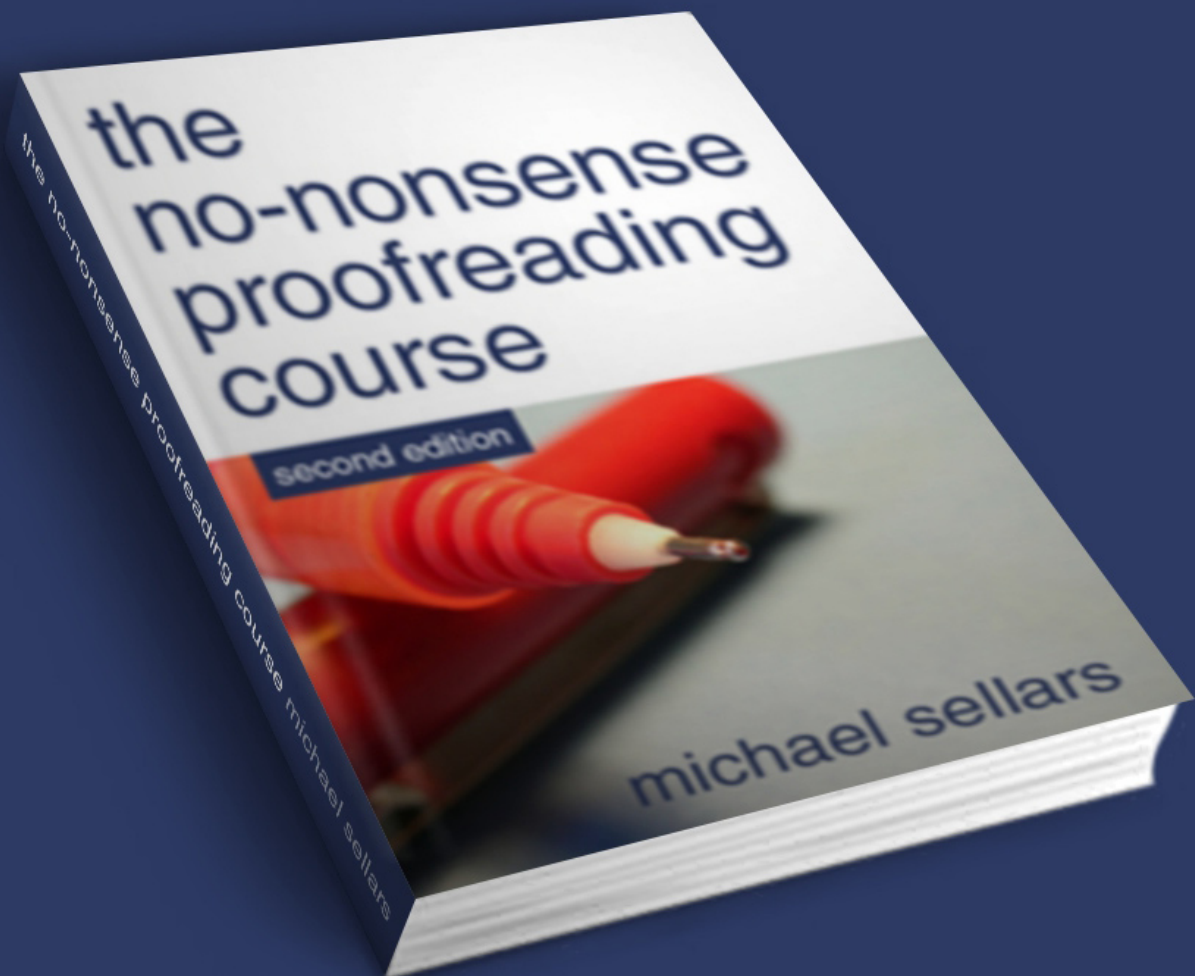


# Proofreading exercise 18

From 'The Nature of Goodness'  
by George Herbert Palmer



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## PROOFREADING EXERCISE 18

From 'The Nature of Goodness' by George Herbert Palmer

IN undertaking the following discussion I foresee two grave difficulties. My reader may well feel that goodness is already the most familiar of all the thoughts we employ, and yet he may at the same time suspect that there is something about it perplexingly abstruse and remote. Familiar it certainly is. It attends all our wishes, acts, and projects as nothing else does, so that no estimate of its influence can be excessive. When we take a walk, read a book, make a dress, hire a servant, visit a friend, attend a concert, choose a wife, cast a vote, enter into business, we always do it in the hope of attaining something good. The clue of goodness is accordingly a veritable guide of life. On it depend actions far more minute than those just mentioned. We never raise a hand, for example, unless with a view to improve in some respect our condition. Motionless we should remain forever, did we not believe that by placing the hand elsewhere we might obtain something which we do not now possess. Consequently we employ the word or some synonym of it during pretty much every waking hour of our lives. Wishing some test of this frequency I turned to Shakespeare, and found that he uses the word "good" fifteen hundred times, and its derivatives "goodness," "better," and 'best,' about as many more. He could not make men and women talk right without incessant reference to this directive conception.

But while thus familiar and influential when mixed with action, and just because of that very fact, the notion of goodness is bewilderingly abstruse and remote. People in general do not observe this curious circumstance. Since they are so frequently encountering goodness, both laymen and scholars are apt to assume that it is altogether clear and requires no explanation. But the very reverse is the truth. Familiarity obscures. It breeds instincts and not understanding. So inwoven has goodness become with the very web of life that it is hard to disentangle. We cannot easily detach it from encompassing circumstance, look at it nakedly, and say what in itself it really is. Never appearing in practical affairs except as an element, and always intimately associated with something else, we are puzzled how to break up that intimacy and give to goodness independent meaning. It is as if oxygen were never found alone, but only in connection with hydrogen, carbon, or some other of the eighty elements which compose our globe. We might feel its wide influence, but we should have difficulty in describing what the thing itself was. Just so if any chance dozen persons should be called on to say what they mean by goodness, probably not one could offer a definition which he would be willing to hold to for 15 minutes.

It is true, this strange state of things is not peculiar to goodness. Other familiar conceptions show a similar tendency, and just about in proportion, too, to their importance. Those which count for most in our lives are least easy to understand. What, for example, do we mean by love? Everybody has experienced it since the world began. For a century or more, novelists have been fixing our attention on it as our chief concern. Yet nobody has yet succeeded in making the matter quite plain. What is the state? Socialists are trying to tell us, and we are trying to tell them; but each, it must be owned, has about as much difficulty in understanding himself as in understanding his opponent, though the two sets of vague ideas still contain reality enough for vigorous strife. Or take the very simplest of conceptions, the conception of force—that which is presupposed in every species of physical science; ages are likely to pass before it is satisfactorily defined. Now the conception of goodness is something of this sort, something so wrought into the total framework of existence that it is hidden from view and not separately observable. We know so much about it that we do not understand it.

For ordinary purposes probably it is well not to seek to understand it. Acquaintance with the structure of the eye does not help seeing. To determine beforehand just how polite we should be would not facilitate human intercourse. And possibly a completed scheme of goodness would rather confuse than ease our daily actions. Science does not readily connect with life. For most of us all the time, and for all of us most of the time, instinct is the better prompter. But if we mean to be ethical students and to examine conduct scientifically, we must evidently at the outset come face to face with the meaning of goodness. I am consequently often surprised on looking into a treatise on ethics to find no definition of goodness proposed. The author assumes that everybody knows what goodness is, and that his own business is merely to point out under what conditions it may be had. But few readers do know what goodness is. One suspects that frequently the authors of these treatises themselves do not, and that a hazy condition of mind on this central subject is the cause of much loose talk afterwards. At any rate, I feel sure that nothing can more justly be demanded of a writer on ethics at the beginning of his undertaking than that he should attempt to unravel the subtleties of this all-important conception. Having already in a previous volume marked out the Field of Ethics, I believe I cannot wisely go on discussing the science that I love, until I have made clear what meaning I everywhere attach to the obscure and familiar word *good*. This word being the ethical writers chief tool, both he and his readers must learn its construction before they proceed to use it. To the study of that curious nature I dedicate this volume.

## PROOFREADING EXERCISE 18, ANSWERS.

IN undertaking the following discussion I foresee two grave difficulties. My reader may well feel that goodness is already the most familiar of all the thoughts we employ, and yet he may at the same time suspect that there is something about it perplexingly abstruse and remote. Familiar it certainly is. It attends all our wishes, acts, and projects as nothing else does, so that no estimate of its influence can be excessive. When we take a walk, read a book, make a dress, hire a servant, visit a friend, attend a concert, choose a wife, cast a vote, enter into business, we always do it in the hope of attaining something good. The clue of goodness is accordingly a veritable guide of life. On it depend actions far more minute than those just mentioned. We never raise a hand, for example, unless with a view to improve in some respect our condition. Motionless we should remain forever, did we not believe that by placing the hand elsewhere we might obtain something which we do not now possess. Consequently we employ the word or some synonym of it during pretty much every waking hour of our lives. Wishing some test of this frequency I turned to Shakespeare, and found that he uses the word "good" fifteen hundred times, and its derivatives "goodness," "better," and 'best,'[1] about as many more. He could not make men and women talk right without incessant reference to this directive conception.

But while thus familiar and influential when mixed with action, and just because of that very fact, the notion of goodness is bewilderingly abstruse and remote. People in general do not observe this curious circumstance. Since they are so frequently encountering goodness, both laymen and scholars are apt to assume that it is altogether clear and requires no explanation. But the very reverse is the truth. Familiarity obscures. It breeds instincts and not understanding. So inwoven has goodness become with the very web of life that it is hard to disentangle. We cannot easily detach it from encompassing circumstance, look at it nakedly, and say what in itself it really is. Never appearing in practical affairs except as an element, and always intimately associated with something else, we are puzzled how to break up that intimacy and give to goodness independent meaning. It is as if oxygen were never found alone, but only in connection with hydrogen, carbon, or some other of the eighty elements which compose our globe. We might feel its wide influence, but we should have difficulty in describing what the thing itself was. Just so if any chance dozen persons should be called on to say what they mean by goodness, probably not one could offer a definition which he would be willing to hold to for 15[2] minutes.

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in proportion, too, to their importance. Those which count for most in our lives are least easy to understand. What, for example, do we mean by love? Everybody has experienced it since the world began. For a century or more, novelists have been fixing our attention on it as our chief concern. Yet nobody has yet succeeded in making the matter quite plain. What is the state? Socialists are trying to tell us, and we are trying to tell them; but each, it must be owned, has about as much difficulty in understanding himself as in understanding his opponent, though the two sets of vague ideas still contain reality enough for vigorous strife. Or take the very simplest of conceptions, the conception of force—that which is presupposed in every species of physical science; ages are likely to pass before it is satisfactorily defined. Now the conception of goodness is something of this sort, something so wrought into the total framework of existence that it is hidden from view and not separately observable. We know so much about it that we do not understand it.[3]

For ordinary purposes probably it is well not to seek to understand it. [Aquaintance](#)[4] with the structure of the eye does not help seeing. To determine beforehand just how polite we should be would not facilitate human intercourse. And possibly a completed scheme of goodness would rather confuse than ease our daily actions. Science does not readily connect with life. For most of us all the time, and for all of us most of the time, instinct is the better prompter. But if we mean to be ethical students and to examine conduct scientifically, we must evidently at the outset come face to face with the meaning of goodness. I am consequently often surprised on looking into a treatise on ethics to find no definition of goodness proposed. The author assumes that everybody knows what goodness is, and that his own business is merely to point out under what conditions it may be had. But few readers do know what goodness is. One suspects that frequently the authors of these treatises themselves do not, and that a hazy condition of mind on this central subject is the cause of much [lose](#)[5] talk afterwards. At any rate, I feel sure that nothing can more justly be demanded of a writer on ethics at the beginning of his undertaking than that he should attempt to unravel the subtleties of this all-important conception. Having already in a previous volume marked out the Field of Ethics, I believe I cannot wisely go on discussing the science that I love, until I have made clear what meaning I everywhere attach to the obscure and familiar word *good*. This word being the ethical [writers](#)[6] chief tool, both he and his readers must learn its construction before they proceed to use it[7] To the study of that curious nature I dedicate this volume.

[1] The word 'best' should be in double quotation marks

[2] Should be 'fifteen'

[3] Wrong font

[4] Should be 'Acquaintance'

[5] Should be 'loose'

[6] Should be 'writer's'

[7] Full stop missing

Note. The word 'inwoven' was correct at the time this piece was published. Nowadays, we would use 'interwoven'.