Introduction

In desiring the good, we aim to have our lives go well. This is the proposal I formulate and defend throughout the book. The desire to have one's life go well makes one do something rather than nothing, perform this or that action, take up one pursuit or another. Agents need—and draw on—conceptions of what constitutes a good life. Conceptions of a good life locate some concerns at the center: *this* is what matters to the agent; *these* are the pursuits she takes up. Other concerns are located at the periphery, either because psychological resources are limited and the agent cannot care as much about them as she otherwise would; or because she thinks these matters deserve only little attention, though they need to be dealt with. Much about our conceptions of a good life is implicit. Much is encoded in affective attitudes or adopted by way of picking up a way of life shared with others. Typically conceptions of a good life have areas to which an agent has devoted considerable reflection—here we may say she knows what she wants—and others that are outlinish or unattended to. Moreover, for most of us our conception of a good life is work in progress. Perhaps it is even conflicted, say, because we take up pursuits that are not evidently compatible. We may want, as it were, more than fits into one life. Such conflicts flag that ordinarily agents do not have full-fledged and comprehensive conceptions of a good life. None of these constraints, however, makes the role of wanting one's life go well any less fundamental for human motivation.

On this picture, even small-scale actions that look like one-off actions—choices seemingly made at a given occasion, not as a component of a pursuit or part of a routine—relate to the agent's desire for a good life and her substantive conception of what makes a life, and specifically her life, good. The values that are at issue in a given decision are, by the lights of the agent, more or less important. The place they have in the

agent's conception of a good life affects how, and how much, she thinks about what to do here-and-now. When the desire to have one's life go well falters, say, in severe depression, an agent may not have the motivational resources to do anything at all. She may not get out of bed in the morning, not because she does not think she should get up, or because she cannot make up her mind on whether she should, or because she succumbs to temptation to sleep some more; but because the characteristic human motivation is missing that ordinarily makes us do something, whatever it is, that seems conducive, in one way or another, to our life going well.

My approach throughout the book appeals to arguments and ideas in Plato and Aristotle. And yet it departs from a prominent strand in ancient-inspired ethics, which focuses on virtue and happiness. Here philosophers think about the best kind of life a person may live. They discuss normative questions about the activities and lives of excellent agents. Their explorations presuppose, I submit, a psychological claim: any agent, in pursuing this or that, is motivated by a more or less explicit, and more or less determinate, idea of what it means for her life to go well. This is a quotidian feature of motivation, and the case of depression showcases how deeply motivation depends on it. Concern with one's life as a whole is, further, widely absent from Aristotle-inspired theories of action, which focus on the motivation of particular, small-scale actions in isolation. I aim to counteract this long-standing trend. This is not because there was not much of philosophical interest in the analysis of small-scale actions. But there is a larger and neglected dimension to agency, namely the way in which our desire to have our lives go well informs and supports all other motivations. It is this gap in the theory of action and motivation that I aim to fill.

When philosophers in the theory of action go beyond the analysis of small-scale actions, they sometimes discuss long-term planning. They ask how a person can bind her-

self over time; how one's decisions can have authority over one's actions in the future; and whether a decision made today for one's future self involves metaphysical puzzles about persistence and identity of persons over time. I share the premise that the theory of planning has a metaphysical dimension. In the terms I develop, agents plan for their lives as changing entities in a changing world. Planning, on my account, is shaped by an agent's desire to have her life go well and framed by agential thought about one's life as a whole. Persistence over time is not merely a metaphysical issue. Planning involves anticipation *and* memory. Insofar as one do better or worse in remembering one's past, the persistence of one's mental life has a normative dimension.

My proposals, though they start from questions about motivation, need to address questions about the nature of the good. If it is argued that desire is for the good, then something needs to be said about this notion: the good. How is it to be understood? Several options shall figure in my discussion, most importantly the idea that the good is the well-lived human life. For long-time readers of Aristotle, this proposal may sound so familiar that it seems almost without competition. Nevertheless, I argue that it is a mistake to take Aristotle at face value when he says in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.4 that we all agree that the good human life is the highest practical good. As his own discussion of competing views throughout *NE* I gives away, this claim is in need of argument. I shall defend the premise that the highest practical good is the good human life, and then part ways with Aristotle. I won't argue, as he does, that there is one kind of life that is best. The view that one can get it right, living in a way that *is* good, must be sensitive to difference and variability. Different people can get it right, I propose, by picking up different pursuits and leading a life that is best for them. With this claim, my project moves beyond and outside of a reconstruction of ancient ethics.

Both Plato's and Aristotle's views permit, or demand, that different people should take up different pursuits. Not everyone is to be a philosopher-queen, for example. My focus on difference, however, goes beyond this type of argument. It is inspired by the distinctively modern intuition that pursuits are not easily ranked as higher or lower. On the picture I defend, there is a good life for you, and a good life for me, and they may differ without one of these lives being better than the other. This notion of a good life *for* a given agent, however, is a far cry from relativism. One can get it right, I argue, in aiming to figure out how one should live. Thus I propose a kind of realism. Some actions, pursuits, and ways of life—say, the life of a tyrant—are not candidates for being right for any one of us. Minimally, a life that is good for a given agent must be a good *human* life. Beyond that, a certain kind of life is, or is not, good for a given person.

Both Plato and Aristotle introduce a notion of measure when discussing the good and the good life. To those who are not immersed into the study of ancient philosophy, this notion may seem surprising. What does measure have to do with the good? I turn to those dialogues which, in my view, make this idea most intuitive and which, ultimately, seem to me to offer compelling arguments in its favor. Measure is, I think, a useful notion for the ethicist and action theorist concerned with questions about good lives. In Plato's *Philebus*, measure is needed because good lives are mixtures with many ingredients—and these need to be put together in the right way. In the *Euthyphro*, a much earlier dialogue, measure is introduced as a *desideratum*. In the face of value disagreement, it seems we need some tool—a measuring tool—to arrive at resolutions. I reconstruct this line of thought because it offers a path for thinking about value disagreement that is novel with a view to today's discussions. I explore disagreement about value and the sense in which it may be true that human beings are 'the measure' such that this is not a relativist proposal, but an insight into the nature of ethics. The notion of human beings as measure enables

me to spell out how good lives for different people differ, though they share much insofar as they are good lives of human beings.

The emerging picture is still broadly speaking Aristotelian, on account of two framing premises I adopt: that desire is ultimately for the good human life, and that agential thought engages with what Aristotle calls a "for the most part" domain, a domain in which future events are contingent and in which assumptions about the way things may play out cannot involve strict regularities. It departs, however, from some long-standing premises in Aristotelian and scholastic action theory.

Here, then, is an outline of the proposal I develop throughout the book:

1. Ethical thinking starts from the question "what is the good?"
2. The final, agential good is the good life.
3. The good is the most basic kind of value.
4. There is such a thing as what is good for human beings *and* such a thing as what is good for a given agent.
5. The Guise of the Good is most compelling as a theory about the desire to have one's life go well.
6. Desire for the good is translated into the motivation of pursuits, which in turn structure large domains of small-scale motivation.
7. Due to the metaphysics of the sphere of action, a conception of the good life cannot be more than an outline.

Steps 1 through 7 correspond to the seven chapters of this book. They do not exhaust what I argue for in these chapters, which can also be read individually as in-depth discussions of ideas I consider pertinent to my overall topic. Let me summarize very briefly the seven chapters, and offer some further remarks that help situate my approach.

Chapter 1 provides what I call a blueprint for ethics, with Plato's *Philebus* as its ancestor. Ethics, as I think of it, starts out by asking "what is the good?" I call this question Q, and offer a distinction between different versions of Q. These versions reflect lines of inquiry, which on my proposal belong to a broad conception of ethics: questions about substantive value, about the nature of value, about psychology, about cognitive activities relevant to agency, and about the metaphysics of human life. I argue that a certain interpretation of Q, namely one that inquires after the good for human beings, comes first. This interpretation does not, however, eliminate the need to address other versions of Q. My proposal departs from orthodoxy in contemporary appropriations of ancient ethics by being significantly less aligned or concerned with Aristotle's normative proposals. I side with the Plato of the *Philebus*, rather than the Aristotle of the *NE*, because the *Philebus* provides the relevant distinction between versions of Q; it offers arguments for starting from what I call an agential version of the question "what is the human good?"; and it puts forward an approach that is largely and primarily about the human good, without making the metaphysics of value obsolete.

Chapter 2 turns to Aristotle's construal of Q, as inquiring into the good as substantive, relative to human beings, and agential. The final good, here, is the ultimate end of agency, a well-lived human life. My aim in analyzing this proposal is to take a step back, as it were refusing to be pulled into Aristotle's mode of exposition. Aristotle makes it seem as if the claims that the highest good is happiness and that happiness is the well-lived life—and that, accordingly, the highest good is the well-lived life—are agreed-upon. But each of these premises merits close examination. In effect, they amount to a controversial approach in ethics: that ethics should conceive of the highest good as the final end of agency, or at any rate, that ethics should *start* from this conception. The good qua end of agency is more familiar to us than its main competitor, the good understood as

the property goodness. To hold that the good—understood as the good that ethics is primarily concerned with—is the good human life does not, by itself, commit one to any of the comprehensive substantive proposals Aristotle makes about good ways to live. On the contrary, to hold that the good is the good life is compatible with assuming that different lives are best for different people. This is my reason for examining Aristotle's proposal: once spelled out clearly, it is a plausible place to pause or even to stop—to set aside the *NE* and pursue the proposal further in ways that do not go along with the way Aristotle's arguments unfold.

Because arguably there is not one way to live that is best for everyone, I take a step back from any replies one may offer in response to Q in chapter 3. I retrace an ancient idea that Plato and Aristotle share: disagreement about value calls for some kind of standard or measure of resolution. This idea is formulated, in ways that have not received much attention, in Plato's *Euthyphro*. The dialogue begins with three examples of deeply contested actions and an analysis of value disagreement. One upshot of this analysis is that, when people (and gods) approve or disapprove of actions, they refer to the good, just, and noble. The *Euthyphro* distinguishes between basic values like good on the one hand, and relational value properties such as pious on the other hand. My reading of the dialogue calls into question a long-standing agreement among interpreters, namely that Plato takes the pious to be a basic value property. As I show, this is not compelling, both with respect to any ordinary notion of piety—which involves relations and attitudes—and with respect to the text. On my reading, the dialogue is more Socratic than it is standardly taken to be. It identifies the good as basic, and as a central topic for ethicists to understand. And it emphasizes that the good is the kind of value people disagree about. The *Euthyphro* lays out a research project, one that is to be undertaken rather than already ac-

complished: how to account for the nature of the good, given pervasive and persistent disagreement and the lack of an established standard to resolve it.

In chapter 4 I take up this research project by re-thinking Protagoras's "man is the measure" in conversation with recent discussions of relativism. Protagoras's *dictum* can be reconstructed in a non-relativist way, amenable to many of Plato's and Aristotle's arguments in the *Philebus* and *NE*. On this realist reconstruction, it is nothing other than the claim that human beings are the measure of what is good for them. My argument involves a series of steps away from standard contemporary relativism, which I call Truth Relativism; and I reject the epistemic notion of standards of assessment that figures in these discussions. Human beings, on my proposal, are the measure in a metaphysical way: qua the beings we are, we are the measure or standard that is needed in ethical theory. Measure Realism, as I call the relative-but-not-relativist account I put forward, makes human beings the primary *relatum* of relative goodness. It makes sense to ask "what is the good for cats?" and "what is the good for the universe?"; and the fact that we can and do ask such questions matters. But in ethics the good for human beings comes first, simply because ethical theorizing originates in ordinary thinking about how to live (and how our actions ought to take into account, say, the good of animals or of the universe, is part of how we ought to live). The fact that good-for permits different *relata* also matters because a compelling conception of the good needs to accommodate differences between agents and variability in the sphere of action. A way of thinking about the good is needed that accommodates what is good for a given agent and even what is good for a given agent here-and-now.

In chapter 5 I advance my own version of the so-called Guise of the Good account (GG). Roughly, the GG is the type of theory which says that actions are motivated by something looking good to an agent. The GG is most compelling if we distinguish be-

tween motivations of particular small-scale actions, the motivation of mid-scale actions or pursuits, and the largest scale motivation to have one's life go well; and if we explore the relations between them. GG theorists tend to see their proposals as broadly speaking Aristotelian. And yet their theories address particular actions in isolation: agents, in one formulation, are motivated to perform a given action by seeing the action or its outcome as good. *NE* I makes a different proposal: each small- and mid-scale activity aims at some good and also at *the* good, the well-lived human life. The first sentence of the *NE* formulates this claim in programmatic fashion, and much of *NE* I aims to make good on it. What, then, are the resources of a more genuinely Aristotelian approach? I argue that Aristotle applies the GG to a range of human activities, including lines of inquiry and productive activities; that according to his GG small- and mid-scale activity is ultimately motivated by desire for a good life; and that smaller-scale motivations depend for their existence and power on the desire to have one's life go well. This approach, I argue, has three advantages. It is (i) inherently more plausible than an approach that isolates small-scale actions; it (ii) captures the formative role that pursuits typically play in human life; and it (iii) explains why, in its Aristotelian version, the GG belongs to the theory of the human good.

In chapter 6 I address a long-standing concern about ancient ethics. If the starting-point of an ethical theory is an agent's selfish concern with her own happiness—or in my terms, her life going well—it would seem like pulling a rabbit out of a hat to arrive, at some point, at the concerns of others, or anything really that goes beyond the agent's happiness. But at least some such concerns are essential for a theory that is to count, by our lights, as ethical. The charge may be less pressing if one thinks in terms of well-going lives rather than in terms of happiness. But it does not entirely dissolve. In order to genuinely refute it, I argue, one must show that something about the agent's desire for a well-

going life goes beyond her own well-going life. On the reading I propose, Socrates's speech in Plato's *Symposium* ascribes precisely this role to the motivation of typical human pursuits. The very way in which human beings desire happiness propels them into pursuits that are devoted to the good, pulling them away from what might appear to be, on ordinary notions, their own happiness. According to the *Symposium*, there is a range of typical human pursuits: having children, producing artifacts, earning a living through work, creating art, writing laws, formulating theories, seeking knowledge, and more. These pursuits are kinds of making, and via the agent's commitment to that which is made they extend her motivations beyond her own life. Once we are committed to such pursuits, they make demands on us. People typically go to great lengths in any number of ways for the sake of the good of these pursuits, rather than their own good narrowly conceived. If this proposal is compelling, mid-scale motivation deserves a lot more attention in the theory of action than it often receives. Here an otherwise nondescript desire for a good life translates into a plan. Pursuits thereby provide the framework for any number of small-scale motivations. And they explain the distinctive force of those small-scale motivations that relate to them—the way in which days are arranged around picking up one's child from school, running to catch a train so as to not be late for work, finding the one shade of green that will work for this painting, and so on.

In chapter 7 I return to *NE* I and to the premises Aristotle explores prior to developing his normative views about good ways to live. I examine a fundamental philosophical principle that Aristotle formulates in *NE* I.3: like other lines of inquiry, ethics must be adequate for its domain. In exploring this principle, I analyze what I call the metaphysics of the sphere of action and how it bears on the nature of ethical theorizing. On my reading of *NE* I.3, an Aristotelian ethicist must ask herself what her line of inquiry is about, study the nature of her theory's subject matter, and observe norms of theorizing that are

adequate for it. What, then, is the domain of ethics? As I argue, according to Aristotle the subject matter of ethics is value as it figures in human life. Aristotle ascribes two features to value in human life: difference and variability. Other theorists, he notes, are misled by these phenomena and become relativists. They observe a lack of strict regularity, and falsely conclude that the domain of value is messy, unsuitable for any general insights. Aristotle aims to improve on that. In his view, it is possible for a domain to lack strict regularity, and yet to display for the most part regularities. These lesser regularities are sufficient for ethics to be a kind of study. In arguing for this view, I pursue four aims: (i) to emphasize that Aristotle takes his ethical theory to be a competitor to relativism; (ii) to call into question some dominant trends in Aristotle scholarship, most importantly the idea that ethics' precision (or lack thereof) attaches specifically to deliberation; (iii) to make plausible the view that the subject matter of ethics is value as it figures in human life; and, finally, (iv) to depart from particularist proposals and appropriate the notion of for the most part regularity as a compelling way to characterize the sphere of action.

Desiring the good, along these lines, is the motivation that propels agents forward, guided by their conception of the good life-for-them. Here I accept a widely shared premise: it is constitutive of desire that it aims at the good. Desire is the very attitude that agents like us characteristically have to the good. I do not endorse either of two much-debated options, namely that desire aims at what is believed to be good or that desire aims at the perceived good. In agreement with the kind of realism sketched a moment ago, I take it that desire aims at what is good by the agent's lights *and* thereby at what is really good. In desiring to have one's life go well, one aims to get it right—one aims to take up pursuits and to perform actions that are conducive to a well-going life. Beyond the claim that desire aims at the good, I advance only two specifications. First, that insofar as desire is for the good it does not come with built-in limits; we do not desire so-and-

so much of the good, or the good for such-and-such a duration of time. We desire the good, period, and that is, we desire to have and keep the good, as it were, indefinitely. Second, insofar as motivation plays out on the different and interrelated scales mentioned above it involves a range of desiderative attitudes. All of them aim at the good and are therefore attitudes of one kind. But, for example, wishing for some good is different from deciding to pursue it. My notion of desire is intended to encompass the various desiderative attitudes that figure in motivation. On this account, the theory of action and the theory of motivation are not distinct; there is no natural cut-off point between analyzing 'merely' particular actions and the wider spectrum of attitudes that play a role in motivation. Accordingly, I speak at times of the theory of action and at times of the theory of motivation and at times of both. My version of the GG is a theory of how activities of human agents are motivated.

My version of the GG is, further and distinctively, a theory at the intersection of psychology and philosophy of action. Thereby it differs from some contributions on the GG that are explicitly intended as analyses of *rational* action. Rational action, as understood in these contributions, is the action of some rational being, whether this being is human or, to take examples from Kantian and Kant-inspired frameworks, an angel or a Martian. Such an approach removes the GG from arguments that appeal to psychology, and it is an ill-fit for the ancient-inspired version of the GG I defend. I take it that the question of what is a good human life is a practical question *for us*, and that is, for us as human agents who aim to lead good lives. Insofar as the GG is developed within this framework, it would be misguided to set aside human psychology. We are aiming to lead good lives as the beings we are—even though, and I argue for this when developing the notion of human beings as the measure, we plausibly aim to be a lot better thinkers, deliberators, and so on, than it may initially seem we can be.

Finally, on method. Ancient ethics has time and again inspired later contributions in ethics. There is a varied and rich history for this approach, with contributors who go back and forth between aiming to get things right in reading an ancient text *and* aiming to get things right in ethics. This mode of doing philosophy flourished already in the Academy. With changing times and changing philosophical preoccupations, it continues to inspire debates. This book is intended as part of this endeavor. Many influential proposals in this tradition are, however, on questions in *normative* ethics, on questions that, depending on the way one conceives of these fields, may qualify as ancient counterparts to central concerns in modern moral philosophy. These concerns are often taken to be about impartiality. They are taken, further, to address the normativity of moral reasons, say, as opposed to prudential reasons, as well as moral deliberation, understood as a mode of practical reasoning that distinctively picks out what, morally, one ought to do. My book is not about these questions. Though I often acknowledge debts to these contributions, my book aims to carve out a different space: a set of questions about motivation and agency where, I propose, some distinctively ancient resources are underexplored.

Moreover, I take seriously Elizabeth Anscombe's observation about Aristotle's ethics: the notion of morality is conspicuously absent. This strikes me as an inherently interesting observation. Surely the ancients were thinking about what one should do and why. How is it possible that they seem to have done this without a notion that seems crucially important to moderns? Anscombe's conclusion was, in part, that thinking this through leads one to turn to the philosophy of psychology. It leads, in other words, to a line of inquiry that is fundamental and yet preliminary. It is fundamental insofar as we ask what goes on in the minds of agents. It is preliminary insofar as substantive questions of how we should act and live are not (yet) discussed. This delineates the scope of my book. I aim to contribute to the theory of motivation and metaethics as far as it relates to

motivation; I do not aim to contribute to substantive normative ethics or moral philosophy. Hence I need not settle, for present purposes, whether or not ancient philosophy speaks to distinctively moral questions. In this spirit, moral values, moral reasons, and so on, do not figure in this book. I do not even speak of moral psychology, which is often thought to be a field Anscombe inspired. To some extent, one's usage of these terms is stipulative, and it is not my plan to quibble about words. Thus my remarks here are intended merely as prefatory clarifications. As I will put things throughout the book, there is a distinctive kind of ancient-inspired ethics, which differs from later moral philosophy at least in two respects: (i) by being a significantly broader field, one that includes the questions about motivation, psychology, and agency that interest me here; (ii) by being self-consciously practical, conceiving of ethics as the theoretical extension of an agent's thinking about what to pursue and why.

As will become clear quickly, I draw more on Book I of the *NE* than is customary; I part ways with Aristotle once some of *NE* I's premises are established; and I pursue lines of thought from Plato that, compared with the *NE*, put more emphasis on disagreement about value and the way in which desiring the good fuels human pursuits. I focus on the motivations and actions of ordinary agents, rather than on an ideal agent often called the *phronimos* or practically wise person or other models intended to determine what we *should* do. The agents I am interested in are more like you and I and pretty much everyone else: imperfect and more or less failing to be practically wise. I aim to understand how you and I and others are motivated when doing particular things or taking up pursuits, guided by what we take to be a good life. These conceptions of a good life are work in progress or not even explicitly attended to. And yet, or so I argue, it is the desire to have our lives go well, combined with some idea of what amounts to a good life, which shapes every one of our motivations.