Life Cannot be Good

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Abstract
This paper examines a structural tension in contemporary Aristotelian moral philosophy. Geach's claim that states of affairs cannot be bearers of goodness underpins critiques of outcome-based ethics, yet accounts of human flourishing and procreation appear to rely implicitly on the value of states of affairs. By tracing the roles of Geach, Foot, and Anscombe, the paper shows that this tension is unavoidable: either states of affairs can be good, admitting consequentialist reasoning back into moral theory, or life, flourishing, and procreation cannot be affirmed as morally good. Using procreation as a decisive test case, the argument demonstrates that appeals to virtue or practical reason alone cannot resolve the dilemma. The paper thus contributes a sharpened understanding of the internal structure of Aristotelian ethics and its implications for normative claims about life and human flourishing.
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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1958, Peter Geach made what appeared to be a startling claim: that states of affairs cannot be good. This claim has since played a central role in Aristotelian critiques of outcome-based moral theories, especially utilitarianism. We argue that while contemporary Aristotelian moral philosophy continues to rely on this constraint, it simultaneously relies – explicitly or implicitly – on the evaluability of certain states of affairs: that there is life, that there is flourishing, that there is procreation. This combination cannot be sustained. Either states of affairs may be bearers of goodness, in which case outcome-based moral evaluation as such may legitimately re-enter ethical theory, or life, flourishing, and procreation cannot themselves be good. The Aristotelian position does not permit both.

2. The Constraint on Goodness

According to Geach, goodness is not a property that can attach to states of affairs. In his article 'Good and Evil', he argued that 'good' functions as an attributive adjective. A thing is good as a knife, a promise, or a human being; it is evaluated relative to a kind. States of affairs – what is or is not the case – do not belong to kinds in this sense and therefore cannot be good or bad.

This was not merely meant as a narrow linguistic observation. Geach's claim imposes a substantive constraint on moral theory. If states of affairs cannot be good, then moral evaluation cannot be grounded in the promotion, realisation, or maximisation of conditions of the world. This constraint has since become a cornerstone of Aristotelian critiques of modern moral theory, especially utilitarianism (Anscombe 1981; Foot 1985; Thompson 1995; Foot 2001; Vogler 2002; Moosavi 2022). Methodologically, the constraint on good states of affairs functions exclusionarily: it is used to disqualify entire classes of moral theory. As such, it must apply symmetrically to both negative critique and positive construction. A constraint strong enough to rule out utilitarianism cannot be selectively relaxed when developing an alternative.

3. Its Use Against Utilitarianism

Philippa Foot (1985) explicitly relies on Geach's constraint in her rejection of utilitarian ethics. Utilitarianism, on her account, identifies goodness with the obtaining of certain conditions – most notably minimal suffering or maximal satisfaction. Descriptions such as 'there is as little suffering in the world as possible' are therefore treated, within utilitarian theory, as candidates for being good states of affairs.

Foot argues that such descriptions fail as candidates for goodness. They describe how matters stand, but they do not identify objects, actions, or practices that admit of attributive evaluation. On this basis, utilitarianism is said to rest on a mistake about the grammar of goodness. However, Foot's argument leaves a crucial ambiguity unresolved. Utilitarianism may be mistaken either because it treats states of affairs as bearers of goodness at all, or because it selects an insufficiently rich set of states of affairs as morally decisive. Foot's later work (2001) suggests that she ultimately endorses the latter interpretation, replacing utilitarian outcomes with a thicker evaluative ideal.

Methodologically, if utilitarianism is rejected only because it values the wrong outcomes, then the rejection is not principled but ad hoc. A genuinely Geachian critique must deny that outcomes can ground moral evaluation as such. Any later theory that relies on outcomes – even under a different description – must therefore meet the same objection.

4. The Aristotelian Reorientation

In her mature writings, Foot (2001) develops an Aristotelian alternative to utilitarianism. Moral evaluation, on this view, concerns human beings as members of a life-form. Practical reason guides agents toward human flourishing, understood as the proper end of human life. Goodness is said to attach to character, action, and life, rather than to outcomes considered independently of agency. Contemporary Aristotelians continue to develop this framework. Appeals to life-form norms (Thompson 1995), practical reasoning and agency (Vogler 2002), and basic goods (Finnis 2011) preserve the central claim that morality is not fundamentally about producing good states of affairs.

Methodologically, the Aristotelian insists that flourishing is not an outcome but a normative concept internal to the evaluation of human life. This insistence depends on rejecting certain paraphrases of the normative claim as illegitimate. But a philosophical position must be able to withstand faithful paraphrase. If the claim that flourishing is the end of action cannot survive being restated as the claim that it matters whether humans flourish, then the theory relies on a restricted grammar whose normative authority remains unexplained.

5. The Reappearance of States of Affairs

Despite its resistance to outcome-based evaluation, the Aristotelian account cannot provide normative guidance unless flourishing is treated as normatively significant. To say that practical reason aims at flourishing is to say that there must be a difference, from the standpoint of evaluation, between lives in which humans flourish and lives in which they do not. That difference is a factual difference in how the world stands. If it is denied that such differences can be evaluated as better or worse, then flourishing cannot ground moral assessment. If it is allowed, then states of affairs must be treated as bearers of value in moral theory.

Methodologically, an Aristotelian cannot avoid this conclusion simply by rejecting the language of 'outcomes'. This argument does not rely on reducing flourishing to a brute physical condition. It relies only on normative dependence: if a concept performs evaluative work, then the obtaining or failure to obtain what it refers to must matter. Denying this entirely strips the concept of normative force.

6. Procreation as a Test Case

As a monumental figure in the Oxford Aristotelian tradition, Elizabeth Anscombe makes the tension explicit in claims about procreation. In 'Why Have Children?' she suggests that

having children is not merely permissible but morally good. The claim is not defended in prudential terms, nor as a means to external goods, but as an expression of practical reason guiding virtuous action. Yet having children is bringing new human lives into existence. If having children is good in a general moral sense, then the existence of new human lives is thereby being positively evaluated.

At this point, the Aristotelian position, as represented by Geach, Foot, and Anscombe, faces a dilemma. Either the goodness of procreation is grounded in its benefit to the agent, in which case the claim loses any general moral force, or it is grounded in the resulting increase in human life, in which case a state of affairs is being treated as good. Appeals to virtue or practical reason do not dissolve this dilemma; they merely postpone it. While such concepts guide agents toward human flourishing, they cannot alter the fact that the choice to have children changes the world in ways that are evaluable. The dilemma remains: either procreation's goodness is prudential and agent-relative, or the state of affairs constituted by new human lives is being treated as good. Procreation is a decisive test case because it irreversibly alters the world. Any moral claim that procreation is good must explain why the resulting change matters. If such an explanation cannot appeal to good states of affairs, it must collapse either into prudential reasoning or into silence regarding its normative force.

7. CONCLUSION

The Aristotelian critique of utilitarianism, articulated by Geach, rests on the claim that states of affairs cannot be bearers of goodness. This claim is used to reject outcome-based moral theories in principle. Foot's work makes the structure of this critique reveal a fork: either moral evaluation can depend on states of affairs, or the normative force of flourishing and life must be explained without appealing to outcomes. Anscombe provides a decisive test case: the claim that having children is good. Contemporary Aristotelian ethics continues to rely on this structure while also appealing to the goodness of life, flourishing, and procreation.

These commitments cannot be jointly sustained. Either states of affairs may be good, in which case outcome-based evaluation – and with it familiar forms of consequential reasoning – returns to moral theory, or life cannot be good at all. In that case, no general moral claim in favour of creating new life can be maintained.

The Aristotelian position does not permit both. The internal tension between denying value to states of affairs and affirming the goodness of flourishing, life, and procreation remains unresolved. Any claim that human life is good must either admit evaluable states of affairs or retreat into prudential or agent-relative reasoning. In consequence, the appeal to life, flourishing, or procreation as morally good cannot be sustained without undermining the very constraint that defines the Aristotelian critique of utilitarianism.

8. References

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