

*Winner of the 2014 Boethius Prize*  
**The Problem of *Eudaimonia* and Virtue**  
by Alexander Thomas

In commenting on modern virtue ethics, Rosalind Hursthouse makes the point that most, if not all, modern accounts of virtue ethics have their roots in ancient Greek philosophy, particularly that of Aristotle's. She further notes that those roots are bound up in the three Greek concepts of *arête* (excellence), *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (happiness, or more recently translated as human flourishing). "As modern virtue ethics has grown and more people have become familiar with its literature, the understanding of these terms has increased, but it is still the case that readers familiar only with modern philosophy tend to misinterpret them" (Hursthouse). This is particularly the case with the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, and indeed modern scholars are generally struck by Aristotle's puzzling (and somewhat contradictory to their minds) use of the concept in his account of virtue and virtuous activity.

In order to understand *eudaimonia* in the context of Aristotle's work, we must first understand his 'science' as it relates to his account of virtue and happiness. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that all species have a specific, and unique to that species, end in life. For Aristotle, end (*telos*) means the purpose and goal of life. For the human species then, it is the direction in which life is lived that is the point of being human. Just as for instance a tree's or a horse's life existence is predicated on being the best tree and the best horse, so man's teleological end is the perfection of his rational activity (with 'rational activity' seen as Aristotle's species differentiation between men and animals).

Aristotle, following Socrates/Plato, maintains that man's end is rational activity directed towards human perfection, that is, to the good.

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. (*NE*, Book 1, Ch 1)

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. (*NE*, Book 1, Ch 2)

For Aristotle, since human beings are the only species that have rationality, the 'good' of a human being must have something to do with being human; and as we have said, what sets humanity apart from other species is their use of reason. So, if we reason well, we live well; thus reasoning well over the course of a life is what happiness consists of and the 'good' perfected is in essence full happiness. And doing anything well (and in this case, 'living a happy life') requires *arête* (excellence, or in Aristotle's case virtues which are 'excellences'), and therefore living well as the end goal requires the cultivation of virtue (excellence) in the practice of rational activity. (Kraut)

Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, ... and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy (*NE*, Book 1, Ch 4)

So for Aristotle, living well towards the end goal of happiness (*eudaimonia*) consists in our practice of virtuous activity. But in order to achieve this happiness we must not just act virtuously, but in addition we must act with the intent of being virtuous, and in addition we must actually be virtuous in ourselves. In other words, a person intending to act virtuously but not virtuous himself, can not achieve the end goal of happiness. Thus if any one of these three aspects of a virtuous life are missing we are unable to have true happiness.

End-happiness then consists of virtuous humans intending and acting with virtue, that is, with excellency, in

order to reach *eudaimonia*.

Yet, Aristotle also says, that true perfect end-happiness can only come, if in addition to the tripartite aspect of virtue practiced (i.e. the intent and act of a virtuous man), we actually have *eudaimonia*. And here Aristotle is quite clear that there is nothing a virtuous man can do to 'earn' *eudaimonia*. On the one hand, man must be virtuous to be 'worthy' of *eudaimonia*; but on the other hand his virtuous actions can have no effect in the end as to whether or not his life is *eudaimonias*. Of course, this leads to the question: If *eudaimonia* is our human end-goal-perfection, and if our virtuous activity cannot gain us *eudaimonia*, then why be virtuous? The puzzle for modern virtue ethicists is thus: We can't achieve *eudaimonia* without virtuous activity, but no virtuous activity will gain us *eudaimonia*.

Aristotle's qualification as to end-happiness or end-*eudaimonia* has been for modern commentators, particularly 'virtue ethicists', the problem. A problem in that modern western society generally looks at virtue and virtuous activity as a means to a goal: salvation, eternal life, heaven and or etc. While we often hear the phrase 'virtue is its own reward', we generally do not act on this. In fact, we are 'good' for a 'reason', whatever that reason may be. But this modern understanding as to the 'end of and the reason why' of virtuous activity is not Aristotle's. In attempting to solve the problem then, we have to understand and consider what exactly Aristotle meant by the term *eudaimonia*.

*Eudaimonia* is generally translated into English as 'happiness'; and more recently as 'flourishing'. Both translations, while partially accurate, do not express Aristotle's meaning of a 'state or existence of the ongoing activity' of happiness. When using *eudaimonia* Aristotle is not referring to the emotion we think of with happiness; as in 'I feel happy that ...'. Rather Aristotle is referring to a description of a whole life, a unified picture of virtuous activity and of the totality of a person's life summed up. Or as Kraut says: "... not that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is virtue, but that it is virtuous activity. Living well consists in doing something, not just being in a certain state or condition. It consists in those lifelong activities that actualize the virtues of the rational part of the soul." (Kraut)

But the state of *eudaimonia* does not just consist of virtuous activity, for Aristotle clearly says that *eudaimonia*, in addition to virtuous activity, requires some amount of friends, love, wealth, and reputation; and without these 'exterior conditions or possessions', a person's virtuous activity aside, life can not be one of perfect *eudaimonia* (happiness). In the end, we must understand *eudaimonia* as a 'state or existence', founded on the results of both individual virtuous activity (the successful pursuit of the good, from whence comes happiness) and good luck or good fortune or good fate. So Aristotle is describing a fact of existence that is such that if a man 'achieves' *eudaimonia* he has had a perfect end (*telos*) and he has been perfectly happy.

At the end of Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle most telling describes what he means by *eudaimonia* in his quote from the philosopher Solon:

Are we then to count no other human being happy either, as long as he is alive? Must we obey Solon's warning, and 'look to the end'? And if we are indeed to lay down this rule, can a man really be happy after he is dead? Surely that is an extremely strange notion, especially for us who define happiness (*eudaimonia*) as a form of activity! (*NE*, Book 1, Ch 10)

Aristotle is actually quoting Herodotus who had said:

Solon visited Croesus, king of Lydia, and was shown all his treasures, but refused to call him the happiest (*eudaimon*) of mankind until he should have heard that he had ended his life without misfortune. (Herodotus, Book 1, 30-33)

A man who experiences good fortune can be called lucky, Solon explained, but the fact of a happy life must be held in reserve until it is seen whether or not his good fortune lasts until his death. "This is why," Solon finally concludes to Croesus, "I cannot answer the question you asked me until I know the manner of your death. Count no man happy until the end is known." (Herodotus, Book1, 30-33)

So Herodotus clearly understands *eudaimonia* as a 'state of existence' as opposed to our modern transitory 'feeling of happiness', and Aristotle in his discussion of Solon's quote clearly understands likewise. What is of further significance is that Aristotle, while using Solon's concept of *eudaimonia*, disagrees with Solon's conclusion, and in doing so explicitly defines what both (Solon and Aristotle, and indirectly Herodotus)

mean by their use of *eudaimonia*.

Sophocles (often quoted by Aristotle), in his tragedy *Oedipus the King*, again quotes Solon in the context of *eudaimonia*. The Chorus at the conclusion of the tragedy say:

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus. He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, he rose to power, a man beyond all power. Who could behold his greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him. Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy (*eudaimon*) till he dies, free of pain at last. (*Oedipus the King*, 1678–1684)

At the end of his discussion of Solon's answer to Croesus, Aristotle concludes:

May not we then confidently pronounce that man happy who realizes complete goodness in action, and is adequately furnished with external goods? Or should we add, that he must also be destined to go on living not for any casual period but throughout a complete lifetime in the same manner, and to die accordingly, because the future is hidden from us, and we conceive happiness as an end, something utterly and absolutely final and complete? ...If this is so, we shall pronounce those of the living who possess and are destined to go on possessing the good things we have specified to be supremely blessed (*eudaimonia*), though on the human scale of bliss. (*NE*, Book 1, Ch 10)

Hursthouse says: "All usual versions of virtue ethics agree that living a life in accordance with virtue is necessary for *eudaimonia*." She notes that most standard versions of virtue ethics insist on a conceptual link between virtue and *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle though, virtue is "necessary but not sufficient", the link then is in only one direction: virtuous activity is needed for *eudaimonia*, but *eudaimonia* does not come from virtuous activity.

Aristotle's answer to what to moderns seems to be a contradiction is that not just virtuous activity, but in addition the 'blessings of fame and fortune, love and friendship' are also needed for a *eudaimonias* life, and that these 'external goods' come solely as a matter of luck, or fate and or blessing.

Rosanna Lauriola writes that the etymology of *eudaimonia* suggests the original conception 'happiness' among the Greeks. *Eudaimonia* means "having a well disposed (*eu*) divine power (*daemon*). In ancient Greek thought happiness is a condition due to divine favor, and happy is the one who enjoys the favor of *daimones* (of those divine powers who might be disposed to be either friendly or hostile). Thus the manifestation of being "favored by the divine powers", that is, of "being free from divine ill-will", is what is commonly called "prosperity", in terms of either material wealth or success.

As noted above, Aristotle concludes his initial discussion of *eudaimonia* by issuing one caveat:

If this is so, we shall pronounce those of the living who possess and are destined to go on possessing the good things we have specified to be supremely blessed (*eudaimonia*), though on the human scale of bliss. (*NE*, Book 1, Ch 10)

And it is this qualification of happiness on a human as opposed to a divine scale that completes the sense of *eudaimonia*. Lauriola notes that often '*eudaimonia*' is "coupled with the ancient Greek word denoting the other aspect of being 'happy', that is *olbios*, which properly means "prosperity granted by the gods, blessed fortune" (Lauriola).

So it is in this sense that Hesiod says:

. . . that man is happy (*eudaimon*) and blessed (*olbios*) who, knowing all these rules, goes on with his work guiltless before the gods... and avoids transgression" (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 826-828)

*Eudaimonia* has then the sense of a free gift, a blessing, something not earned but given, or in our modern parlance, chance luck or random fortune. This is of course the reasoning used by Aristotle in his point that *eudaimonia* is not 'solely' the result of virtuous activity

In addition, we find one more aspect of the 'blessed' sense of *eudaimonia*, and that is best described by the English saying "we make or seek our own luck"; or as the poet Pindar says:

Seek not, my soul, the life of the immortals; but enjoy the full resources that

are within your reach (*Pythian* 3. 59-62)

Pindar is naming the ‘work of self-restraint’ as important to *eudaimonia*; just as Aristotle later will emphasize the ‘work’ of virtuous activity. For it is self-control and moderation in life that are what make it possible for men to be ‘happy’. Aristotle echoes the inscriptions at Delphi: “Know thyself”, and “Nothing in excess” as maxims important to a virtuous life. For Aristotle, virtuous activity was just plain ‘common sense’ or practical wisdom. Thus those who have good sense are able to ‘find their luck and good fortune’ and thus able to receive the gift of *eudaimonia*.

Good sense is by far the chief part of happiness, and we must not be impious towards the gods . . . (Sophocles, *Antigone* 1347-1350)

To be happy is to be practically wise, that is, to have the good sense to be content with all goods granted, well aware that no person on earth can be wholly *eudaimon*.

for any one man to win the prize of happiness complete is impossible . . .  
(Pindar, *Nemean* 7. 55-56)

The evidence is such that we have to conclude that for the ancient Greeks, and for Aristotle in particular, *eudaimonia* is a ‘state of grace’. Random and uncertain and the result, not of any action on man’s part, but rather that of ‘blind fate’. Aristotle insists, however, that we do indeed ‘make our own luck’, and consequently, the virtuous (excellent) life aimed at the perfection of our rational natures ‘predisposes the virtuous man’ to, should he at the end be blessed with good fortune, a full life, a life well lived and a life of *eudaimonia*.

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