Leading a good life, acting according to rational principles, and doing the right, beneficial thing are three different forms of being good traditional ethical theory focused upon.
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Varieties of Being Good

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The word “good” is used in English as an adjective that modifies the noun it is in construction with. But the adjective “good” not only modifies the constructions it enters into. It is also modified by them. “Good” in “This is a good strawberry” modifies and qualifies the strawberry. In such a construction “good” is also qualified by the strawberry. What is in question must be sweet so that the goodness of the strawberry contains sweetness. In the sentence “This is a good lemon”, the goodness in question is not sweet, but sour. “Good” in English can also modify noun clauses like in “It is good that it is not raining now” or “It is good that I passed my oral examination”. Expounding the meaning of “good” is therefore essentially saying precisely how it modifies whatever it does modify. And such an exposition will have always to take into consideration certain interests the persons using the word do actually have.

What persons characterize as “good” is always something that answers to certain interests. In order to find out what those interests are it is sometimes necessary to think of the context that
makes the sentence or utterance understandable. So, for instance, if we say “That is a good number”, the presupposed interests become clear as soon as we think of a number at roulette or a phone number. Aristotle spoke, instead of interests, of ends. Being good was for him always being conducive to or constituting the attainment of certain goals or ends.

Using the word “good” to qualify something, we express sometimes that we approve of it or that we commend it. But that is not always necessarily the case.

In what follows I am concerned with different possibilities of being good in a moral sense. Depending on the approach preferred in moral theory, the things qualified as good may vary. For Aristotle, “good” were certain acts and dispositions that contribute to what he would have called “leading a good life”. For Kant, in a strict moral sense, “good” was alone the will when it acts according to Reason. Utilitarians, on the other hand, consider only those actions to be good that have beneficial effects for all individuals involved.
1. Leading a Good Life

For Aristotle, every art, every inquiry, every action, and every pursuit aims at some good. And, as there are many and heterogeneous arts, inquiries, actions and pursuits, their ends or aims also are many. The end of medical art is health. The end of shipbuilding is the construction of vessels. The end of military strategy is victory. The end of economics is wealth. Not all aims are reached in the same way either. And their character varies too. Some ends are activities. Other ends are products that exist apart from the activities that produce them. Therefore, we will not be able to obtain the same precision in all things. In each class of things, precision accords with the subject-matter. Consequently, we will have to proceed differently in every single case, according to what we are dealing with.

Some ends or goals are merely instrumental. We aim at them in order to get something else. Others are final, ends in themselves. We do not
aim at them for the sake of something else. The final end everyone aims at is called “happiness”. Views concerning what happiness actually is may vary. But it is generally agreed that the final good for human beings is happiness. Whatever else human beings may want, they want certainly to be happy.

Some people identify happiness with a life full of pleasure and enjoyment. Others identify it with honour and social recognition. A contemplative life is, finally, for the most refined what happiness is all about. Aristotle elaborates a conception of happiness that brings together these three views. Happiness is for him an active life according to the nature of the human soul (“a virtuous activity of soul, of a certain kind”). Such an activity has to correspond to the different functions a human soul is capable to perform, and, if possible, not to neglect any of them, accomplishing them in the best possible way.

Happiness is therefore, according to Aristotle, a specific activity. But it presupposes certain happenings and things which are beyond our control. Happiness needs external goods, material and relational goods. For it is impossible to
accomplish good acts without the proper equipment. There are several things for Aristotle the lack of which hinders happiness: “… for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is not very likely to be happy, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death … happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition…” (Aristotle, 17)

Books VIII and IX of the “Nichomachean Ethics” are about the relational good called “friendship”. In both books Aristotle examines kinds and functions of friendship, establishing that without friends no one would choose to live, even though he had all other goods. Friends cause us pleasure, help and support us, and, ideally, make us better persons. Therefore we value friends for the sake of pleasure, for their utility, and for the moral improvement friendship sometimes leads to.

But happiness is not a passive thing that happens to us. It is mainly a way of being active according to our own nature. This being active presupposes competences, skills, virtues we can acquire
and develop in various learning processes. Aristotle distinguishes intellectual and practical virtues and competences. Intellectual virtues would be wisdom and understanding. Practical virtues are, among many others, courage, temperance, generosity and magnanimity. All virtues are dispositions or habitual states that allow us to act in an excellent way, avoiding excess and defect in the different domains in which we are active. Virtues are concerned with choice. They are neither passions nor faculties, but states of character or states of mind (“hexis”). Moral or practical virtues are dispositions to desire or choose, and not merely capacities to know. Virtues as dispositions are acquired by learning.

Aristotle’s description of particular virtues and vices can be read as an analysis of contemporary society and ideas: an account of the qualities and properties admired or disliked by cultivated Greeks. Aristotle’s analysis, however, is more than that. It may have, superficially seen, the character of a patchwork rather than of a unified whole. But it contains insights into structure and dynamics of human actions and decisions whose validity is universal. Being an interpreter of Greek experience, Aristotle became an
acute and wise analyst of the human condition. What he writes about conditions to lead a good life and the competences necessary for it transcends the Greek context, specially his insight concerning the structure of virtues as a mean. Virtues are, according to such an insight, always concerned with choice and lie in a mean relative to us. What this exactly means can be exemplified analysing how courage and temperance work. To fear everything is to be a coward. To fear nothing is to be rash. To abstain from no pleasure is to be self-indulgent. To abstain from all pleasure is to be insensible. Courage and temperance are thus destroyed by excess and defect, and are preserved by the mean between being coward and rash, being self-indulgent and being insensible. Due to the virtues we have learned and cultivated we are able to choose the intermediate and avoid excess and defect positions. Moral virtues are a mean between two vices, the vices of falling short of or of exceeding what is right concerning passions and actions. Moral virtues always find and choose that which is intermediate.

The virtuous mean is a relative mean: it is relative to each one of us, not in terms of the thing itself, as it is not one and the same for all. It is a rational
mean appropriate to circumstances that include facts about the agent himself. It is not an arithmetical mean. It contains an indirect reference to the good works of art that avoid excess and defect preserving also a mean. Of good works of art we often say that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, as they express a balance of traits and properties equivalent to what Aristotle calls the virtuous mean. Ethical knowledge as a consequence of that is for Aristotle only approximate knowledge. It lacks mathematical precision.

Aristotle’s ethical theory is neither prohibitive nor restrictive. It is a subtle reflection on the conditions of leading a good life. The idea of the naturally functional is fundamental for it. A good and happy life is only possible on the basis of certain external conditions and as a result of a “virtuously” being active. Aristotle’s ethics examines how such a good and happy life is possible. As a theoretical activity, Aristotle’s ethics is itself an important element in it.

Aristotle’s ethical theory is “phenomenologically conservative” (C. Shields) in the sense that he tries to save appearances (“phainomena”) using
them as witnesses and standards. Aristotle’s theory takes as a starting point what people think and say: the “endoxa”, the reputable opinions or entrenched opinions or credible and common beliefs, assuming that there must be some good reason for them. What his philosophical predecessors affirm is taken seriously too because he deeply believes that we can learn something from them paying attention to the terms in which they have cast the problems we are confronted with. What tragedy writers think and say is for Aristotle also to be taken into consideration because such creative artists have studied human nature and arrived at conclusions not to be neglected.

The ideal moral agent Aristotle tries to describe in his ethics is the “great-souled” man capable of leading a good life, with a fine sensitivity for the plurality of goodness, knowing that different things are good in irreducibly different ways, and deeply understanding the conditions of human flourishing.
2. Being Guided By Good Rules and Principles

Nothing less than a scientific system of morality is what Immanuel Kant intends to create: a “metaphysics of morals” with a rational part containing abstract principles and an empirical descriptive part having as a guiding model Newton’s metaphysics of nature. The metaphysics of Morals has to examine the idea and the principles of a possible “pure will”, and not the empirical acts and conditions of human volition in general, which from the most part are drawn from psychology. Such a metaphysical Theory of Morals and the “Critique of Practical Reason” it leads to will prove that the will is only good when it is determined by Reason (that is, by rational rules and principles).

In his “Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals” (1785) Kant contrasts such a theory of morals with the “common rational knowledge of morality” and the “popular moral philosophy” as this philosophy was practised by empirical
philosophers. The final step to be accomplished in the metaphysical theory of morals will be the passage to a “critique of the pure practical reason” in which the principle of morality is to be transcendentally deduced.

The First Section of the “Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals” starts with the sentence that presents Kant’s view as an assertive statement: “Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called “good” without qualification, except a Good Will” (Kant, 151). Not intelligence, judgement, and the other talents of the mind. Not courage, resolution, and perseverance. And not power, riches, honour, or health. Nothing can be called in a strict sense “good” but the will when it proceeds in a specific way. A good will is not good because of what it brings about, performs or effects (by its utility), but simply “by virtue of the volition”, by the way it wills. Such a will can only be according to Kant a will determined exclusively by Reason: Reason itself willing. Not the purpose to be attained decides whether the will is morally good or not, but the “principle of volition”, by which actions take place, without regard to any object of desire. Therefore, for Kant, the purposes which
we may have in view in our actions, or their effects regarded as ends and springs of the will, cannot give to actions any unconditional or moral worth.

The “principle of volition” is, consequently, to be critically examined in order to find out whether the will is good or not. In Kant’s terminology, the subjective principles of volition are called “maxims”. If a single subjective principle of volition, a maxim, when examined, can be accepted to be a universal maxim, then such a maxim becomes an “objective” practical “law”. The so-called “Categorical Imperative” is nothing else than a critical assessment procedure that, when applied, allows us to find out which subjective maxims can become objective laws. The “Categorical Imperative” prescribes that “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Kant, 160). The critical examination of will in order to find out whether it is morally good will or not is in Kant’s own view quite an easy procedure to be implemented. Kant himself writes: “I do not, therefore, need any far-reaching penetration to discern what I have to do in order that my will may be morally good. Inexperienced in the course
of the world, incapable of being prepared for all its contingencies, I only ask myself: Canst thou also will that thy maxim should be a universal law? If not, then it must be rejected, and that not because of a disadvantage accruing from it to myself or others, but because it cannot enter as a principle into a possible universal legislation, and reason extorts from me immediate respect for such legislation” (Kant, 161). Only when we as willing agents (Kant’s “will”) are determined by universalizable reasons (“Reason” itself, or “Reason” becoming “practical”) and rules (“principles”) can morality come about in the empirical world of actions and happenings whose empirical course and results will always be outside our controlling powers.
3. Doing the Right Thing

For the defenders of ethical consequentialism, the criterion of right and wrong can only be the beneficial effects or consequences of our actions. Acts or actions are good, morally speaking, if they contribute positively to our moral well-being, that is, if they have good effects or results. A good effect or result is a “utility” for the subspecies of consequentialists called “Utilitarians”.

Many Utilitarians from Epicurus to Jeremy Bentham identified “utility” with pleasure or the exemption of pain. In John Stuart Mill’s (masterly found) own words: “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure”
Pleasure and freedom from pain are indeed for classical Utilitarians the only things desirable as ends, so that all desirable things are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in them, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

As such a view excited in many minds considerable dislike, John Stuart Mill stressed that the pleasure meant by Utilitarians could not be the pleasure experienced by beasts but the pleasure or pleasures that correspond to human beings who have many mental faculties more elevated and subtle than animal appetites. There are different kinds of pleasure (intellectual pleasures, emotional pleasures and pleasures of the imagination), and all of them were included, so Mill, in the concept of pleasure used by Utilitarians.

Pleasure when a being of higher faculties is concerned means something else than the pleasure characteristic of beings of an inferior type. The cultivated man’s pleasures are the ones meant when Utilitarians talk about pleasure. The pleasures of persons who find sources of interest in all that surrounds them: in the objects of nature and the achievements of art, in the imaginations of
poetry and the incidents of human history. And it is not the pleasures of a single individual that count, but the pleasures that result for all individuals. What counts is the promotion of the general good conceived of as happiness. Therefore, particular motives that lead to beneficial actions are less important than the obtained results arrived at. Saving someone from drowning is the morally right thing to do, whether the motive is duty or the hope of being paid.

Utilitarianism is a morality of right, beneficial actions and results. The promotion of total happiness is what really counts for it. Utilitarians are aware of the fact that sometimes right actions do not necessarily indicate a virtuous character. But having to choose, they let the moral quality of an action depend on the factual results achieved by it, and not on the agent’s motives that lead to it. And they believe that in the long run the best proof of a good character is good actions, refusing to consider mental dispositions as good of which the predominant tendency is to create bad conduct.

The happiness Utilitarians want to promote is not the happiness of single individuals but total
happiness, the happiness of wholes. Impartiality between persons or agents belongs therefore as an essential principle to Utilitarianism. In Bentham’s words: “Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one.” All persons are to be treated equally, except when some recognized social expediency requires the reverse. Neutrality concerning individual agents characterizes utilitarian ethics. In his Book “The Methods of Ethics”, in which Utilitarianism is contrasted with “Egoism” and “Intuitionism”, Henry Sidgwick calls Utilitarianism “Universal Hedonism” and defines it in the following way: “By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct” (Sidgwick, 411).

Utilitarianism assumes that all pleasures that get into the calculation are capable of being compared with one another and with all pains so that the greatest possible surplus of pleasure over pain can be determined. That is not going to be always possible in a precise way. Practical Utilitarian reasoning will sometimes be rough. But that
is no reason for not making it as accurate as the case admits.

Utilitarianism is, in principle, compatible with the morality of common sense. It sustains the general validity of well established moral judgements. But it intends to supplement possible defects which reflection may find in the intuitive recognition of their stringency so that Utilitarianism may be presented as the scientifically complete and systematically reflective form of traditional regulation of conduct which through the course of human history has always tended to prevail.

Utilitarianism pretends to be able to cope with hard, difficult cases that may imply that certain established rules may be outweighed by strong special reasons: cases traditional morality would not be able to deal with or properly handle. However, Utilitarianism does not want to eliminate traditional morality at all. Well aware of its positive effects for ordinary men in ordinary circumstances, Utilitarianism intends to revise it only whenever and wherever it is necessary or beneficial to do it.
As a moral theory Utilitarianism is flexible and creative enough to accept and to integrate possible critical objections inducing like that processes of improvement and refinement.

4. Simply Being Good

Moral life is complex. A good ethical theory should help us understand how it actually works, and what possibilities there are of improving it, of making it better. Factors that are important in our concrete moral lives do not always cooperate. They do not function according to the addition or aggregation model. They do contribute to the quality of our moral lives. But they do it according to the organicity model: The value of the complex whole is not to be identified with the sum of the independent values of its parts.

The moral lives human beings leads are always something concrete. Persons have biographies.
And such biographies are important to understand their moral lives. Understanding moral decisions and moral actions is also to understand the persons who decide and act. It is often a matter of understanding what someone makes of something, and what someone makes of himself or herself through it.

Being morally good is leading a good life, acting according to good rules and principles, doing the right beneficial thing in the appropriate moment, and, most of the time, simply being good.
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