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**Gabriel Richardson Lear: Happy Lives and the Highest Good**

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## Introduction

ARISTOTLE INVITES US to conceive of the human good as a special kind of end (*telos*). In the very first line of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) he says, “Every craft and every inquiry, and likewise every action and every choice, seem to aim at some good; for which reason people have rightly (*kalôs*) concluded that *the* good is that at which all things aim” (1094a1–3, my emphasis).<sup>1</sup> He calls this ultimate goal of the successful life *eudaimonia*, or happiness (1097a28–34). Just as an archer aims at a target, so, Aristotle thinks, the happy person aims at the human good in everything he does (1094a22–24). In effect, he proposes that we think of happiness not as the property of being happy—a certain feeling of contentment or satisfaction—but as the goal or end for the sake of which the happy person acts. Aristotle’s investigation into happiness is thus decidedly practical. Not only does he want to arrive at a theory of happiness that will actually help us to live well, his investigation is guided by the thought that happiness is the ultimate object of rational desire and action. If we know what a good must be like in order to serve as the end of all of our rational pursuits, then we can use those criteria to evaluate goods, such as pleasure, wealth, honor, moral virtue, and philosophical contemplation, which people have at one time or other taken to be keys to happiness.

Notice that for Aristotle the happy life needs to focus on a *single* kind of good. Throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics* he envisions the happy life as a life of devotion to a single supremely valuable thing (or kind of thing). This is the natural way to read the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In *NE* I.4–5 Aristotle considers whether lives characterized by the pursuit of pleasure or wealth are happy, and he criticizes the idea that honor or moral virtue is the good at which the political life aims, apparently as a preliminary to supplying his own account. Then in *NE* I.7 he argues that the highest good must be activity in accordance with virtue, “and if there are several, in accordance with the best and most final” (1098a16–18). It is natural (although certainly not necessary) to interpret Aristotle as saying here that happiness, the ultimate goal of the happy life, is a single kind of virtuous activity, that is, it is a monistic good. When we reach the final book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the impression that happiness is a single kind of good for the sake of

<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine unless noted otherwise. However, my translations of the *NE* have often been influenced by the excellent translations of Ross (in Barnes 1984) and Crisp 2000.

which the happy person makes all his choices is even more pronounced. In *NE* X.7 Aristotle argues that the happiest life is one in which the agent “does everything” for the sake of philosophical contemplation (1177b33–34). And in *NE* X.8 Aristotle allows that a life lived for the sake of morally virtuous activity (another monistic good) is also happy, though in a lesser sense (1178a9–22). Most readers are surprised, of course, when they discover that Aristotle thinks the happiest life is lived for the sake of contemplation. The lengthy discussions of moral virtue and friendship and Aristotle’s evident admiration for the morally virtuous person lead most people to assume that, according to Aristotle, the human good is the exercise of practical, and not theoretical, virtue. What is not surprising (or at least ought not to be) is that, according to Aristotle’s considered opinion, the happy life aims at a monistic good.

But although there is ample evidence, I believe, that Aristotle thinks of happiness as a monistic end in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, many, if not most, recent interpreters deny that this is what he has in mind. Instead, many scholars believe Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* is (or ought to be) a set that includes some or all intrinsically valuable goods.<sup>2</sup> As I understand it, the motivation behind these various *inclusivist* interpretations is not so much that various particular passages require it, as that—despite the evidence that Aristotle *does* conceive of *eudaimonia* as a monistic end—the overall theory of the *Nicomachean Ethics* looks incoherent on a monistic interpretation of *eudaimonia*. Here is why.

There are two problems for a monistic interpretation, both of which spring from Aristotle’s central claim that happiness is an ultimate end. First, Aristotle claims that the happy philosophical life includes morally virtuous activity (*NE* X.8 1178b5–6). But morally virtuous actions, in Aristotle’s account, are not just *worth* choosing for their own sakes; they must be *chosen* for their own sakes (*NE* II.4 1105a32). What, in a monistic interpretation, prevents the happy philosopher from having divided allegiances—to contemplative *eudaimonia* on the one hand and to morally virtuous action on the other? Or does Aristotle imagine, quite implausibly and with no argument, that morally virtuous activity with all its social concerns always promotes contemplation? Unless Aristotle does think something like this, however, it seems that the happy person does not aim at *eudaimonia* as an end in everything he does, despite what Aristotle has claimed.

The second problem goes even deeper. In conceiving of happiness as the practical goal of the happy life, Aristotle implies that things contribute to

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ackrill [1974] 1980; Crisp 1994; Cooper [1987] 1999; Devereaux 1981; Irwin 1985b, Keyt 1983; Keyt 1989; Roche 1988b; White 1990, Whiting 1986. Broadie (1991) might be considered one of this number, although she thinks that Aristotle equivocates on the meaning of *eudaimonia*, which sometimes refers to a monistic good. Hardie ([1965] 1967) thinks that Aristotle usually conceives of happiness as a monistic end but sometimes has the insight that it is inclusive. Heinaman (1988), Kenny (1992), and Kraut (1989) are notable exceptions in interpreting *eudaimonia* as a monistic good.

the flourishing of a life in virtue of their teleological relationship to happiness. All goods other than the highest are relevant to our well-being and find a place in the happy life *because* they are worth choosing for the sake of *eudaimonia*. But that means that, if *eudaimonia* is a monistic end, such as contemplation, all other goods, including the intrinsically valuable goods and in particular morally virtuous action, are parts of the happy life because they contribute to contemplation. This looks implausible, however. Surely intrinsically valuable goods are parts of the choiceworthy life because they are the good things they are, regardless of what they lead to. In fact, that seems to be what we mean by saying that they are choiceworthy for their own sakes (*NE* I.7 1097b2–4). Unless intrinsically valuable goods are actually parts of the highest good, Aristotle’s conception of happiness as a most final end seems utterly wrongheaded.

The inclusivist interpretation is, for these reasons, apparently attractive. But I will argue that it misunderstands Aristotle’s technical concept of a *telos*, or end, so it cannot really solve the problems it addresses. (I will make this argument in chapter 2.) Furthermore, nothing in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* suggests that the happy life converges on a set of good things as its ultimate goal. In particular, a close study of Aristotle’s claim that happiness is a self-sufficient good will show that this criterion does not require, or even suggest, an inclusivist interpretation of *eudaimonia* as many scholars have thought (chapter 3). So we need to try a new approach.

Problems for the relationship between intrinsically valuable goods and a monistic final end arise when we assume that X is choiceworthy for the sake of Y only when X is either an instrumental means to Y or a constituent of Y. That is to say, we have trouble understanding how, in Aristotle’s account, morally virtuous action could be choiceworthy for the sake of contemplation because that would seem to imply (since morally virtuous action is not a constituent of contemplation) that morally virtuous action is always an instrumental means to contemplation. Aristotle’s conception of teleological relations was not so narrow, however. According to Aristotle, X may also be choiceworthy for the sake of Y when it approximates or imitates Y (chapter 4). Now, teleological approximations have an interesting feature: If the paradigm is worth choosing for its own sake, then insofar as the approximation succeeds in imitating the paradigm’s nature, it too will be worth choosing for itself. Under appropriate conditions teleological approximations are worth choosing *both* for their own sakes *and* for the sake of the paradigm.

I will argue that morally virtuous action is, in Aristotle’s account, a teleological approximation of contemplation (chapter 5). The excellent exercise of practical reason accompanied as it must be by the agreement of emotion and desire, grasps truth about the good in action as exactly as possible. In fact, grasping of truth is the practically wise person’s aim. (The idea that the target of practical wisdom, and by extension the moral virtues, is truth may strike us as counterintuitive. Consider, however, the common opinion that

whereas self-indulgent and otherwise foolish people see what they want to see, wise and good people want to see the truth. This intuition is not conclusive, of course, but it may help make Aristotle's position seem less odd). However, Aristotle believes that the project of grasping truth is more perfectly realized in the exercise of theoretical wisdom. Practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) embodies only to a degree an ideal of rational activity perfectly achieved by theoretical wisdom (*sophia*). In this way, excellent theoretical truthfulness sets the standard for the excellent practical truthfulness of morally virtuous action. So even if making the virtuous choice does not maximize contemplation, it will still be worth choosing for the sake of contemplation because it approximates theoretical truthfulness. It is a sort of contemplation in action. But precisely because morally virtuous action succeeds in approximating the more perfect exercise of theoretical reason, it is also choiceworthy for its own sake. After all, the morally virtuous agent possesses, by approximation, the most valuable human good. Thus moral virtue finds a place in the life devoted to philosophy while still being valued for itself.

Thinking of morally virtuous activity as an approximation of contemplation can seem remote from Aristotle's discussions of particular moral virtues in *NE* II–V. Aristotle's virtuous agent is caught up in the details of his social circumstances. He fights battles, drinks (moderately) at dinner parties, puts on dramatic festivals, and receives with grace the honors bestowed by his community. There is very little indication that he cares, above all else, for contemplation. Nevertheless, I will argue that when we attend carefully to the ways in which Aristotelian virtue is fine (*kalon*), we see that virtuous actions are chosen by the agent because they are appropriate to him as a lover of reason and truthfulness (chapters 6 and 7). When the courageous person goes shield-to-shield with his compatriots against the enemy in just the way that he does, or when the temperate person eats moderately and with attention to the flavors of his meal, he shows that happiness for him is the most excellent use of reason in leisure. (Since war is not leisure, this means that the paradigmatically courageous person pursues as happiness an excellent exercise of reason that is not itself specifically courageous.) This orientation to the most excellent and leisurely use of reason is what makes these virtuous actions fine. (It is also what it is to grasp the truth in action and, thereby, to approximate theoretical truthfulness). But since the most excellent use of reason possible for human beings is in leisurely contemplation, the morally virtuous person's sense of the fine, as Aristotle describes it, is guided by the value of contemplation, whether the agent understands this or not. I believe that if we read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* with a broader understanding of the ways in which one thing may be worth choosing for the sake of another, his conclusion in *NE* X.7 that the most perfect happiness is the monistic good of contemplation will not strike us as so problematic (chapter 8).

Before I begin, I should make clear this is an interpretation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although I suspect that, in the end, the happy life as Aristotle describes it in the *Eudemian Ethics* will look, from the ground, so to speak, very much like the happy life as he describes it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's philosophical analysis of what makes that happy life happy is, I believe, quite different in the two works. (In particular, in the *Eudemian Ethics*, even though theoretical virtue holds a special place in the good life, Aristotle thinks that happiness includes moral as well as theoretical virtuous activity.) Thus, although I will from time to time make reference to the *Eudemian Ethics*, I will not attempt any systematic treatment of the relationship between those treatises, nor will I assume that what Aristotle says in the *Eudemian Ethics* applies to his argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

I will, however, frequently refer to works by Plato. This may come as a bit of a surprise. It is, of course, widely recognized that Aristotle's theory of moral education is influenced by the *Republic* and that the finality and self-sufficiency criteria for an account of the good derive from the *Philebus*, even though Aristotle does not always acknowledge his debts to Plato by name. But scholars of the theory of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* have not made as much of the Platonic corpus as I believe they might. This may be because Aristotle explicitly rejects (*NE* I.6) Plato's claim that the goodness of human beings and of their lives is to be explained by their participation in the transcendent Form of the Good. He thereby presents himself as offering a new account of what makes some human lives worth living. But although Aristotle rejects Plato's claim that the goodness of *all* good things is to be explained by their being in relation to the same thing (*viz.*, the Good), he does believe that the goodness of all *human* goods is explained by their being appropriately related to the single highest *human* good. It is true that, in Aristotle's account, this source of human good is achievable within human life. Furthermore, he believes that humanly good things can be related to this highest human good in different ways. Clearly these differences from Plato are important. But they do not constitute so radical a departure from a Platonic framework that our understanding of the *Nicomachean Ethics* cannot be greatly enhanced by an appreciation of where Aristotle may be drawing implicitly on his Platonic heritage. (Of particular importance for my project, Aristotle agrees with Plato that (1) finality and self-sufficiency are marks of the good; (2) certain activities are related to each other as paradigm to approximation [I discuss the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* in this regard in the appendix]; and (3) human beings are motivated by "spirited" desires that are gratified by the fine or beautiful.) The lesson we should draw from Aristotle's rejection of the Form of the Good as the subject of ethics is not that we should read the *Nicomachean Ethics* in isolation from Plato's remarks about happiness and goodness but that we should read Aristotle in light of Plato with care.

Another reference that appears frequently in the chapters that follow is to Richard Kraut's *Aristotle on the Human Good*. I will leave the details of my agreements and disagreements for the footnotes. But since his is the most important recent monistic (and intellectualist) interpretation of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, it will perhaps be helpful to say where in general I see my interpretation as coinciding with his and where there are fairly significant differences.

Kraut argues that perfect happiness, the single aim of the happiest life, is philosophical contemplation and that every other good has a place in the happy life *qua* happy because it is worth choosing for contemplation's sake. Here I am in complete agreement with Kraut and for many of the same reasons. Now since Kraut and I think Aristotle's ideal contemplative life includes moral virtue, we must both explain the nature of the teleological relationship between morally virtuous action and contemplation. Kraut believes that the causal means-end relation is the only "for the sake of" relation that Aristotle recognizes (1989, 200–203, 211–213). Thus, for Kraut this project amounts to showing how the moral virtues are instrumentally valuable in the pursuit of philosophy (1989, chap. 3). Now, I accept that morally virtuous actions may sometimes causally promote contemplation. However, I do not think that the instrumental relation is the only "for the sake of" relation Aristotle recognizes. Indeed, since I will argue that approximation is a "for the sake of" relation, I do not think a good needs to causally promote another in order to be worth choosing for its sake. (Kraut claims that approximation may be a way of acting for the sake of contemplation, but only when contemplation is not ever possible for the agent in question [1989, 87–88].) Thus, unlike Kraut, I do not argue that moral virtue finds its place in the happy life only to the extent that it maximizes the philosopher's contemplation. According to my interpretation, the philosopher has reason to choose moral virtue even when it does not directly promote theoretical reflection.

Of course, Kraut also thinks the philosopher has reason to act virtuously at the expense of spending more time contemplating. A major claim of his book is that there are some goods—in particular, the well-being of friends and fellow citizens—whose value for the agent is independent of his own happiness (1989, chap. 2). Thus, even when the agent has no reason from the point of view of his happiness to act on the basis of moral virtue, he may well have other, unrelated reasons. We should notice that Kraut's thesis is not only an interesting claim about the kinds of value Aristotle recognizes; it is a solution to what I will call the problem of middle-level ends. That is to say, it is an explanation of how in Aristotle's account some ends may be worth choosing for their own sakes *and* for the sake of happiness.<sup>3</sup> Friends,

<sup>3</sup> This is not Kraut's solution, however (1989, chap. 5.14). His interpretation takes the general approach of describing these goods as worth choosing for two different reasons, though. See chapter 2, section 4, below.

honor, pleasure, and moral virtue itself may be worth choosing for two reasons: for their intrinsic value and for their contribution to happiness (1989, 228–230; 300–305). Now, as opposed to Kraut, I do think that Aristotle’s ethics is eudaimonistic—that every action is ultimately to be justified by reference to the agent’s own happiness.<sup>4</sup> Thus I do not adopt this solution to the problem of middle-level ends. But I am motivated not merely by the sense that Aristotle does not recognize non-eudaimonistic value, but also by the thought that a solution of the sort Kraut proposes will not work in principle. That is to say, I will argue in the next chapter that the intrinsic value of middle-level ends is not independent of the value they have by being for the sake of the agent’s happiness. Thus, while I am in sympathy with Kraut’s claim that the happiest life is, insofar as it is happy, aimed at contemplation alone, our interpretation of how goods other than contemplation find a place in that life is not the same. And this is because we develop such different accounts of what, according to Aristotle, it means to act for the sake of an end. So let us turn to that question at once.

<sup>4</sup> I prefer to use *eudaimonistic* in the traditional sense in order not to obscure a distinction Aristotle himself is keen to draw between the virtuous person’s love of self and selfishness. I take Kraut’s point, however, that we ought to distinguish the question whether actions are justified by reference to the happiness of someone or other from the question whether actions are justified by reference to the *agent’s* happiness (1989, chap. 2).