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Aristotelian Happiness

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1. Introduction

The Declaration of Independence hails the importance of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, but happiness conjures up many different types of life and pursuits, just as it did in Aristotle’s time. What then is the happiness that is appropriate to pursue and that lawmakers should be interested in? Is it simply whatever the particular individual happens to think it is, but in that case why should lawgivers pay any attention to it, especially if it does not harmonize with the good of others? (Consider someone like Hannibal Lecter, who, by his own lights is leading a very happy life.) On the other hand, if a person’s happiness is objective, but depends on external goods and factors that are beyond the individual’s control and are constantly changing, how can anyone pursue it? It looks as if we are blessed if it pursues us. As the Greek term for happiness “*eudaimonia*” implies, happiness will be like having a good daimon, a guardian angel, who shields us from disaster and brings us good fortune. Being happy will just be a matter of luck, which is the view of the ancient sage Solon. To escape the dilemma, Aristotle needs to show how happiness is both objective, not just whatever we think it is, and attainable by human endeavor. In the following, I shall explain how this is so on Aristotle’s account, and how the pursuit of happiness benefits the agent and other people too, in a way that should be congenial to enlightened legislators. A key idea will be Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean, a doctrine of Aristotle that has been denigrated as “false” (Immanuel Kant’s verdict), “true but uninteresting” (Bertrand Russell’s view) and “better forgotten” (the conclusion drawn by Bernard Williams).¹ The doctrine of the mean has had such a bad press that even modern virtue ethicists who admire Aristotle, for example the “grande dame” of virtue ethicists, Philippa Foot, and Rosalind Hursthouse, have dropped it from their theories.² I shall argue that the doctrine of the mean has some true and interesting implications for the problem at hand.

First, a couple of comments about what happiness is. The ancient Greeks did not have plane flights or bottles of coke, but the following considerations may be useful. The place mat I was given on a recent flight showed a picture of a bottle of coke with the slogan “Open Happiness.” Perhaps this was supposed to conjure up the phrase “open sesame” and the magical, lucky daimonic aspects of happiness. Or maybe it meant that if you were to open the bottle and drink the contents you would get a happy feeling. But that would not be enough for the advertisers. They want you to get a happy feeling from drinking coke, not

from drinking anything else. So perhaps it meant that if you opened the bottle, happiness would emerge in the form of a drink, or what Aristotle would call an external good, assuming the drink is good for you. It is a short step to the assumption that it is external goods that are decisive for happiness, as Solon thought.

2. Solon's view

Aristotle discusses Solon's view in the context of the latter's famous comment that one should call no person happy until that person be dead, a comment reportedly made in Solon's legendary meeting with the proverbially rich king of Lydia, Croesus. Herodotus describes the encounter in detail in his History.³ Croesus is visited by the wise Solon and takes his guest on a tour of all his treasures. Croesus then asks Solon who is the happiest man Solon has ever seen, expecting the answer to be himself. Instead, Solon points to a certain Tellus who grew up in a prosperous city, had good children and healthy grandchildren, died a fine death and was given great honor at his funeral. Obviously a bit peeved by that answer, Croesus asks for the second happiest man. Solon mentions two brothers, Cleobis and Biton, who had enough to live on and had great physical strength. They both won prizes in athletic contests, and, in a feat of superhuman strength, drew their mother in a chariot to a festival of Hera and were rewarded with death and statues dedicated to them at Delphi. Solon concludes with the more radical comment that "a human being is entirely chance".⁴

Two important points emerge from this discussion. First, Solon presents an objective account of happiness; just because Croesus thinks that he is happy does not guarantee that he is.⁵ Secondly, Solon does not dispute Croesus's implicit view that treasures and what Aristotle would classify as external goods (goods external to psychological qualities), namely, strength, athletic prizes, children, grandchildren, good reputation and the like, are decisive for happiness. Instead, Solon notes that success in their regard may be fleeting, and the truly happy life is one that is successful throughout. (Solon even explains how the mother of the two men mentioned above actually prays that their lives should come to an end immediately upon the conclusion of their great feat, so that their lives would remain happy.) According to Solon, one can have a happy life only if the whole of one's life contains good things and if one dies in such a way that one is honored afterwards by those who survive. In short, on Solon's view, happiness depends entirely on external goods and fortunes and external validation by posterity.

What does it mean to say that no one can be called happy until dead? Solon's comment combines two claims, first, that one should not call a person happy before that person is dead, and secondly, that one *can* call someone happy once that person is dead. Aristotle reasonably points out that Solon cannot mean

that someone could *be* happy after that person is dead, which would be absurd.⁶ Therefore, argues Aristotle, Solon must mean that the person in question is now beyond good and bad fortune. But that, says Aristotle, is debatable: Since goods and bads exist for a person even if that person is not aware of them, they must also exist for a dead person, even if that person is not aware of them. As examples of goods and bads, Aristotle gives honors and dishonors, and successes and misfortunes of children and other descendants, precisely those things which Solon himself mentioned in praising Tellus, Cleobis and Biton. (A modern parallel may be the “legacies” that politicians become concerned about when they are about to leave, or have left, office.) This raises a further problem, because if someone becomes happy or unhappy whenever there is a change in the fortunes of his children, for example, the happy person will be as changeable as a chameleon. In effect, Aristotle is posing a problem for Solon—If the fluctuations in fortune are so great that we cannot safely call someone happy during his or her lifetime, why aren’t they equally great after death so that we should never call anyone happy?

Aristotle does not want to answer this question by rejecting an objective account of happiness and assuming that only perceived changes in our experience affect our happiness. An alternative account is therefore needed.

3. Introducing virtuous activity

Aristotle argues that Solon’s understanding of happiness is wrong because happiness does not depend solely on good or bad fortune concerning external goods. Although human beings need external goods for a happy life, “it is the activities in accordance with virtue that control happiness and the contrary activities that control its contrary”. In other words, we should not gauge a person’s happiness simply by looking at the ups and downs in that person’s fortunes, because these, unless very great, are not decisive. What *happens* to a person is less important than how the person deals with circumstances, through virtuous activity. The good person, he says, is not immune to bad luck, but will only be shaken from his happiness “by many great misfortunes, from which he will not become happy again in a short time, but if at all, in a long and complete one, by achieving many great and fine things” (EN I 11 1101a12-13). Therefore, according to Aristotle, it is reasonable to congratulate people on their happiness if they are virtuous, in anticipation of a continuing good life, and it is certainly possible to say whether they were happy once they are dead, when their happiness can no longer be decisively changed by acting virtuously or viciously.⁷ Therefore, Solon is wrong to concentrate solely on fluctuations in external goods in his account of happiness.

What, then, is virtuous activity? On Aristotle’s account in book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is activity that expresses a virtuous or good character. (In

modern times, people tend not to talk so much of virtue and vice, but they do praise people for their good qualities and blame those who are jerks like Aristotle's "mochthēroi".) What is virtue? It is what makes for a happy life. In his discussion of Solon, Aristotle has not yet said what the virtues are. Just reading the passage about Solon, we might assume that Stoic virtues of endurance and perseverance would be most appropriate for dealing with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. On the other hand an "eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we may die" attitude might also seem appropriate, not to mention the qualities of self-sacrifice and resignation. We need to know what the virtues are, according to Aristotle, to explain exactly what is missing from Solon's account. What are the good qualities that make one live a happy life?

Aristotle's list of virtues runs as follows: courage (the virtue of having the appropriate fear and confidence and acting appropriately), temperance (having the correct disposition towards food, drink and sex), generosity (being disposed to give and also take in the appropriate manner), magnificence (which includes tasteful philanthropy), magnanimity (being correctly disposed to honors on a large scale), a virtue concerned with honors on a small scale, mildness (concerned with appropriate anger), truthfulness (concerned with telling the truth about oneself, which is also at issue in making truthful claims), wit (concerned with delivering and listening to jokes with appropriate targets), friendliness (a disposition relating to pleasing and objecting to others in general), justice (of which there are several types) and equity.⁸

It is usual to complain that Aristotle's list of virtues simply reflects the views and prejudices of his time, and are not based on any sound theory. One point against this view, as I argue in my book,⁹ is that half of Aristotle's virtues are called "nameless". Even though Aristotle uses names for them from the ancient Greek, these names do not quite capture the dispositions Aristotle has in mind. For example, truthfulness, according to Aristotle, relates to expressing the truth about one's own abilities, and mildness may be expressed by someone who is quite angry, at the appropriate times. Aristotle even changes his own mind about what count as virtues. Truthfulness, friendliness and wit do not count in his (probably earlier) *Eudemian Ethics*, but they are upgraded in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The addition of these to the cardinal virtues of courage, justice, wisdom and temperance, is an Aristotelian innovation.

Is there a systematic explanation for what counts as an Aristotelian virtue of character and what does not? Commentators have tried to account for Aristotle's list of ten virtues (and justice and equity), in various ways, without discussing the doctrine of the mean, even though Aristotle says that his list confirms the doctrine. But, as I mentioned earlier, the doctrine of the mean has received a bad press.

4. The Doctrine of the Mean

According to Aristotle each virtue is “a disposition involving choice in a mean relative to us” (*EN* II 6 1106b36), and each virtue is in a mean between two vices, one of deficiency and one of excess. As I argue in my book, Aristotle’s doctrine combines three ideas, the idea of equilibrium, the idea of relativity and the idea of triads. The first two ideas originate in ancient Greek medicine. A person is healthy when her bodily functions are in equilibrium. They can be thrown out of equilibrium in various ways. For example, too much or too little food and drink ruins health. Similarly, too much or too little exercise will ruin one’s strength, whereas the proportionate amount both produces and preserves it. The correct amount, explains Aristotle, is what is “relative to us”. Even though six is midway between two and ten, a trainer will not necessarily prescribe six pounds of food. That is because six pounds of food would be too little for Milo, the Chris Rock of the ancient world (he was six-time winner of the wrestling competition at the ancient Olympic games), and too much for someone new to the sport. Different amounts of food are appropriate for each. The author of the Hippocratic treatise *On the Ancient Art* makes similar points about relativity, noting that even among healthy people, different dietary habits may be beneficial. For example, some people have an adverse reaction if they miss lunch; others have an adverse reaction if they have lunch. Similarly, cheese is good for some people but bad for others. (They knew about lactose intolerance in the ancient world.)

Aristotle’s application of medical ideas to ethics is controversial, but here is my interpretation. The good person’s character is balanced in a way that he or she has the rationally appropriate feelings in particular situations and acts accordingly. For example, the mild person will get angry at the appropriate time in the appropriate way for the appropriate reason &c. The courageous person will be appropriately fearful and confident in battle. Like an old-fashioned scales that registers the right weight of what is put in the pans, when correctly balanced, so the good person, having a balanced character, registers the appropriate emotions at the appropriate times and acts appropriately too. Aristotle also uses a musical analogy to illustrate his point. The good person’s character, like a well-tuned instrument, will sound the correct tones.¹⁰

To understand the kind of ethical relativity Aristotle has in mind, we need to turn to his accounts of particular virtues. It is clear that he does not think that the relativity is relativity to what the agent happens to think, although the good person, according to Aristotle, is correct in her thoughts, feelings and actions. In this account of generosity, Aristotle argues that what’s appropriate to give is relative to the agent’s own means. What would be generous for you to give would be stingy for Bill Gates. In the case of magnanimity, a virtue relating to great honors, magnanimous people must have and use self-knowledge. The

magnanimous person must have the correct view of her own worth and abilities. The pusillanimous person has too low an opinion of herself. The vain person has too high an opinion, and will put herself forward for offices that she cannot fulfill. Thus, those who have the vices lack knowledge of their worth and abilities. The appropriate actions are relative to the agent's worth and abilities.

This brings me to the point of Aristotle's triads. It is not that the vices necessarily exhibit too much or too little of what the virtue has, a point that has caused much confusion, suggesting that the doctrine of the mean is a doctrine of moderation, and a false one as Kant thought or a depressing one, as Bernard Williams suggests.¹¹ The mild person, for example, is not moderately angry all the time, but will get very angry when the occasion warrants, and not at all when it does not. Furthermore, since there are indefinitely many ways in which one can go wrong, it has seemed perplexing why Aristotle picks out two rather than a myriad vices for each virtue. Certainly, picking out three shows that the dyadic way of thinking about virtue and vice is incorrect, but there ought to be more to it than that.

There is. Aristotle picks out a virtue and two vices because there are three recognizable underlying psychological profiles involving self-knowledge. Just as the virtues are unified, in Aristotle's view, so there is also unity among some of the vices. The coward, the pusillanimous person, the inirascible person, and the person who is indifferent to honor all underestimate their worth and abilities. The rash person, the vain person, the irascible person, the person who loves honor too much, and the buffoon all overestimate their worth and abilities. The coward's inappropriate fear and lack of confidence in his abilities lead him to run from the battle. The person who is inirascible, and does not get angry when he ought when insulted, again has too low opinion of his abilities and worth. Similarly the person who is indifferent to all appropriate honors does not think himself worthy of them. Again, the rash person, who is over-confident, overestimates his abilities to succeed in battle, the vain person thinks he is owed all kinds of honors because he over-estimates his worth and abilities, as does the person who loves honor too much. The buffoon is full of himself and thinks his ability to make jokes is much greater than it is.

The match is not perfect. Flattery (the excess vice relating to the virtue of friendliness) would seem to line up with the deficiencies, if the flatterer happens to be insecure, and the boaster (who has the excess vice relating to the virtue of truthfulness) may not be wrong about his abilities, but simply lying (although there is a question about whether a successful boaster needs to deceive himself too.) Nevertheless, the triadic view shows why virtues are virtues and vices are vices in terms of three psychological mentalities. The doctrine of the mean is neither a doctrine of moderation, nor an empty doctrine after all. In fact, it entails a substantive conclusion about the type of qualities that will count as virtues. Dispositions like self-sacrifice, meekness and the like will not count as

virtues. Nor will the qualities that Thrasymachus of Plato's *Republic* or Gekko of Wall Street thought were all-important, such as grabbing as much as possible for oneself. Though generated by the doctrine of the mean, the resulting virtues are good both for oneself and for others, especially for a good friend.

5. Self-love and friendship

In introducing the virtues and vices, Aristotle describes them in ways that relate to the agent, rather than focusing on the impact these will have on other people, although many vices will obviously be harmful to others just as much as they are self-destructive. However, in his account of friendship Aristotle draws a direct parallel between the correct attitude towards oneself and the correct attitude towards another person, a friend, showing how the two go together. Here, he distinguishes two kinds of self-love, the kind where the agent gratifies his desires indiscriminately, in a way which lines up with the vices of excess, and the good kind of self-love where the person gratifies himself in ways which lead to virtuous activity. Here Aristotle is explaining that good self-love is not the same as selfishness. The correct way to treat a friend is to love him the way one would oneself when one loves oneself in the correct manner. Presumably, Aristotle does not include the vices of deficiency here, because they are hardly describable as a form of self-love.

Friendship, in Aristotelian parlance, covers a variety of relationships: between friends, lovers, family members and, in the case of civic friendship, other citizens. Aristotle distinguishes three types of friends, friends merely for mutual advantage, friends merely for pleasure, and friends of good character. Only the good person will have the correct attitude towards her friend, and a friend, most significantly, is the greatest external good, according to Aristotle.¹² According to Aristotle, only those of good character can be true friends, and true friendships are more fulfilling than friendships merely for mutual advantage or for pleasure, although friendships based on good character will be useful and pleasant too. Aristotle's conclusion that friendships based on good character are best follows from the objective nature of happiness. The good person knows what is really good and wishes herself what is really good accordingly. Since she knows what is really good she will wish her friend what is really good too. Good friends, according to Aristotle, reciprocate their good-will, are aware of each other's good-will and also share many activities.¹³ Good friends, then, will not be enablers; they will help their friends when they can, and, since they have all the virtues, will be witty and amusing too. The virtuous person will be trustworthy and reliable, not changing her mind about important things from one day to the next. The virtuous person, then, will be the greatest external good for others, and contribute most to the happiness of her friends.

6. Solon and the greatest external good

According to Solon, as portrayed by Aristotle, continuous external goods and strokes of fortune are all-important for the happy life. Aristotle argues that with or without a large amount of external goods, virtuous activity is more important. Having the virtuous disposition relating to wealth (generosity) or to honor (magnanimity and the virtue concerning honors on a small scale), is much more important than merely having wealth and honor, and virtuous activity is especially important in ensuring one's ability to enjoy the greatest external good, a friend of good character, because only good people can have genuinely good friendships. This does not mean that external goods are unimportant on Aristotle's view. Aristotle argues that the good and happy person requires a moderate amount of external goods, and, as we have seen, a good friend is the greatest external good one can have. Aristotle does not believe that one can be happy in the direst of circumstances, for example. He does not have the view that virtue is sufficient for happiness. He merely disagrees with Solon that external goods are all one needs to be happy. But if someone like Solon can begin to see the value of a friend of good character as the greatest external good, he can perhaps be brought to see that virtuous activity should be included in an account of happiness.

7. The pursuit of happiness

Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with the comment that his inquiry is "*tis politikē*", a sort of politics. Happiness is the goal of the legislator as well as of the individual. Aristotle's account of happiness, especially his doctrine of the mean, relates to the agent and his or her dispositions, rather than the outcome of having those dispositions. As we have seen, however, an important implication of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is that Aristotelian happiness is good both for the agent and for others, and so should be something a legislator would have reason to promote. While the virtues (courage, generosity, friendliness, truthfulness and the rest) are obviously helpful to others, the vices are often harmful to others as well as to oneself. For example, people who are vain and put themselves forward for high offices when they are ill-suited to carry them out, will do harm to the people they serve. Similarly, people who are rash will do much harm to themselves and others who follow them into battle. Pusillanimity, the vice of those who think that they are not worthy of high office when they are, with its attendant lack of self-esteem, is harmful to the agent and as well as to others. So it is in the interest of the legislator to see that people are able to pursue a happy life through the virtues, both for their own benefit and for the benefit of others, and it is also in their interest to provide an education that goes beyond the mere acquisition of the inanimate external goods. Such an education, as Aristotle

argues in the central books of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, requires people to think for themselves, and also to practice what they think. In my book I coin the term “metalog mentality” to describe the mentality of those whose virtues of character involve thought and who, at the very least, do not merely parrot the thought of others. Without psychological dispositions informed in this way, external goods will be of limited use. In short, you cannot “open happiness” simply by ordering a bottle of coke.¹⁴

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Notes

¹ See Kant *Doctrine of Virtue* 163, Russell 1930, Chapter 16, and Williams 1985, 36.

² Foot 1978, 2001, and Hursthouse 1999.

³ See Herodotus *History* I. 30-33 and White 1992, Part II, especially 60-68.

⁴ Solon also notes that although a rich man may do best at coping with disaster, a lucky poor man will fare even better. For present purposes I leave this issue aside, although each may do better with good Aristotelian friends.

⁵ Herodotus's readers would have known that Croesus came to a bad end, when he misinterpreted the oracle and brought about the end of his empire.

⁶ Solon and Aristotle are therefore not assuming the existence of any afterlife.

⁷ It is controversial what Aristotle's conclusion is, because he uses rhetorical questions (*EN* I 10 1101a14-16). However, his final, non-rhetorical comment that the blessed, i.e., happy individual is the person who has and will keep the goods he has, supports my interpretation of the role of virtue (*EN* I 10 1101a16-20). I assume that "blessed" and "happy" are interchangeable here.

⁸ These final virtues and the virtues of thought are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹ References are to Gottlieb 2009, especially Chapters 1, 2 and 4.

¹⁰ The fact that murder is always wrong is no counterexample to the theory. The term "murder" is only given to killing in the wrong situations, at the wrong time &c. See *EN* II 6 1107a9-17.

¹¹ See Kant *Doctrine of Virtue* 163 and Williams 1985, 36.

¹² Perhaps Aristotle is not speaking in his own voice when he describes *honor* as the greatest external good in his discussion of magnanimity (*EN* IV 3 1123b20).

¹³ Must good-will be reciprocated or can one merely be "a friend to" someone? This is a difficult topic, but Aristotle describes the advantages of being a benefactor in *EN* IX 7. Thanks to Georges Dicker for raising this (and other) questions.

¹⁴ Thanks to Georges Dicker, as well as to Julie Ponesse, Gordon Barnes and their students for v. helpful discussion.

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