Good, theories of the

‘Good’ is the most general term of positive evaluation, used to recommend or express approval in a wide range of contexts. It indicates that a thing is desirable or worthy of choice, so that normally, if you have reason to want a certain kind of thing, you also have reason to prefer a good thing of that kind.

A theory of the good may consist in a general account of the good, which is meant to apply to all good things; or in a definition of ‘good’, that is, an account of how the term functions in the language. Theories of the good have metaphysical implications about the relations between fact and value. Many ancient and medieval philosophers believed in the ultimate identity of the real and the good. Modern philosophers generally reject this identification, and have held a range of positions: realists, for example, hold that the good is part of reality, while certain moral sense theorists hold that when we call something ‘good’ we are projecting human interests onto reality; and emotivists hold that we use the term ‘good’ only to signify subjective approval.

Theorists of the good also categorize different kinds of goodness and explain how they are related. Good things are standardly classified as ends, which are valued for their own sakes, or as means, valued for the sake of the ends they promote. Some philosophers also divide them into intrinsic goods, which have their value in themselves, and extrinsic goods, which get their value from their relation to something else. Various theories have been held about the relation between these two distinctions – about whether an end must be something with intrinsic value. Philosophers also distinguish subjective or agent-relative goods – things which are good for someone in particular – from objective or agent-neutral goods, which are good from everyone’s point of view. Views about how these kinds of goodness are related have important implications for moral philosophy.

Usually, a theory of the good is constructed in the hope of shedding light on more substantive questions, such as what makes a person, an action, or a human life good. These questions raise issues about the relation between ethical and other values. For example, we may ask whether moral virtue is a special sort of goodness, or just the ordinary sort applied to persons. Or, since actions are valued as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, we may ask how these values are related to the action’s goodness or badness. We may also pose the question of whether a life that is good in the sense of being happy must also be a morally good or virtuous life. This last question has occupied the attention of philosophers ever since Plato.
1 History and metaphysics of the good

Almost anything may be assessed as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This ubiquity of ‘good’ and its cognates in other languages has suggested nearly opposite conclusions about the metaphysics of goodness to different philosophers. At one extreme we find Plato’s view that the good is the fundamental principle of reality. Through works such as the Republic, Plato expounded his view that the reality of an object consists in its ‘participation’ in a ‘Form’. A Form is both an archetype or pattern for, and an ideal, a perfect version of, the things of which it is the Form. Each Form, because it is perfect, in turn participates in the Form of the Good. A thing is real, then, to the extent that it participates in the Form of the Good.

In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle criticizes Plato’s account for not telling us anything about particular kinds of goodness (see Aristotle ββ21–6). Yet Aristotle’s own metaphysics retains a version of the equation of goodness and reality. The form or essential nature of each thing, according to Aristotle, consists in its characteristic activity or function, and the thing is both most perfect and most real when it performs its own function well (see Perfectionism).

These metaphysical views may seem remote from our everyday employment of the idea of goodness. Yet most philosophers agree that the basic insight behind Aristotle’s account throws important light on many uses of ‘good’. To say that a thing is good is to say that it is a well-functioning thing of its kind, and its well-functioning is related to its reality: a good heart is one that pumps blood well, and a heart that ceases to pump blood altogether ceases to be a heart. This functional account of goodness applies most clearly to things that have purposes – instruments and tools, biological organs, parts of machines, crafts and professions – and it has the advantage of making it clear why we care about having things that are good. But when we say that happiness, or beauty, or freedom, is good, we do not seem to be talking about the performance of a function. Efforts have therefore been made to extend the basic idea of the functional account to things which are not clearly purposive, like people and lives.

Aristotle himself extended his functional account of goodness to organisms with the aid of the
view that an organism is a thing with a special kind of form: an organism is a thing designed so as to maintain and reproduce its own form. An organism’s function, therefore, is to maintain and reproduce itself and its own kind. The organs and activities of an organism are called ‘good’ when they enable it to function well in its own characteristic way, and such an organism also is so designed as to achieve its own good. So for instance since a cheetah functions by running down prey for herself and her cubs, a cheetah is in good condition when she can run fast, and she is then likely to achieve her own good, which is catching her prey. Since the way of functioning characteristic of human beings is through the use of reason, good human beings are those who have the properties that enable them to make good rational choices. Those properties count as virtues, and the virtuous person, barring uncontrollable misfortunes, will achieve the human good. Some contemporary philosophers, emphasizing that we can talk about what is good for and in plants and animals as well as human beings, have championed an account like Aristotle’s, either of what makes a human being good, or of what makes a life good for a human being, or both (Foot 2001; Kraut 2007).

Taking a slightly different tack, Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), extends the functional account of goodness by proposing that ‘a good x’ means ‘an x that has the properties it is rational to want in an x’. This covers the functional account, but can easily be extended. A good life, for example, has the properties it is rational to want in a life. The goodness of pleasure, freedom, or beauty may then be interpreted in terms of the role these things play in good lives. A good person has the properties that it is rational for persons in a just society to want in each other.

The relinquishment of the view that the good coincides with the real marks the transition from the ancient and medieval to the modern world. Modern thinkers confront a value-neutral world, the world of matter in motion described by physics. Modern ‘realists’, although they reject the general equation of the real and the good, still believe that goodness is an objective property of certain objects (see Moral realism). Other modern philosophers believe that goodness is not a property that exists independently of the human mind, but rather some sort of projection or construction out of the needs, desires, and interests of human or sensate beings.

Philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries distinguished between the ‘naturally good’ and the ‘morally good’. The naturally good is what is pleasant or desirable or makes us happy. Some early modern philosophers believed that the morally good is constructed out of the naturally good. For example, natural law theorists like Hobbes and Pufendorf thought that naturally good actions become morally obligatory when we are commanded to perform them by God or a sovereign (see NATURAL LAW), while sentimentalists, such as Hutcheson and Hume, held that naturally good dispositions – pleasant or useful character traits – are rendered moral
virtues by the fact that we approve of them (see MORAL SENSE THEORIES). Rationalists such as Clarke and Price, on the other hand, believed that certain actions have a special kind of moral value which is independent of natural goodness, namely rightness.

By the late eighteenth century the distinction between natural and moral goodness began to blur, but from two opposed directions. Kant (1788) argued that moral goodness is the necessary condition of natural goodness. Happiness purchased by immoral action, for example, is not good at all (see KANTIAN ETHICS; KANT, I. 6–11). The utilitarians, by contrast, made natural goodness the source of all value, arguing that morally right actions are simply those that produce the maximum amount of the natural good, happiness or pleasure (see UTILITARIANISM).

The claim that happiness or pleasure just is the good puzzled Moore, who, in the early years of the twentieth century, pointed out that 'good' certainly does not mean 'pleasant' (see MOORE, G.E. 1). Moore argued (1903) that any attempt to identify 'good' with a natural property is an instance of the 'naturalistic fallacy', and that we must therefore suppose that 'good' is a 'non-natural' property (see NATURALISM IN ETHICS 3). This attempt to establish value-realism on linguistic grounds set off a discussion of what the word 'good' means, or how it is used. Does it describe some property of objects, or is it used just to prescribe or recommend? The most extreme view is that of the emotivists, who stand in diametric opposition to Plato. Emotivists believe not only that goodness is not the fundamental principle of reality, but that strictly speaking the word 'good' does not refer to anything real at all. Its ubiquity, they think, can be explained only by the supposition that 'good' is used merely to express the speaker's subjective approval, like a squeal of delight (see EMOTIVISM).

2 Distinctions in goodness

The most obvious distinction in goodness is that between things which are valued as means, or instrumental goods, and things which are valued as ends, or final goods (see VALUES). This distinction is often confused with the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value. To say that something is intrinsically good is to say that it is good in virtue of what it is – in virtue of its own intrinsic nature – while to say that something is extrinsically good is to say that it is good in virtue of the relations in which it stands to things outside of itself. Means, for instance, are obviously extrinsically valuable, because their goodness springs from the fact that they promote other good things. Ends, by contrast, are often characterized as intrinsically good. In fact, however, it is an open question whether in order to be an end – to be valued or valuable for its own sake – an object must have intrinsic value.
Early twentieth-century moral philosophers debated this question. Empiricists argued that for something to be a final good is just for it to be desired for its own sake; philosophers in the idealist tradition, in contrast, believed that to be a final good is to be the object of a rational will. On both accounts, final goods are extrinsically valuable, deriving their value from the desires or volitions of human beings. But Moore argued that because ‘good’ does not mean ‘desired’ or ‘willed’, it is always an open question whether something desired or willed is good. Final goods, he thought, must therefore be intrinsically valuable. Moore suggested that in order to ascertain whether something is intrinsically good we should use a test of isolation: we consider whether the object has value apart from its relations to other things. He claimed that when we use this method, we will discover that value belongs to complex states of affairs which he called ‘organic unities’, such as a person’s appreciating a beautiful object, or two friends enjoying each other’s company.

One of Moore’s aims in advancing this theory was to oppose hedonism, the view that pleasure is the good (see HEDONISM). Yet the theory that final goods must be intrinsically valuable may push us towards hedonism, as we can see by applying Moore’s isolation test. A beautiful painting must surely be a good thing, yet if we imagine it existing in isolation from all viewers who might enjoy it, it seems to be without value. So we may decide that the value belongs instead to an ‘organic unity’ consisting of someone’s enjoying the beautiful painting. This line of thought led Moore to conclude that human experiences, especially pleasant ones, are an element in most intrinsically valuable organic unities. But the same idea – that a thing’s goodness cannot be completely independent of its relation to human or sensate experiences and concerns – led utilitarians to suppose that pleasure must simply be the good.

The categories of value which Kant adopted suggest a different way of thinking about the relation between value and human concerns. Kant distinguished unconditional and conditional value, a distinction that resembles the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction. According to Kant (1785), a thing has unconditional goodness if we value it under any and all conditions, whereas it is conditionally good if the value we accord it depends on circumstances. The only thing we value unconditionally, he argued, is a good will, and human beings as the possessors of the capacity for good will. Yet the things people desire and care about do have conditional value – they are valuable because they matter to people, who have value. In this way, all values are related to human concerns. Those who believe that the happiness of say, small children and the other animals is also good may reject or wish to modify this account, but may still believe that all good things are related to the concerns of sentient beings.

If all value must be related to human or sentient concerns, then we might think that anything that
is good must be good for someone. Goodness for someone is sometimes characterized as 'subjective' or 'agent-relative' goodness, as opposed to 'objective' or 'agent-neutral' goodness, which pertains to everyone. If something is subjectively good for me, then I have reason to promote it and care about it; while if something is objectively good, then everyone has reason to promote it and care about it.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophers have debated the question of the relation between these two kinds of goodness. Some think that goodness is inherently subjective or agent-relative, and that people have reason to pursue common objects only when their interests happen to coincide. Others think that subjective values always give rise to objective ones, so that if it is (subjectively) good for me to have something, then it is objectively good that I should have it. Still others think that some subjective values – say, the ones associated with needs – give rise to objective ones, while others do not (Nagel 1986). And finally, at the other extreme, there are philosophers who think that subjective values are derived from objective ones. According to these philosophers, I cannot claim that something is good for me ‘because it makes me happy’, unless I consider my happiness to be, independently of my personal interest in it, an objectively good thing. On the basis of this sort of view, Moore (1903) argued that rational egoism is incoherent. I cannot rationally attend only to my own good unless I believe that it is the only thing objectively good.

3 The goodness of people

When we call a person ‘good’ are we using ‘good’ in the ordinary sense? Sometimes it seems clear that we are. A person may be good at things – talented at sports or crafts, or master of an intellectual discipline. A person may also be good in certain roles – a good mother or teacher, for instance. Aristotle’s functional account of goodness, or something like it, seems to apply to these cases: a good teacher is good at carrying out the functions of a teacher, or has the qualities that it is rational to want in a teacher. But what about when we say that a person is good, just as a person?

In fact there are two different ways in which people are said, just as people, to have value. Ordinarily, when we say of a particular person that they are ‘a good person’, we mean that they are morally good or virtuous. Aristotle applied his functional account of goodness to moral virtue in a straightforward way. He identified reason as the human function, meaning that what is distinctive of human beings is the use of reason to govern our activities. Virtues are qualities that both foster and arise from the good performance of this function. Both Plato and Aristotle compared moral virtue to health: it is a way of being in good psychological condition. As noted
earlier, some contemporary philosophers have argued for this sort of account of moral virtue (Foot 2001). The functional account has also been used in a more broadly social way to explain moral goodness. On this view you are morally good if you are good at the performance of all of your various social roles, or if you have the qualities it is rational for your friends and fellow citizens to want in a friend and fellow citizen; or, as in certain sentimentalist theories, if you are an object of moral approval because you have these qualities (see VIRTUES AND VICES 2–3).

Those accounts identify moral goodness with the possession of certain dispositions – character traits – that influence a person's conduct. Philosophers who favour such accounts usually suppose that your actions issue directly from your character. But other philosophers claim that human beings have a power distinct from and more directly related to actions than character traits are, namely the will (see WILL, THE). The will enables you to act freely, even to the point of doing what is 'out of character'; and it makes you responsible for your actions, even when they seem to be determined inevitably by your character. Kant, accordingly, recognized a form of moral goodness distinct from virtue or the goodness of character traits, namely goodness of the will or moral worth, which pertains to the well-functioning of the will itself, either as it is exercised in particular actions, or as a standing disposition. Kant famously claimed that you may achieve moral worth even if you have temperamental qualities which make it hard for you to do what duty demands (see SELF-CONTROL). This claim raises important questions about how the will and character are related.

The second way in which people are considered to be valuable just as people, enshrined in many religious and philosophical systems, involves the thought that every human being as such has a fundamental value which it is wrong to deny or overlook. The religious view that we are all God's children, the political view that all human beings are created equal, and the Kantian moral view that every human being is an end-in-itself are all expressions of this idea. There are various views about what makes people valuable in this way – freedom of the will, rationality, consciousness, the possession of identifiable interests, the capacity for pleasure and pain, or simply life itself – and so of what treatment is called for. Some of these options raise the question whether other living things should also be accorded such value (see MORAL STANDING 1–3). This kind of value is different from that which we attribute to particular people when we say they are morally good, for one need not be an especially good person to lay claim to the political rights or the moral respect due to every human being. But the two ideas are sometimes related by the thought that it is the capacity for moral goodness, or the capacity that makes us capable of moral goodness, that gives us this fundamental value (see RESPECT FOR PERSONS). Those who think that all animals or all living things should be accorded this kind of respect will reject this
4 The right and the good

Good is a ubiquitous term, applying to almost any sort of thing, but actions, policies and laws are also praised as being ‘right’ or ‘just’. Right actions are those which are required by morality or, more extensively, those not forbidden by morality, not ‘wrong’. So a question arises about the relation between these two kinds of value, the right and the good. Consequentialists think that the relation is simple: right actions are those which tend to maximize good results, so that rightness is actually a form of instrumental goodness (see CONSEQUENTIALISM). Yet we sometimes seem to care about doing the right thing independently of, or even in the teeth of, the consequences that it produces. We may decide that we will uphold someone’s rights, or obey the law, or keep a promise, though we know the results will be bad, because, as we say, ‘it is the principle of the thing’. Consequentialists think this attitude is either an acknowledgement of the especially important consequences that result from the observance of certain rules, or else a misguided form of rule-worship. But ‘deontologists’ believe there is something valuable about doing the right thing apart from the good results it may or may not produce (see DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS).

Since deontologists deny that rightness is merely an instrumental value, we might be tempted to say they think of rightness as either a final good or a special kind of intrinsic value, characteristic of actions. But this does not completely capture the deontological intuition. Final and intrinsic values, as they are often conceived, may be weighed in with other values, so on this view we might sometimes endure wrongdoing, as we sometimes endure pain, for the sake of the larger benefits it brings. But deontologists deny that such values as freedom, justice, or fidelity may be traded off for other goods. They also believe that the way in which right actions serve these values is not by producing or causing them, but instead is direct or constitutive. For example, a deontologist may think that it is right to keep a promise, not because fidelity to promises is thereby efficiently produced (for we can imagine circumstances in which one person’s keeping a promise will induce others to break theirs), but because it is an act of fidelity. And we respect human rights, not because this produces freedom, but because this is what freedom consists in – living in a world in which human rights are respected.

Some contemporary philosophers nevertheless think that rightness or at least rationality is a form of goodness in action. According to these views, action itself has a kind of metaphysical function in the life of an agent which is not merely the production of good consequences, and it is good – in the sense of right or rational – when it performs that function well. Velleman (2000) argues that a successful action is one that is chosen in a way that renders the agent intelligible to himself.
Korsgaard (2009) argues that a good or right action is one is chosen in a way that unifies and constitutes the agency of the person who chooses it.

The question of the relation between the right and the good therefore gives rise to deep questions about the relations between values of actions and the other values that they serve. But these questions belong more properly to a discussion of the right (see RIGHT AND GOOD).

5 The good life

One of the oldest questions of moral philosophy is what the best life is for a human being. Plato and Aristotle believed that the best human life is one in which the person is well-functioning as a person, or flourishing, a view, which, as noted above, still has its proponents. But Plato and Aristotle also went on to ask which life was the most flourishing life. A standard view in ancient Greek philosophy was that there are three types of life: a contemplative or philosophical life; a life of virtuous political activity; and a hedonistic or money-making life. Plato and Aristotle agreed that the contemplative life is best and the political life second best; in their view, only those who do not know the true pleasures of contemplation and virtuous action resort to hedonistic pursuits (see EUDAIMONIA; HEDONISM).

The idea that so specific a life can be identified as best may seem paradoxical. If there is a best life for human beings, does that mean it is the best life for any human being, regardless of personal endowments or natural tastes? On this view, lives are like looks: there may be a best way for each person to look, but the best way for you to look may not, unfortunately, be the best way to look. Some philosophers argue that this makes no sense: how can a certain way of life be better for you, if there is no way in which you could enjoy, appreciate, or be interested in such a life and still be yourself?

What sorts of arguments might be used to show that one type of life is best? Plato favoured a test of experience: we should take as authoritative the preferences of those people who have experienced the kinds of activities central to all three types of life. John Stuart Mill (1861) suggested that this test could be used to identify those pleasures whose ‘quality’ is so high as to outweigh considerations of ‘quantity’, and so which belong in the best life (see MILL, J.S. β9). Aristotle appealed to his own idea of function: if human beings have a function, the person who performs the human function well must lead the best life. But Aristotle also thought we could identify certain criteria which any good life must meet, and rate lives by the extent to which they fulfil these criteria: the pursuits central to a good life must be active, pleasant, self-sufficient, and done for their own sake alone.
Perhaps the most common strategy is to appeal to human psychology, to what people actually care about. Classical utilitarians argued that human beings care about only two things: getting pleasure and avoiding pain. The best life must therefore be the one with the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. Others claim that the goodness of your life is a function of how many of your desires are satisfied and the strength of those desires. But the content of your desires and their strength may be determined in unfortunate ways by the limitations of your knowledge or imagination, and this has led some philosophers to adopt an idealized version of this account: the good life for you is the one you would choose under conditions of perfect knowledge and imaginative reflection.

Moore’s theory of intrinsic values suggests a simpler account: the good life is one that consists of intrinsically valuable states and activities, such as appreciating beauty, having friends, and seeking knowledge. Contemporary philosophers sometimes call this an “objective list” theory of the good. Scanlon’s “buck-passing” account agrees that the goodness of life depends on a person’s engagement with what is of value, but “passes the buck” from value to reasons: it is not that we have reason to engage with what is of value, but rather, what is of value is what has properties that give us reason to engage with it in certain ways (Scanlon 1998). But Scanlon distinguishes between a life that is good in this general sense and a life that is good for the person who leads it in the more specific sense indicated by the idea of a person’s welfare or wellbeing or personal happiness. A person might find good reason to sacrifice their own wellbeing or personal happiness for some greater good or value. Focus on a person’s well-being, according to Scanlon, is more properly the concern of third parties who wish to benefit a person, or political institutions aimed at benefiting the citizens, than it is of the person himself. Taking these ideas in a different order, Darwall (2002) argues that we can identify a person’s welfare or well-being by asking what, insofar as one cares for someone, one ought to want for them for their own sake.

These views obviously raise the question whether the good life and the happy life are the same. The early modern philosophers’ distinction between moral and natural goodness brought this question sharply into focus. They thought of happiness as a natural good and many of them believed that reason demands the pursuit of happiness just as obviously as it demands the practice of virtue. Yet virtue does not always bring happiness. Are human beings then subject to conflicting demands of reason? Ancient Greek philosophers had raised a parallel question, whether being virtuous is a good thing for the virtuous person. But ancient and modern solutions are different in an important way. For the Greeks, the answer lay in demonstrating that the qualities we ordinarily regard as moral virtues really are qualities that make us good at the
performance of the human function – qualities without which we would be incapable of choosing and acting well. Once this is established, it is evident that a virtuous person will necessarily have a better life. Modern philosophers, however, are more inclined to believe that happiness and virtue are independent. Many modern philosophers have therefore tried to produce what Rawls (1971) calls ‘congruence’ arguments: arguments that show that the pursuit of virtue will also bring happiness, and so that the two kinds of good, although independent, come together in practice. But others have drawn a more austere conclusion, namely that a life which is both morally good and happy is open to us only in favourable circumstances – circumstances which must be secured by divine arrangements or, more optimistically, by political action.

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See also: Eudaimonia; Evil; Happiness; Practical reason and ethics; Right and good; Virtue ethics; Welfare; Xunzi

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