"Realism about the Good For Human Beings"
L. Nandi Theunissen
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The aims of moral philosophy, and any hopes it may have of being worthy of serious attention, is bound up with the fate of Socrates' question. – Bernard Williams

A recognizable program in meta-ethics is the analysis of "moral utterances." We ask about the function of bits of normative vocabulary as they figure in contrivances about torturing babies for fun. What is meant by calling such an act "morally wrong"? What is our best theory of the properties thereby invoked? How can they be known? And so on. Initiated by G. E. Moore and spurred by developments in the philosophy of language, high analytic metaethics had its "heyday" in the early part of the Twentieth Century.[1] For all the backlash that ensued in subsequent decades,[2] armchair semantic analysis of "ordinary normative claims" or "moral discourse" continues to be a recognizable starting point for discussions of realism, anti-realism, and their kin. How, it may be asked, could it be otherwise?[3]

It is instructive to go back to the original pioneers—to the scene before metaethics as we know it was clearly defined. I think of Moore, but more immediately, the intuitive realists he inspired—H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross. Prichard articulates his realism by engaging with Plato, Aristotle, the consequentialists, and Kant. He defines the concepts that are basic in their theories and gives an account of their relationship. One of his key proposals is that we should

[1] I take the term "heyday" from the still relevant recounting of "Fin de siècle Ethics" by Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton 1992, 116. A differently compelling, and more explicitly editorial, account of the development of meta-ethics is given by Foot, 2001, ch. 1.
[2] Backlash that found a target in non-cognitivism in particular. See Darwall et al (121-124) on "The Great Expansion" of the 1950s.
[3] This question is (rhetorically) posed by Darwall et al. (n. 27). As I shall indicate below, I think the (non-rhetorical) answer is contained in the avenues explicitly set to one side in the *Review* article (n. 24), in particular, literate engagement with the history of ethics.

sharply distinguish between the concepts of right action, moral goodness, and virtue, seeing them as sui generis forms of normative concern whose claims on us are self-evident. It is no accident that Ross—crediting Prichard's (1912) "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" as a primary influence (1930, v)—outlines his realism in a work that gives the right and the good eponymous place. With Prichard, Ross's realism comes into focus by thinking through foundational concepts and making a proposal about the relation between them. Of course, Ross, like the others, was deeply literate in the history of ethics; indeed, he was a celebrated scholar of ancient philosophy.

The point of this potted history is two-fold. First, the distinction between "meta" and "normative" ethics, no doubt useful for certain purposes, is also artificial and potentially misleading. Before there was this division within the field, there was simply *ethics,* and it is impossible to read canonical figures in ethics—Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill—without seeing them as interested in meta-ethical questions. The so-called normative theorists of the tradition are also meta-ethicists. Second, this is no accident. If meta-ethics takes ethics as its object, it has something to say only if the object is clearly in view. How we delineate the ethical—what we identify as the primary subject; how we propose to conceptualize it; what we take as first principles—has a decisive influence on the theories we give.[4] And there is great scope for blindness and oversight just here. We do not come to "moral utterance" innocently.[5] The concepts we find ourselves invoking have a history and being in touch with that history makes us self-conscious about the fully expressive and philosophical implications of what we are

[4] This is a point long and forcefully made by Iris Murdoch (1957, 33). Her essay belongs in Darwall's et al. discussion of the "Great Expansion" in moral philosophy of the 1950s (1992, 121).
[5] Compare Shelly Kagan's (1989, 12) doubts about the existence of pre-theoretical intuitions.

saying (or indeed the possibility that we are not saying anything at all).[6] This is something Prichard and Ross were very much alive to. Their distinctive forms of realism come into view by way of a reckoning with the concepts they take to be basic in ethics.[7]

While my substantive proposal is at a considerable remove from that of the intuitive realists, I broadly follow their methodology in this chapter. That is, by thinking through the relationship between the concepts I take to be basic in ethics, I articulate a form of realism. It is a realism that aligns the prospects of our discipline with the fate of Socrates' question: the question of what it is for human beings to live well. To supply some recognizable labels, this is the project of giving ethics an objective foundation in human nature or well-being. It is the program of relational realism in ethics—of realism about the *good for* human beings. As I will put the emphasis, it is a realism that works with a unified or integrated conception of the good in which virtue and the beneficial are the key concepts, and in which the "moral good" is not foundationally distinctive, but explicable in terms of the good for human beings.

SECTION 1: MORALITY AND HAPPINESS

There are different ways of expressing the basic concepts and distinctions in ethics. Some draw a basic distinction between the moral and the non-moral good, others the right and the good, morality and prudence, or equally, virtue and the beneficial. Our choice of terminology seems to matter, and I will work up to my preferred vocabulary. But to begin I will treat these pairs of terms as broadly synonymous, and for simplicity's sake, I will use the language of morality and

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[6] I am thinking here of Elizabeth Anscombe's (1958) polemical claim that much of what passes for ordinary moral utterance is actually nonsensical. I accept that it is often indeterminate, vague, unfocussed, provisional, and in these ways, not up for assessment as straightforwardly true or false.

[7] This way of proceeding is of course not the exclusive province of realists. Judith Jarvis Thomson in "The Right and the Good" (1997) and Christine Korsgaard of "The Two Distinctions in Goodness" (1983) both articulate forms of anti-realism by taking a stand on the character of and relationship between foundational concepts in ethics.

happiness to express a basic distinction. My immediate interest is how these terms have been defined and related to one another, and in Section 1, I work through some representative approaches in the tradition. I discuss the proposals: (i) that morality contrasts sharply with happiness as a *distinct source of normative concern*; (ii) that morality and happiness are distinct sources of normative concern with the one taking *normative priority* over the other; (iii) that morality and happiness are foundationally distinctive and in one way or another *causally* connected; (iv) that morality and happiness are not distinct but *co-extensive*. (I)-(iii) arguably lay bare commitments of Kant and his followers, while (iv) is familiar from ancient Greek discussions. I give my reasons for rejecting (i)-(iv) before making my own proposal in Section 2. As I will argue there, I think we are well-served by finer-grained distinctions, and I will make use of a three-fold distinction between virtuous action, virtuous people, and the good for human beings.

1.1 Distinct sources of normative concern. According to a familiar style of proposal, while we may want to distinguish right action from moral motivation, these are alike forms of moral exemplariness. Living happily, on the other hand, felicity—that is something else altogether. We have here two forms of the good—the moral and the prudential—or a deontic category that is at a remove from an evaluative one—the right and the good. Either way, these are ethical categories with distinctly different rationales.[8] The idea that there is a basic duality here finds defenders from various quarters, but the proposal owes much—mediately or

[8] That morality and prudence are distinctly different sources of normative concern is arguably a mark of modern moral theory. Darwall (2012) gives a tremendously clear-sighted account of this and Rawls (2000, 1-14), whom Darwall also cites, makes a related set of claims.

immediately—to Kant.[9] For Kant, what matters morally is a person's principle of action.[10] While principles of action may concern oneself, they are not made right by advancing one's happiness. The foundation of morality is not one's own happiness, and it is not the happiness of anyone else either. Morality may concern the happiness of others, but what makes a principle of action rational and good has nothing to do with its standing to do good for anyone . Morality is independent of happiness, and happiness is understood in subjectivist terms as the satisfaction of desire or inclination.[11] In this way, morality and happiness are distinctly different sources of normative concern, and it follows that they can crosscut one another.[12] The demands of morality may strain one's happiness (or "interest"), and what is in one's interest may strain the demands of morality. Just to this extent, there is pressure to establish a normative order of priority between them. And that gives scope for connecting these distinctly different sources of practical concern by way of a relation of normative constraint.

1.2. Normative constraint. Conceivably, a relation of normative constraint could go in either direction, but for reasons that are not hard to come by, the tradition affords readier examples of the moral constraining the prudential good. In Kant's own discussion, that which conduces to the satisfaction of a person's desire, or the realization of their end, is "good for" them in the sense that it facilitates their end. And Kant supposes that what facilitates a person's

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[9] Here, and below, I draw broadly from Kant's treatment of the moral and the non-moral good in Chapter II of the Analytic of the second *Critique* (esp. 5:58-5:63).

[10] One of Prichard's criticisms of Kant is that he does not properly distinguish between right action and moral goodness (acting from a moral motive) because he takes motivation, or the ground of action, to be all that matters morally. Prichard also urged that Kant's conception of virtue (of being a good person) is inadequate on the grounds that to be virtuous for Kant is no more than to be committed to moral motivation (action from duty). Prichard sees the notion of virtue as broader, and as involving distinctly different motivational states. I am sympathetic to both of Prichard's criticisms. What I am emphasizing at this juncture is Kant's commitment to a basic duality between the moral and the non-moral good.

[11] Rawls (1999, 27; 361-365) considers qualifications to the effect that it is the strongest of our desires, or the largest number, or those that stand the best chance of being satisfied, and etc.

[12] Kant discusses this at 5:60-5:61.

end is practically significant for them and must be seen by others as so.[13] Where it lacks full evaluative and normative significance is in its susceptibility to being outweighed or trumped by another kind of value, viz, the moral good. On one way of making sense of Kant's proposal, what conduces to the poisoner's end of poisoning her victim is good for that purpose, and it is rationally incumbent on the poisoner to seek it out. There is a bona fide rational demand here, and yet, on account of its immorality, it is not decisive. To take a related example from Rawls—whose dictum about normative priority is self-consciously drawn from Kant—if a person enjoys seeing others oppressed, then though the enjoyment would be good for him, his interest will not issue in practical reasons.[14] Importantly, the claim is not that having a desire to oppress others is not properly good for the one who has it. It is that *despite* the fact that its satisfaction would be good for them, it is illicit or wrong for them to act on it.

1.3. *Causal connection.* Apart from a relation of normative constraint, on a scheme according to which morality and happiness (prudence, what is "good for" oneself, what is in one's interest) are distinct sources of normative concern, there is scope to countenance a causal relation between them. A causal relation may be drawn in either or both directions. We may venture that showing up for the obligations of the day gives rise to feelings of satisfaction, and/or that when we feel good and satisfied, we tend to show up with greater alacrity for moral demands. Or perhaps we seize more readily on the negative analogues here—that bad behavior conduces to states of loneliness and misery, and/or that states of loneliness and misery set one up

[13] That what is instrumentally good for p must be recognized by others as instrumentally good for p follows from the fact that good is the kind of concept for which we share grounds and about which there is pressure to agree. In Kant's terminology, *good*—be it moral or non-moral—is a "rational concept." Moreover, Kant proposes that the good must in every reasonable person's judgment be an object of desire. So, we can all agree that such and such conduces to p's end, and we can all agree that such and such is something p (instrumentally) ought to seek out. What is "good for" some purpose or other is the evaluative analogue of the hypothetical imperative, and Kant moves freely between the idioms of the good and practical reason. Cf. 5:58.

[14] Rawls, 1971, 31. Here Rawls explicitly cites Chapter II of the Analytic. I here set aside some much discussed complexities in Rawls's treatment of these issues.

for being bad.[15] While these may be homely truths, it is natural to wonder about the stability of the connection between morality and happiness where the latter is treated (extra-ethically) as desire satisfaction, pleasure, or good feeling. Kant was interested in the scope for a causal connection between a commitment to principled action and happiness in just this extra-ethical sense, but he thought there needed to be a considerable massaging of the conditions.[16] Kant is not prepared to allow that we observe good people getting the satisfaction they deserve with anything approaching regularity. But he is prepared to postulate the existence of a benevolent being to see to it that the righteous have the commensurate gains of satisfaction in the *next* life. Rectitude does pay, or at least, as we strive to attain the highest good that is moral rectitude in conjunction with happiness, we are constrained to postulate that there is this mediated species of connection down the line. In this way Kant gives a version of the causal proposal with a (signature) twist.

Kant's treatment is interesting to think about because, having carved morality and happiness at the joints as he sees them, he takes measures to stitch them back together. Happiness is in no way the standard or foundation of morality, but Kant thinks that as practical reasoners we "cannot but" desire happiness in proportion to morality. This is not quite the thought that morality must fit with happiness if it is to have a chance of being taken seriously, but it is a concession to the idea that as practical agents we cannot allow the moral life to be, quite generally, and absent tragic circumstances, a miserable life. One may find the aspiration to find some unity between morality and happiness right even as there is something disappointing about the treatment. One is interested in the bearing of ethical considerations on living happily in

[15] Williams (1985, 45-6) says these should be regarded as ordinary and powerful facts. But he also contends that they are some facts "in a range of" others, to adapt his examples, the nice guy who finishes last, and the tycoon who has it all.

[16] Cf. Ch. 2 of the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason.*

this life, and Kant kicks the can (quite far) down the road. As I will indicate later, I think there is something to be said for postulating some kind of causal relationship between doing and being as one ought and feeling "happy." But to see the truth here, I think one first needs to probe the conception of happiness—subjectivist and extra-ethical—that has so far been at issue. I turn to proposals that in one way or another apply pressure here.

1. 4. Co-extension. I began with the view that there is a foundational difference between morality and its cognates (the moral good, the right) and happiness and its cognates (prudence, what is in one's interests, what is good for one). I discussed ways of connecting these concepts through relations of normative priority and causation. I now consider a distinctly different approach, one that seeks a more radical rapprochement. I state it using the vocabulary of virtue and happiness. While the one connotes excellence or exemplariness, and the other faring well or being in a felicitous state, according to the present proposal, they actually coincide. Living as a *good person* does (virtue) is coextensive with what is *for the good of* a person (happiness).

When Kant canvasses views about how the concepts of virtue and happiness are connected, he contrasts a causal approach—some version of which he accepts—to views that in one way or another see them as equivalent.[17] He attributes the approach he rejects to the ancient Greeks and distinguishes two ways of construing the proposal depending on which, "virtue" or "happiness", is taken as that in terms of which the other is understood. If "virtue" is treated as semantically or epistemologically prior, then to the extent that someone is living as a virtuous person lives, she is in a felicitous state. And if "happiness" is prior, then to the extent that

[17] "The connection between virtue and happiness can therefore be understood in one of two ways: either the endeavor to be virtuous and the rational pursuit of happiness are not two actions but quite identical […] or else that connection is found in virtue's producing happiness as something different from the consciousness of virtue, as a cause produces an effect" (5:111).

someone is in a felicitous state, she is living as a virtuous person does.[18] As I will construe the first proposal, one starts with commonsense ideas about right and wrong, and defines happiness and its cognates in terms of them. What it is for someone to be happy is fixed by whatever it is to be properly responsive to moral considerations. According to the second (or a version that is relevant to discussions of ethical naturalism), one starts with an account of what it is for human beings to fare well and what one antecedently recognizes as ethical virtue emerges from it. Ethical virtue is whatever equips a person to fare well, where faring well is understood in pre-philosophical ways. I consider these options in turn.

1.4.1 Virtue is happiness. In defining happiness and its cognates in ethical terms, the first variant of the proposal is highly revisionist. While I will urge that it revises too far, it does push us to contend with a key question about the form of happiness that is the proper object of ethical study, and indeed, whether "happiness" is quite the word for it. When we inquire about the happiness that is "humanity's good," what sense of "happy" should be at issue?[19] Happiness can connote contentment, satisfaction or pleasure—the sense that is broadly at stake in Kant's account—and on that way of saying "happy" there is no suggestion that virtue bears conceptually

[18] "Of the ancient Greek schools there were, strictly speaking, only two which […] followed one and the same method insofar as they did not let virtue and happiness hold as two different elements in the highest good and consequently sought the unity of the principle in accordance with the rule of identity; but they differed, in turn, in their choice of which of the two was to be the fundamental concept. The Epicurean said: to be conscious of one's maxim leading to happiness is virtue; the Stoic said: to be conscious of one's virtue is happiness. For the first, *prudence* was equivalent to morality; for the second, who chose a higher designation for virtue, *morality* alone was true wisdom" (5:111). Kant goes on to decry both approaches for suppressing "essential and irreconcilable differences in principle by trying to change them into disputes about words and so to devise a specious unity of concept under merely different names" (5:111-5:112). There are interpretive questions that I cannot take up here. (For example, Richard Kraut has suggested that the Stoic view is not that happiness and virtue are different names for one and the same concept, but that the latter is the sole constituent of the former. Happiness is a place-holder good in the sense that one possesses it only by possessing what it consists in.) Strikingly, John McDowell (1980, 368) uses something comparable to Kant's schema for the Stoics and Epicureans to describe two ways of interpreting Aristotle. In McDowell's telling, Aristotle is committed to a biconditional: if a person is living as a virtuous person would then she is happy; and if a person is happy then she is living as a virtuous person would. But there is a question of whether the biconditional is to be read left to right or right to left. McDowell defends a "left to right" reading, while Wilkes (1980) defends what could be described as a "right to left" reading.

[19] This question is thoughtfully posed by Foot, and the formulation in the text is taken from her (2001, 85).

on it. But there are terms in the neighborhood that carry other implications. Phillipa Foot has claimed that we would not say the person who is aiding and abetting a pair of serial killers is doing what is "beneficial" for the pair (2001, 93). In a similar vein, we hesitate to say that someone who is thoroughly wicked is "living well." Or take the homely question, "How is your daughter doing"? And the reply, "She's doing great!" The "doing great" connotes a state of excellence and satisfaction both, and presumably it is relevant that we have to do with a parent's perspective on a child (since parents tend to want their children to find joy in doing what is honorable).[20] The term "wretched" seems to carry the negative analogues of badness and misery together. These are registers in which it is not preposterous to speak of an ethical *conception* of happiness (misery), or of an internal rather than causal connection between virtue and happiness (vice and unhappiness).

The discussion brings out that there is philosophical work involved in isolating the form of the good for human beings that is centrally of interest in ethics. For Kant, and those following him, we are interested in what conduces to the satisfaction of desire, where desire varies from individual to individual, and is independent of ethical considerations. Where the subject is taken to be living well, the beneficial, or flourishing, we are set on a different track, and it is not out of the question to posit a non-trivial (conceptual) connection to virtue. However, to the extent that it *identifies* virtue and happiness, the present proposal seems to me to overreach. That we hesitate to say that a wicked person is living well does not mean that there are no substantive questions about how, say, being unjust is disadvantageous to the one who is so.[21] The difficult questions here cannot be dispensed with by stipulation. What is more, if what it is to be in a good state just

[20] I owe it to Michael Thompson (in conversation) and Katja Vogt (2017) to think of the parent's perspective.
[21] Kraut (2018, 16-17) makes this point and in doing so picks up the animating question of the *Republic*.

is to be responsive to the demands of morality, then the subject of the good for human beings has lost all connection with our sensible condition—with what contributes to and promotes our life, and conversely, with what maims or deprives it. We may not share Kant's view that the form of the good for human beings which ethics properly studies is satisfaction or pleasure, but these are surely not categorically misguided proposals. Presumably Kant is also right to countenance the possibility of conflict between virtue and the good for oneself, or to put it differently, the scope for moral tragedy, something that is ruled out on the present view.[22] While I agree that we need a more sophisticated conception of happiness than Kant's, and my own eventual proposal will reflect this, these are my reasons for rejecting the view that being virtuous just is being happy.

1.4.2 Happiness is virtue. The second variant of the proposal treats responsiveness to moral concerns as a matter of "enlightened prudentiality."[23] The prudent person, the person who excels at practical reasoning, is one who deliberates well about what is advantageous to themselves. They have a well-conceived "life plan" with the right understanding of the ingredients that are necessary to live well, an appreciation of how to integrate these elements coherently, and the technical facility to bring them into form.[24] Since they are social beings who live in community, they recognize that cooperation and responsiveness to the concerns of others are among the essential elements for a successful life. Accordingly, they have developed the other-regarding virtues of justice and beneficence. They recognize that part of what living well involves is fulfilling their social roles and obligations, being fair in their dealings with others,

[22] This criticism of 1.4.1 is made by Foot (2001, 97-8) and Wiggins (1995, 226-229) whom Foot also cites (97).
[23] This is Wilkes' (1980, 356) formulation, and as she observes, while having the advantage of being blunt, the formulation will mislead if the terms are taken to carry their familiar connotations, i.e. that morality and prudence (happiness) are distinct sources of normative concern.
[24] Again, the term "life plan" is from Wilkes (41). For recent development of a comparable style of proposal, see Vogt 2017, chs. 5 & 6.

and helping where they can. Virtue just is exceling at thinking about and actualizing what is really in one's interest, and that includes the canonical virtues.

Needless to say, the proposal has countless detractors, and describing it as a form of "egoism" is usually taken to be enough to reject it out of hand.[25] Insofar as the ground of moral reasons is self-concern, the proposal is thought to miss the point of moral normativity. We are not told we *ought* to act as morality requires, the objection runs, only that we *want* to (or would want to if only we understood our own happiness in an adequate way).[26] This begs the question about the nature or ground of practical reasons, but I myself accept that we have reasons to do things independently of agent-relative considerations. As I will argue below, the reasons we have to be fair and generous with others can be quite independent of our own good. This is my principal reason for rejecting the proposal.

Even so, and even as it seems too hopeful to suppose that there is no scope for conflict between concern for others and the good for oneself, the proposal holds out the promise of an account of the good for human beings that is more adequate, let's say, to the perspective a parent takes on their child in hoping (for their sake) that they will build their life around what is decent and honorable. It tells us that ethical virtue equips human beings to live the life that is most satisfying to us because it aligns with our flourishing properly speaking. If this is not a piece of wishful thinking, we need an account of what is really good for us, and we need to be brought to understand how something like justice or fairness of mind is good for someone in a way that makes contact with pre-philosophical ideas about this (i.e. with platitudes about what promotes or contributes to a person's well-being). I return to these issues below.

[25] To my mind Williams (1985, ch. 3) and Vogt (2017, ch. 6) offer thoughtful responses to charges of egoism.
[26] Cf. Prichard 1912, 23 which McDowell refers to at 1980, 368.

SECTION 2: VIRTUOUS ACTION, VIRTUOUS PEOPLE, AND THE GOOD FOR HUMAN BEINGS

I have been discussing familiar ways of defining and relating basic concepts in ethics. According to one family of views, there is a basic duality between the moral and the non-moral good, or the right and the good, or morality and prudence. According to another, there is a fundamental unity between what are apparently different forms of the good: being good and being well, or virtue and happiness. As I said earlier, the terms we use for these categories seem to make a difference. For example, it makes a difference whether the form of the good for human beings that centrally concerns us in ethics is “happiness” or “living well” and equally “benefit,” for these terms set us on different tracks. I share Foot’s sense that the right concept in this area is the good for human beings understood as the beneficial, and I will shift to this vocabulary for the remainder of the essay. Equally, it makes a difference whether we talk of “morality” or “virtue.” Arguably the former finds its home in a dualistic framework, the latter in a unified one. Since I will defend some form of ethical monism, I will use the vocabulary of virtue, and because I think they admit of different treatments, I will distinguish between virtuous *action* and virtuous *people*.

To anticipate my positive proposal, I am setting aside the view that morality is foundationally independent of happiness, or to put it another way, that the right is foundationally independent of the good. Against proposals that are in one way or another basically dualistic, my view is that the good is the ground of practical reason, though the good that is in question is not happiness understood in subjectivist terms (desire satisfaction). The *good for human beings*, understood in terms of the *beneficial*, is the foundational notion on my view, and it is something I propose to theorize in a realist way. The concepts of *virtuous action*, and of *being a virtuous*

person, importantly distinguishable dimensions of virtue to which my account also refers, make essential reference to it. I argue (a) that virtuous *actions* are such because and insofar as they successfully protect, preserve, secure, or promote the good for human beings, and (b) that being appropriately responsive to the good for human beings is (at least part of) what it is to be a virtuous *person*, where this form of responsiveness can itself be shown to be good for the one who is so. While my proposal has more in common with the monists of Section 1.4, I depart sharply from the monistic proposals considered there. I am not working with a conception of the good for human beings that is simply defined in terms of virtue, and neither am I accepting that our reasons to be virtuous are always agent-relative. I am also making room for the possibility of conflict between self- and other- concern. I begin with my approach to the good for human beings, before drawing out the connections to virtuous actions, and virtuous people. Since I offer a realist account of the good for human beings, I start with a discussion of realism.[27]

2.1. The Good for human beings. I am making *good* understood as *good for* foundational in ethics. This is one strategy (among others) taken by moral realists who feel called to deliver realism from its reputation for extravagance and dogmatism. Peter Railton long ago urged that the notion of the good for a person holds out the promise of explaining how values can be

[27] My proposal is one way of developing a schema for the relationship between virtue and the beneficial that is defended by Philippa Foot (2001) who acknowledges Elizabeth Anscombe for the core idea. The schema is that virtues are ways of doing and being that are necessary because and insofar as some human good hangs on them. In Anscombe's example, keeping our promises is a virtue because human beings need to bind one another by word and not force in the cooperative activities that are given to us as dependent, social beings (1969, 18). In Foot's example, beneficence is a virtue because every one of us needs help in facing the losses and difficulties that are inevitable for us (108). I am not developing this schema in light of Foot's and Michael Thompson's (2008) larger apparatus of natural normativity, even as, as I will make clear, I share key points of emphasis. The proposal is also comparable to Judy Thomson's (1997) account of the right and the good in making *good for* the primary notion; in conceiving of the right in terms of virtue; and in making virtuous actions metaphysically prior to virtuous people. A comparable proposal to the one articulated here is independently put forward as an interpretation of Aristotle's axiology by Sukaina Hirji (ms). Hirji emphasizes Aristotle's distinction between virtuous action and acting as a virtuous person does, arguing that the source of the value is different in each case. She defends an instrumental reading of the value of virtuous actions, and a constitutive reading of the value of acting virtuously. The notion of needs is also central to her account of the human good.

objective without being "cosmic:" they are a function of "nothing more transcendental" than facts about the physical and psychological constitution of human beings and their contingent circumstances in the world.[28] To reach for another idiom, according to this view, "normativity is a problem" for human beings because things can go better or worse for us, and how we live, our forms of affiliation, the activities we engage in, the choices we make, can affect this.[29] This is realism understood *relationally*: a realism about the good for human beings. So how do realists propose to deliver on their promise of objective relational value? Let's consider some contemporary-classic realist proposals.

Take the account due to Railton. Railton is concerned with what is good for a person in the sense that it puts them in a *better* state than the one they were in.[30] Importantly, Railton's target is what he calls the "*non-moral* good for a person." By the designation "non-moral" Railton means to allow, in the spirit of *normative constraint* above (cf. Section 1.2), that something could be good for a person but morally bad, and I will come back to this shortly. But the point of the designation is also to signal that Railton's sights are set on an uncontentious notion of well-being, one in which ideas of physical and psychic health are at home. And this seems natural given his relational realist aspirations. We are more sanguine about the prospects for an objective account of biological benefit and harm.[31]

[28] Cf. Railton, 986, 201. I would not construe the point in such a way as to suggest that ethical questions are simply empirical. As the discussion in Section 1 is intended to bring out, ethical questions are also importantly conceptual. I am grateful to Richard Kraut for prompting me to make this clarification.
[29] That (and how) normativity is a problem for us are formulations due to Korsgaard 1996. Talk of "the problem of normativity" is likely to introduce the thought that there is an open question whether we have reason to care about what is good for us. I hope to present a view that makes that question seem undermotivated. But the issues require more care than I can give them here. Thanks for Sarah Buss for raising this issue.
[30] As he makes clear, we could investigate, equally, whether doing *this* would be better for the person than doing *that,* or we could investigate not merely what would on balance improve a person's state or condition, but what would be best for them overall. Railton discusses these related distinctions at 176.
[31] Cf. Whiting 1988, 40.

Railton's substantive proposal makes use of the perspective of an ideal cognitive, imaginative, and deliberative version of a person on their ordinary self. Which considerations would a person's ideal self take into account in issuing sage advice about what would promote their good in the situation in which they find ourselves? Railton's proposal is that those facts, whatever they are, are what make it true that following the advice of their ideal self is good for them. For something, X, to be good for a person, S, is for there to be a complex, relational set of facts about X and S and their interaction in virtue of which S's ideal self, S+, would want X for S. Railton illustrates with the example of a person who is dehydrated and because of that in a state of malaise. Their ideal Self would be able to recommend drinking fluids of a certain kind. This is so because there are facts about the sick person's constitution and the properties of the liquid, and their interaction, as well as facts about the interaction between states of dehydration and psychic distress, that explain why the ideal Self would recommend the drink.

The account raises a number of questions and is much discussed. But what I want to draw attention to here is that Railton gives an account of the good for an *individual* person, and moreover, the good for an individual person *at some particular time*. This is striking because it is not what medical or psychological researchers take as their "primary relatum" when they study physical and psychological health.[32] The question is what is the standard relative to which we evaluate an individual's well-being. In medicine the standard is the human body (psyche) in the first place, and particular conditions, or conditions at particular times, as ways the human body (psyche) can go. Given our understanding of the human heart, we study the effects of high cholesterol, and among those with high cholesterol, we look at people who smoke a packet a day.

[32] Here, and below, I am taking the term "primary relatum" from Vogt 2017, 93. My discussion is also indebted to her account of the nature of the subject matter of ethics in which there are general truths that hold for the most part. Cf. 2017, ch. 5.

We understand benefits and harms to individuals in light of our understanding of human biology, and it is hard to imagine a study of the one in the absence of the other. Naturally, there is variation in what is healthy for people. Some people cannot process lactose. Others cannot produce enough insulin. What counts as a healthy meal will be accordingly different for the one and for the other. There is predictable and explicable variation among us, but if someone said that drinking a gallon of diesel a day put them in optimal health, we would be rightly skeptical. The field of medicine is not reduced to particular truths about what is healthy for this individual and that one at certain times. Rather, there are truths about human health that hold within a certain range. This gives us a field of study, medicine, in which there are, to be sure, no perfectly universal truths, but stable generalities.

These considerations lead me to think that the primary relatum in accounts of the good for a person is *human beings* (and only secondarily *individuals*). It matters that the S in Railton's account is a person (and not a horse, or a God, or a frog).[33] We want to understand what is good for S in all their particularity, but supposing, with Railton, we are interested in an uncontentious notion of benefit and harm, where that at least includes biological and psychic health, we do not get far in our thinking about individuals without a theory of what is beneficial for *human beings*.[34]

So, consider an account that makes human beings the primary relatum. Take Bernard Williams' (lesser known) discussion of "real interests."[35] Like Railton, Williams is interested in

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[33] Cf. Vogt's (2017, 92) discussion of Aristotle on the good for human beings and the good for fish. *NE* 1141a22-28.
[34] More would need to be said in full defense of the view that philosophy should seek a theory of the *human* good. Why not say, with hedonists, that what is needed is a theory of the good for all conscious living beings? Why not say that the human good is too coarse grained to be of much use given differences among individuals? For discussion of related questions, cf. Vogt 2017, ch. 4.
[35] Williams 1986, ch. 3. I say discussion because Williams is engaging with Aristotelian ideas about the good for human beings that he is sympathetic to even as he expresses ambivalence and only equivocal support.

a realist account of what it is for a person to be better off as the result of a change. But unlike Railton, the account that interests Williams takes human-level well-being as primary and understands the well-being of individual people in light of it. To bring out the contrast, Railton allows that an individual could be constituted in such a way that they have heinous (or presumably bizarre or self-destructive) commitments and values which no amount of information or imaginative-cum-cognitive expansion on the part of their ideal Self would alter, meaning that what we would find unappetizing (to say the least) would count as a constituent of their good.[36] Williams, on the other hand, is supposing that we are set up in such a way, motivationally and otherwise, that we would not be prepared to accept that facilitating certain kinds of commitment is in a person's *real interest*. (Compare drinking the gallon of diesel.)[37]

To illustrate, Williams offers an example of a self-destructive commitment. A young person who is depressed but otherwise healthy does not wish to live. A guardian who takes measures to keep the young person alive, seeking out therapy and so on, can be thought to act in their real interest, and if the guardian is right, we can expect the young person to acknowledge this down the line. For the young person to be better off as a result of these changes, they should reasonably be expected to acknowledge that the changes have helped. But, importantly, for the acknowledgment to indicate a genuine improvement (and to be more than evidence of brainwashing, or browbeating, or whatever), it must be that what *explains* their sense that things are better now is that something was impeding their psychic health which people who are functioning well reasonably acknowledge to be important for their psychic health. As I will formulate his proposal, a person, S, is objectively better off as the result of a change, X, if X

[36] Cf. Railton 1986, 177, n. 20.
[37] Sharon Street's (2009) argument that figures like the one Railton has in mind are not human beings as we know them, but alien creatures, is very much to the point here.

ameliorates a symptom that was impeding S's effective functioning as a human being, and S can reasonably be expected to acknowledge X as a cure for this reason.

In a clear sense, Williams is not offering a full account of what it is for someone to be in a better state than the one they were in—that is, of improvement. For we can be made better off, not just through the mitigation of symptoms that were holding us back, but, more positively, through whatever enhances or amplifies our state or condition. Can the account be extended to accommodate more positive improvements, so that human beings are made better, not merely through the mitigation of impediments to human functioning but, more positively, the excellent expression of them? That is of course to court a familiar form of perfectionism about the human good. Like Williams' own proposal, it appeals to a notion of human functioning that is arguably more contentious than the notion of improvement that it was brought in to explain. Williams was himself famously leery about the prospects of providing a full account of human functioning, and he gives the proposal only equivocal support for this reason.

But perhaps a full account of human functioning is not needed to get going. In broaching the question of what is in our real interests, Williams targets the notion of *need* in particular: the dimension of our good that is such that, when unmet, things go awry for us. And this notion, even unanalyzed, is arguably precisely the place to begin. The question of what is good for human beings is an ambitious one. It can be answered in one of several theoretical keys, and one wants a full picture. But to get going, perhaps we do well to make use of a modest notion of *starting points.*[38] At several junctures in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle announces that he is

[38] Vogt (2017, 104) makes a comparable point: "Talk about better and worse conditions implies that someone can tell what counts as an improvement. This is no more and no less than being able to say what is good for human beings, a large-scale question that calls for epistemic modesty. Any answer is plausibly to be considered work in progress."

addressing people who are in possession of relevant starting points.[39] These are people who, through ordinary observational and inferential powers, and through the typical course of upbringing, grasp *that something is so*, and in grasping this they are prepared to understand the matter in a more theoretical way. So, consider some starting points about the good for human beings.[40] Human beings need to receive love as children; to acquire language; to grow physically; to make use of our sensory capacities.[41] The key term here is *need*, for the relevant starting points concern practices, forms of development, response, and activity that are necessary for a human life—necessary in the sense that without them things go badly for us. While some things are good and bad for people in light of their particularities as individuals—this person is allergic to nuts, that one has a pronounced aversion to crowds—these platitudes are offered as fixed points about what is good and bad for human beings as such.[42] To the extent they are offered as starting points, the suggestion is that they admit of more substantial study, including investigation of how what I am calling "fixed points" are shaped and made determinate in the life of any one of us. But the suggestion is that the starting points constrain the development of more substantive accounts. We have reason to reject a theory of the good for human beings that denies that, as dependent social beings, mutual reliance, community, and forms of intimacy are good for us.

[39] Cf. 1095b5-1095b14; 1098b1-10.

[40] Here I am employing Aristotle's notion of a starting point, but I focus on different kinds of case. At *NE* III. 1 Aristotle clearly has in mind starting points that we would classify as moral principles, eg. that causing needless harm is bad, or that matricide is wrong.

[41] I draw these from Richard Kraut (2007, 138). When Anscombe says that human beings need to be able to bind one another by their word she is appealing to a starting point about the beneficial. When Foot says that human beings need acts of kindness when misfortune strikes, she is making a similar appeal. The starting point is that human beings need to rely on one another, and that we need supportive forms of community.

[42] In Whiting's (1988, 36) terminology, they are unconditional rather than conditional goods for human beings. Whiting refers to discussion by Cooper 1980, 317.

So far, I have briefly considered some realist treatments of the good for human beings. I have made the modest suggestion that we proceed with the notion of *human needs* understood in a provisional way. Now I turn to consider how the concepts of *virtuous action* and of *being a virtuous person* bear on this way of thinking about the good for human beings. Among other things, I hope to demonstrate how even an uncontentious notion of need can be used to show that being responsive to ethical considerations is itself a constituent of the good for human beings.

2.2. Virtuous action. In contrast to intuitive realists like H. A. Prichard, for whom that we ought to perform some action (keeping a promise, paying a debt) is an underivative fact, I am taking the position that ethically suitable or virtuous action is made suitable or virtuous by the fact that it protects, facilitates, produces, or realizes some good.[43] In this way, I am endorsing a form of value fundamentalism. I am taking the view that ethically virtuous actions are made virtuous by the independently valuable ends they realize, so that what matters is not the *motivation* of the person performing the action, but the (actual or potential) protection, honoring, acknowledgement, or realization of something of value.[44] The value in question is paradigmatically goods in the social community.[45] For beneficent action and species thereof (kindness, compassion, practical love, generosity), an action is made good by (actually or potentially) doing something that benefits another. A room is offered to stave off the night; a

[43] Or could have done so. The failed rescue mission is still commendable. It is commendable because there was a live possibility that it could have helped.

[44] I agree with Prichard, at least, that we need some notion of right action that is independent of motivation (hence Prichard's distinction between right action and moral goodness). Thomson takes a similar line, defending, in her terminology, an objectivist (success based) rather than subjectivist (motivation based) account of virtuous action. I fully agree with Thomson that a person's *motivation* does not settle whether they performed a virtuous *action*. But I would allow that an action that does not succeed in realizing some good, but that could have done so, as in a failed rescue mission, can still be commendable. Thomson may deny this (cf. 1997, 281). Distinguishing virtuous action and actions done virtuously is central to Hiriji's (ms) account.

[45] The form of value fundamentalism that I am defending is humanistic insofar as it looks in the first place to human life and its quality. Ultimately, I think the account should be extended to the quality of life more generally. But that is a more ambitious project, and I rest content with a more modest focus on humanity here. I am here following Raz 1986, 194.

community garden is planted so that neighbors have independent sources of food; the distraught are comforted so that they can face what is next; the students are instructed so that they can learn to think for themselves. The goods that are appealed to here are basic human goods—they answer to human needs.

The schema for what are often referred to as "reliance virtues" (justice, promising, paying debts) is less straightforward insofar as we think that bullies should be opposed even when no one stands to gain. Or take the person, in the stock example, who refuses the mob's offer to kill the one to save three more from being killed. Though fewer are benefited, the person is right not to kill, and in that case, we cannot say that the just action is "on balance" good for people.[46] There are a range of familiar responses here, and my own inclination is to make the familiar point that some actions are assessed in terms of standards that are internal to a practice, where the practice finds its point because it protects some good. A just action does not itself discretely contribute to what is on balance good, but it is a constituent of a beneficial practice. For something to constitute a practice is for us to be committed to adhering to it in a way that is not easily revocable (for what is easily revoked does not constitute a practice). The good the practice protects plausibly has a privileged status because it is a condition for the possibility of the forms of affiliation and community without which we cannot secure the goods that are essential to us. I would not construe this point in such a way that there are *no* circumstances in which a person should break a promise or tell a lie or kill someone. It is for the most part the case that we should not do these things, but given sufficiently specific features of a given case, I leave it open that doing these things could be the better choice.[47]

[46] The example is Thomson's (1997, 282)

[47] I am offering no more than a schema in this well-trodden domain. My approach is broadly in line with ~~Judy~~ Thomson's (1997) approach (even as I am not taking her dispositionalist treatment of the reliance virtues at 282). It is also in the spirit of Williams' (1973) discussions of Jim and the protesters. Williams discredits consequentialist

The proposed schema is that ethically virtuous actions are good because they protect, honor, acknowledge, facilitate, produce, or realize a good for human beings. In other words, virtuous actions are (in one way or another) *instrumentally valuable*. By the lights of some traditions, i.e., the tradition in which virtue (or better, morality) is the expression of a superlative form of worth that is independent of being good for anything, this will be a great scandal. I only have this to say in defense. Instrumental value is not here the degraded category that figures in a Kantian view on which something can be "instrumentally valuable" even when it conduces to something worthless or bad. I am taking the view that if something is instrumentally valuable then it is *valuable*: it conduces to something worthwhile. I have not said anything about the status of the goods that are brought about or secured by virtuous actions—whether they are themselves constituents or necessary conditions for other things that constitute the human good. Some may be both. Plausibly they are (at least) conditions for the pursuit of higher things. They make it possible for us to engage in projects and endeavors that are non-instrumentally good for us.[48] While it will not satisfy the Kantian, I am rejecting the idea that insofar as they are instrumentally valuable, virtuous actions are a lowly form of "mere" usefulness. By my lights, that is vastly to undervalue the very conditions for human flourishing.

2.3. Being virtuous. A virtuous action can be performed for any reason whatever. It can be performed in ignorance, and under compulsion or constraint. It can be accompanied by sundry thoughts and feelings. What is key is that it (actually or potentially) honors, acknowledges, protects, facilitates, or realizes the good for human beings. Matters are different with good or

thinking about what we should be doing. But he leaves open whether there might be situations with features that are such that it is in fact better to kill one person in order to save several others. The approach is also in the spirit of some of Foot's points of emphasis about promising (2001, 11; 47-51). Thanks to Aaron Abma and Katja Vogt for discussion of some of these positions.

[48] I defend a valuing based account of the human good along these lines in Theunissen 2020, ch. 4

virtuous *people*. An ethically virtuous person certainly performs virtuous actions. But they perform them with an appropriate cognitive, affective, and motivational orientation. They choose to perform the actions willingly, and with pleasure. They also understand what they are doing and why it matters. Of the range of practically relevant, value-based considerations that bear on a given situation, they know how to select the one that is suitable. They understand which goods are important relative to the features of a situation, and how to achieve them.[49] While I will not argue for it here, I doubt that there is a way of specifying which of a range of practically relevant considerations are decisively relevant in a situation-independent way. What is central to my argument is that the virtuous person is not in some fundamental way responsive to their *own* good (contrast 1.4.2). Of course, virtuous action *may* concern the good for oneself. Prudence is a word for beneficence that is self-directed, and in some situations, it is true that what one should do is take measures to have enough to eat. Temperance is a word for prudent action where appetitive pleasure has to do, and in some situations, it is true that what is decisive is not to have so much wine that one cannot show up for work. Courage is self-directed when it serves prudence where there is fear about doing what is for one's good, and in some situations the suitable action is going through with the root canal. But the important point is that a virtuous person may be perfectly (and independently) responsive to agent-neutral concerns: to making sure *others* have enough to eat, to supporting *their* resolve to drink moderately, to accompanying *them* to the root canal.

When Prichard decried value-based explanations of right action, he said that the fact that something is good does not show that it ought to be brought about. To show this, we would need

[49] I am avowedly appealing to Aristotle's discussion of what being virtuous adds to virtuous action from *NE* Bk. II. 4.

to suppose that what is good ought to be. And this, he urged, is preposterous.[50] It is interesting that Prichard does not make use of the now ubiquitous notion of a normative reason. Put in the language of reasons, Prichard's claim is that the good is not reason giving—such that it licenses, or makes appropriate, particular forms of response. On the view I am defending, this is quite false. The good is practically relevant—it gives us reasons (at least) to protect, acknowledge, secure, and promote—and the good in question may be personal or impersonal. In contrast to the proposal described in 1.4.2 above (*happiness is virtue*), I am not supposing that the good of others is action guiding on the condition that it relevantly relates to the good for oneself, something whose motivational force is guaranteed. I am suggesting that we can be directly motivated to uphold or facilitate what is good for others. There is no mystery here because, as the point has long been made, intentional action standardly involves beliefs about things as being good.[51]

I have been working with a provisional and uncontentious notion of the good for human beings, appealing to human needs in my discussion of virtuous action and virtuous people. Virtuous actions find their point in meeting human needs, and virtuous people choose to perform virtuous actions out of an appreciation of the good they protect, acknowledge, uphold, or facilitate, and why it matters. I have argued that the good to which the virtuous person is responsive may be perfectly impersonal so that the ground of other concern is not the good for oneself. While I am breaking with the classical view that all action is undertaken for the sake of the agent's own good, I also do not wish to overstate the controversy. For I find it plausible to suppose that responding appropriately to the good of others can *itself* be good for the person who

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[50] Cf. Prichard 1912, 24

[51] Cf. Nagel's (1970) seminal discussion of reasons and desire. The position is defended by many, including Raz 1999, ch. 2, and Foot (2001).

does so. While the monists who contend that *virtue is happiness* reach this conclusion by stipulation (see 1.4.1 above), introducing a revisionist conception of the good for human beings (of benefit, advantage, living well, happiness, etc.), I think we can be brought to the same conclusion without revision. And this is what I now look into.

The claim that being virtuous is itself a constituent of the good for human beings is traditionally supported through a function argument. If an X *qua* X has as its function or characteristic activity to φ, then the good of an X *qua* X (its flourishing as an X) consists in φ-ing well (with excellence or virtue).[52] So if it is characteristic of human beings to engage in rational activity, and if a dimension of rationality is appropriate responsiveness to the good for human beings, then doing so is constitutively good for us. Hence, being good and being well are actually inseparable. This is a venerable form of argument, but it is also a fraught one. We need a reason to accept that human beings have a function or characteristic activity, and it would help if the reason did not depend on accepting a full-blown teleological theory. But even if it is permitted that human beings have a function, and permitted that our function involves (at least) the exercise of practical reason, we also need to rule out a rival conception of practical rationality as the advancement of one's ends whatever they may be. For on that way of thinking about practical reason, it is unclear how it aligns with the other-regarding virtues.[53] In fact, I think defenders of the function argument have a lot to say here.[54] But for my purposes, what is wanted is to bear out the argument in light of what we know of ourselves and one another. That is to say, we need to see how appropriate responsiveness to the good for others is good for us in light of

[52] There is, of course, more than one function argument. Plato gives one in Bk. 1 of the *Republic;* Aristotle in *NE* 1. 7. I take the present formulation of Aristotle's argument from Barney 2008, 311.
[53] Cf. Whiting 1988, 41-43.
[54] I find Barney's treatment especially compelling. She reconstructs and motivates Aristotle's argument independently of the broader teleology.

starting points about the human good.[55] So let me offer an example. It is an example that is meant to show how the motivational and affective orientation of a person who is genuinely concerned for the good of others is itself a dimension of their good.

Think of the friend or family member who habitually gets in touch when they need something and not otherwise. Perhaps they lack support in their life and things are hard. They make routine inquiries about one's health and happiness, but one knows from the *way* they ask, or from experience over time, that the interest is insincere. They know enough about the outward form of relationships to make a show of concern, but they do so, narrowly, with a view to gain. It is natural to wish that this sort of person would *really* take an interest. Why is that? Certainly, being genuinely interested in others would make them better *as people*. No doubt, being better in this way would make the relationship better *for us*. But my sense is that, particularly when we care about the person in question, we wish they would really take an interest because it would be better *for them*. To be without the motivations and forms of affection that mark genuine concern is to be deprived of the real pleasure of intimacy or friendship itself—its *inner* dimension. If that is right, having the underlying attitudes and feelings of a fair-minded person is good for the one who is so because it is part of what constitutes a good (friendship or intimacy) whose status as beneficial can be understood in pre-philosophical ways. If the point generalizes to the other dimensions of virtue, we are brought to see how being good is itself part of the good for human beings.[56]

I spoke earlier of an ethical conception of happiness, a conception on which there is an important and non-trivial connection between virtue and the good for human beings. If we are to

[55] I am here following Kraut (2018, 6-11).

[56] I draw this example from Theunissen (2023). Of course, this conclusion is supported variously by many others. Cf., for example, insightful discussion by Bloomfield 2014.

think of happiness ethically, it is no good to stipulate that being good is being well, so that the topic of the good for human beings loses its intuitive connection with what promotes our life, and with what gives rise to joy. But I hope to have shown how we can think of ethical virtue as equipping human beings to live a life that is satisfying for us because genuine forms of other concern are a constituent of things we can intuitively recognize as part of our good, namely, friendship and other forms of intimate connection. All the same, I do not wish to overstate. Being responsive to ethical concerns can itself be a constituent of our good, but it can also come at the cost of other dimensions of our good. There are difficult and tragic choices. We may be in circumstances that are such that we cannot respond adequately to the good for others without making a great and even an ultimate sacrifice.[57] In this, Kant was right to allow the possibility of conflict between being good and being well.

CONCLUSION

Against those who contend that there is a basic duality between the moral and the non-moral good, or the right and the good, I have sought to articulate a form of realism that works with a unified or integrated conception of the good in which virtue and the beneficial are the key concepts, and in which the "moral good" is not foundationally distinctive, but explicable in terms of the good for human beings. I have suggested that we make headway in thinking realistically about the human good, broaching what Bernard Williams has called a notion of "real interests," by thinking about human needs. I argued (a) that virtuous *actions* are such because and insofar as they (actually or potentially) protect, acknowledge, preserve, secure, or promote the good for human beings in this sense, and (b) that being appropriately responsive to the good for human

[57] In the words of Philippa Foot, "there is indeed a kind of happiness that only goodness can achieve, but […] by one of the evil chances of life it may be out of the reach of even the best of men" (2001, 97).

beings is (at least part of) what it is to be a virtuous *person*, where this form of responsiveness can itself be shown to be good for the one who is so.[58]

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