

BIG QUESTIONS

FINDING THE ULTIMATE GOOD

OVERVIEW:

One way of figuring out what makes a life good is by honing in on what we take to be the greatest or ultimate good. Suppose, with Aristotle, that what we do is directed at the acquisition of some particular good: We eat food (action) in order to survive (good); and we exercise (action) in order to maintain our physical health (good). If all of our actions ultimately converged on a single good, we could use this good — the *greatest good* — to define what makes a life good.

1

On the next page, write out a list of at least ten actions you typically perform. These can be things like “Going to work,” or “buying groceries,” or “watching football on Saturdays,” or “volunteering at a shelter.”

2

Once you’ve completed your list, ask yourself for each item “Why do I do this?” If there’s an answer to this question (e.g. I buy groceries so I can make food) draw an arrow, write down the response, and repeat the process.

3

When you reach an action for which there is no further answer, (e.g. “I eat food to survive. Why? There’s no further reason!”) CIRCLE that action.

4

When every chain ends in a circled action, ask yourself — for each of the circled actions — “What good does this action aim at?”

5

If any of the thinkers we’ve been looking at are right, there will be just one answer to all of these questions. Regardless, this good (or goods if you think there are more than one) is your ultimate good. You can now use that answer toward the Big Question: What makes a life good?

List of Actions and Goods