What is good?

In this essay i will discuss quote number 2; «…Someone who does not enjoy fine actions is not good; for no one would call a person just, for instance, if he did not enjoy doing just actions, or generous if he did not enjoy doing generous actions…» I found this interesting because it reminds me of something I used to hear a lot when I was a kid. I am not fond of cleaning of any sort, but as is right, I was always forced to help the family with cleaning our home. And I would do it of course, but i would never like it and I would be sulking, at least for the first 15 minutes, and my parents would tell me to stop sulking. And I remember getting very angry at this phrase, because there I was doing exactly like I was told, and it wasn’t enough. Not only did my parents tell me what to do, but they also told me how to feel about it. I think of this as a great intrusion, because surely my mind is free and I can think and feel how I want. According to this quote one could say that I am a bad person, because I did not enjoy having to help my family clean the common areas, but is this right? Because after all I am doing what is right. How I feel about it should be up to me as long as I am doing what is right, shouldn’t it?

What is a fine action? Is it doing what is the moral thing to do? What is the moral thing to do? Is it doing what the norms tell you? I sure hope not, groupmentality can be cruel. Mobs of people stood outside cheering for Pontus Pilatus to kill Jesus, a man whoose only crime was caring for outsiders and blasphemy, also known as expressing an opinion. In some parts of the world they punish people for being gay, women for riding bikes, people for wearing hats on a sturday or farting in church. There are som many crazy norms and rules in societies all over the world surely just following these with a smile isn’t all being a good person entails? This cannot be the definition of a fine action. Hedonism says that the meaning of life is to achieve as much satisfaction as possible, and that the morally right thing is to do what gives you satisfaction, but people do not always want the best for others, they can be selfish. If people truely followed through on every little urge they had the world would be a bloodbath. Some would say that the very thing that seperates us from the animals is our ability to postpone or refuse satsisfaction. Luckily, because otherwise I think we would have a bigger problem with people stealing, shouting and killing eachother. Maybe a fine action is one who is done with no malintent, one who is done in the hope that it will be good and do good, but is good intention really enough for an action to be good. Because some of the worst things ever done were done with the best intentions. Satanists molest and burn people to sett them free, christians forced people into christianity to save them, all done with the best intentions.

No, I think my favorite way of moral thinking is Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperativ which says that our actions must be made a universal law. We must always do what we would want anyone in our situation to do. This is a mix of norms in the society and our own personal ideas about what is right. Again this method is challenged by weird and questionaable norms as well as some peoples opinions that are what would be considered unnormal and unmoral. This works best when paired with discussion so that people can check eachothers morals and point out logic flaws in the reasoning. So there we have it, a fine action is an action done according to the categoric imperativ.

Now, in my opinion some of the fine actions you get when using the categoric imperative have horrible consequences for yourself. Let’s use the train experiment: A train is rushing along the tracks at high speed, up ahead there is a split in the tracks. The train is heading for the left tracks where there are twenty children tied to the tracks, screaming for help. On the right track there is a single child tied to the tracks. This child is your son. You are standing by a leaver, if you pull it, the tracks will shift and the train will hit your son. An impossible choice, do you save the twenty children or your own son whom you love to bits. The categoric imperative says that you save the twenty because if there was another in your place, and your child was one of the twenty you would want the other to save your child, and i f you were a true neutral in the conflict you would think twenty or one, simple math. Now, the fine act is, you kill your son. The qoute says that he who does not enjoy fine actions is not good. You will not enjoy killing your son, does that make you not good? You cannot say that a man sacrificing his own happiness for the greater good is not himself a good man. He is the epitome of a hero. There is another aspect here of course, conscience. If you remain passive, you don’t pull the leaver you save your son, you will now have twenty childrens life on your hands, and twenty crying parents saying why didn’t you save my child. There really are no good alternatives in this case, but Socrates would say that knowing you acted according to what was morally right will make you happy. Through doing the right thing you will get selfrespect and you will with time come to appreciate the sacrifice you made. It is extremely comforting for us to know that we have done what is right, it might even be the greatest comfort there is to a human. So maybe in this case, eventhough you would not think so, the act of sacrificing your son would crazily enough be the action that made you more happy.

So where do we stand on the quote. Well i think we have established that a fine action is according to moral and in this essay I used categorical imperative. We have also established that sometimes, even when faced with an impossible choice, sticking to the categorical imperative is the choice that will bring you the most happiness. I think my main problem with this quote was the part were you have to enjoy doing fine actions, to be a good man. Now, we have established that fine actions may bring you more hapiness, but I still don’t think that you will enjoy doing the action. You cannot possibly say that you enjoyed killing your son even if it would bring you more longterm happiness. I think a person who enjoys doing fine actions, who enjoys being just and generous is wonderful, but I also think that a person who would find any sort of pleasure in doing the action with the train I described above is to hung up on justice, and cold and cynical and that is not how I would characterize a good man. I think someone like that has to little regard for human life and is potentially dangerous.

So what then, is my definition of a good man? To me, a good man is a man who cares and has love for others despite race, gender and musicprefrences. A good man acts according to what is morally right, but when faced with the impossible choice he has qualms, because that is a product of love for fellow humans. Without these qualms, without questioning our actions we may end up missing opportunities. We act to fast because we think we have to take a hard choice when really there are other ways. It isn’t supposed to be easy, you are supposed to struggle with these things because that is what makes you human, your ability to make sacrifices. If you know from the start that you are right and you enjoy acting morally too much then you don’t feel the sacrifice anymore. You get numb towards the suffering of others and that makes you unfit to follow moral because you can no longer get the whole story so that you can make an accurate categorical imerative. Empathy is an essential part of morals, and when people lose their empathy you get racism and nazism. This is something we must avoid at all costs. So go out there and do the right thing, but for gods sake, don’t enjoy making tough decisions. Because sometimes you make the right decision, and sometimes you make the wrong decision and sometimes there are no right decisions, and if you cannot see the error of your ways, then we are screwed.