The Human Good

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ABSTRACT: One of the oldest questions in philosophy is "What is the best life for a human being?" After considering some prominent ancient and recent views about that question, I propose that we approach the question using a relatively simple method that most philosophers have neglected. We should ask what in general is involved in something's (some condition, state, or activity, including a certain kind of life) being good *for* some entity (some object, animal, or person), and then applying this answer to the human case. This method, I argue, yields a surprisingly intuitive answer.

Some Past and Recent Views about the Human Good

1. Plato (428/427 or 424/423-348/347 BC) Justice is an organization of the soul which makes it morally virtuous. Just people "live better and are happier than unjust ones." (*Republic* 352d)

2. Many modern moral philosophers, from Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) to Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900): morality is in our interest, where morality and self-interest are "harmonious but distinct." (Sidgwick)

3. John Rawls (1921-2002): Justice is among the human goods, at least for those who live in a just society.

4. Plato and Rawls: Justice is a good thing for its own sake, valued as such by the just person, and not merely it because promotes or harmonizes with our interest, thought of as something distinct.

5. Aristotle: There are three candidates for the best life: the life of pleasant amusements, the political life, and the contemplative life. We decide which is best by asking:
   5.1 Does it meet the criteria for the best life? It must be active, pleasant, and lived for the sake of a final good, one for which a god would choose existence.
   Result: the contemplative life is best, the political life is good, but the life of pleasant amusements is not, because pleasant amusements are not a final good.
   5.2 The good for a human being must fulfill the human function (*ergon*).

6. Derek Parfit (1942-2017)

   The options are: the Hedonistic Life, the Life of Desire-Fulfillment, and the Objective List Theory:

   "What would be best for someone, or would be most in this person's interests, or would make this person's life go, for him, as well as possible? On *Hedonistic Theories*, what would be best for someone is what would make his life happiest. On *Desire-Fulfillment Theories*, what would be best for someone is what, throughout his life, would best fulfil his desires. On *Objective List Theories*, certain things are good or bad for us, whether or not we want to have the good things, or to avoid the bad things." (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 493)

   The Objective List Theory:

   "According to this theory, certain things are good or bad for people, whether or not these people would want to have the good things or avoid the bad things. The good things might include moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty. The bad things might include being betrayed, manipulated, slandered, deceived, being deprived of liberty or dignity, and enjoying either sadistic pleasure or aesthetic pleasure in what is in fact ugly." (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 499)

Why We Need Another Kind of Answer

Aristotle's answers seem too specific.
Parfit's answers seem too trivial.
These answers seem to be based on intuition.

A different approach: Ask what we mean when we say something is good for some entity, and apply the result to the human case.

Specifically, we will ask:

1. What does it mean to say something can be good or bad for an entity?
2. What does it mean to say something can be good or bad for a living organism?
3. What does it mean to say something can be good for bad for an animal?
4. What does it mean to say something can be good or bad for a human, that is, a rational animal?

On Being Good for an Entity

Aristotle on what is good-for an entity:
"Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function." (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7 1097b21-27)

Aristotle's Metaphysics
Every substance has a form and a matter
Matter = parts or materials of which a thing is made
Form = arrangement of the parts considered as enabling the thing to perform its function
To know the thing is to know its form

Function≠Purpose
Purpose = What it does
Function = *How* it does what it does, its way of functioning

Computer:
Purpose: word-processing, solving mathematical problems, connecting to internet
Function, roughly: electronic storage and retrieval of information according to a program

Radio:
Purpose: Broadcasting music, medium for advertisement, reporting the news, serving as an early warning system
Function, roughly : transmit electromagnetic waves and make them audible

If X has a function, X is a good X if X has the properties that enable it to perform its function, or to perform it well.

If X has a function, Y is good for X if Y tends to maintain or promote X's ability to serve its function.

On Being Good for a Living Organism

Why you might think this has to be different: Living organisms were not made to serve a function

Aristotle's reply: we can regard living organisms as having a function, which is to maintain their own forms.

1. An organism maintains its own form through nutrition. It is constantly wearing out and constantly rebuilding itself.
2. An organism imparts its form to other organisms through reproduction

Other differences from artifacts:

1. Organisms maintain their forms themselves.
2. That is ordinarily all that they do. Their function is to be what they are.

Why we can think of organisms as having a function:

1. Thinking that there is a way something does what it does is not exactly thinking that it has a purpose.
2. From the point of view of acting organisms themselves, things, including their own forms, have purposes, and therefore functions. The concept of a function belongs to the perspective of agency.

On Being Good for a Conscious Animal

Why you might think this has to be different: What is good for an animal must have something to do with whether its life and experiences are good from the animal's own point of view.

Two different senses of good-for applying to animals?

1. "has a positive impact on the animal's functioning" (i.e., is healthy)
2. "has a positive impact on the animal from the animal's own point of view, or on the animal's consciousness"
3. How are they related?

What most philosophers think: Contingently:

Hedonism: health is pleasant and wards off pain
Desire-fulfillment: people want to be healthy
Objective List: health is among the objectively good states
Everybody: health keeps you alive, which puts you in the way of whatever is good in life

What that leaves out:
An animal is an organism who maintains her form by moving through her environment, guided by perception. She perceives what is good for her as attractive and pleasant, and what is bad for her as aversive an unpleasant. She enjoys being in a good condition and dislikes being in a bad one. If she doesn't, she won't survive.

In other words:
To the extent that your life has a good impact on your consciousness, you are in a good functional condition. To the extent that you are in a good functional condition, your life will be enjoyable. Your good conscious state is an awareness, a perception of your good condition, but it is also constitutive of your good condition.

On being Good for a Human Being, a Rational Animal

Why you might think this has to be different: the good life for a human being can't just be being a healthy human being. (too trivial)

Aristotle: Three Kinds of Life
1. Life of nutrition and reproduction
2. Life of perception and action
3. Rational Life, in the practical realm, life of choice

Korsgaard's Version: Three Kinds of Identity
1. Living entity, a *Something* (plant)
2. Psycho-physical entity with a point of view, a *Someone* (animal)
3. Practical Identity (rational animal)

Practical Identity = the roles and relationships in terms of which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions worth undertaking. (Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 101)

Practical Identity as a form of identity, an object of self-constitution

We construct and maintain our physical identity by choosing the objects and actions that tend to maintain it and avoiding the objects and actions that tend to harm it, following the cues that our body gives us.

We construct and maintain our practical identity by choosing to act in accordance with it and avoid the actions that are opposed to it, acting on the reasons that come from the values we choose for ourselves.

The human part of the human function is to make something worthwhile of yourself. To have a good human life is to consciously live up to the values that you set for yourself.

A complication: there can be conflicts between your good *qua* human animal and your good *qua* realizing the practical identity that you have constructed for yourself. As autonomous beings, it is up to us to determine how to settle these conflicts, and so what is good for us as individuals.

Reproduction of practical identity: culture and education
Enjoyment of practical identity: conscious living and consciousness of living in accordance with your own values

Good for:

Good for an entity: to function well
Good for an organism: to function well at being what you are
Good for an animal: to function well consciously at being what you are
Good for a rational animal: to be function well consciously in your practical as well as your natural human identity, insofar as those are compatible