

The Necessity of Moral Virtue in the Good Life

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IN THE *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*, Aristotle explicates the importance of both moral and intellectual virtues in man's pursuit of happiness. In Books II through V, he emphasizes the significance of moral virtue in living the good life, while in Book X, he asserts that intellectual virtue is superior to moral virtue; it is only through intellectual virtue that man can attain supreme happiness. Aristotle's notion that intellectual virtue is superior to moral virtue leads many scholars to question whether moral virtue is even necessary to realize happiness. I will examine the necessity of moral virtue in Aristotle's notion of the good life; specifically, I will explore both the inclusive and dominant views of happiness to determine how Aristotle would regard the need for moral virtue in acquiring ultimate happiness.

Some scholars assert that Aristotle believes the good life, or happiness, to be an inclusive end. That is, happiness includes both virtues that Aristotle defines; intellectual virtue and moral virtue are two distinct necessary constituents of true happiness. Such a view has two different interpretations. The first inclusive interpretation is that happiness is a comprehensive good. J. L. Ackrill subscribes to this notion, namely that, as a comprehensive good, happiness includes all possible goods. His interpretation is congruent with the latter portion of Aristotle's happiness definition. The definition reads: "Happiness turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most perfect [*teleion*]" (1098a 16–17). In

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this definition, we understand the Greek word *teleion* to mean *perfect*, where *perfect* can have two separate connotations, either *final* or *complete*. Ackrill interprets *perfect* as meaning *complete* in this instance. As a result, the definition implies that happiness consists of an activity in accordance with the best and most complete virtue, or the virtue containing the maximum amount of virtuous activities. We could also say that if more than one virtue exists, then the activity must be in harmony with all of them. Ackrill bases this interpretation on Aristotle's definition of happiness in his *Eudemean Ethics*:

Since we saw that happiness is something complete [*teleion*], and life is either complete or incomplete, and so also is virtue—one being whole virtue, another a part—and the activity of what is incomplete is itself incomplete, happiness must be that activity of a complete life in accordance with complete virtue. (1219a 35–39)

Here, as a result of Aristotle's reference to *whole* and *part*, we can understand his definition of perfect virtue to mean complete virtue, consisting of all virtues (Akrill 352). Consequently, if Aristotle remains consistent in his definition of perfect virtue in both *Eudemean Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, it would seem that his definition of happiness implies that the soul's activity must be in harmony with all virtues, thus supporting a comprehensive end.

Akrill continues to argue for the comprehensive view of happiness by examining Aristotle's first sentence of Book I, chapter 2. The passage reads:

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. (1094a 19–21)

Akrill asserts that in this passage Aristotle gives a fallacious proof for the chief good. For if some end exists which is desired for its own sake, and if there is not an infinite regress of choosing, it does not necessarily follow that this end is the chief good, that which is desired above all

other goods (Ackrill 350). Under the conditions that Aristotle sets forth, it could be the case that more than one end exists which man chooses for its own sake, these ends chosen independent of each other. For example, man could choose to act in a morally virtuous and intellectually virtuous way, both for their own sakes, yet which end would then be the chief good? Thus, when Aristotle refers to "some end" in the first condition, he does not qualify this as being one particular end, which does not allow for only one possible chief good (351). Ackrill contends that this inconsistency in Aristotle's assertion would not exist if we assume the premise that an end which is composed of two separate ends, both chosen for their own sakes, is more perfect than either of these two separate ends apart from the other. With this assumption, separate ends can exist that are both chosen for their own sakes, while a more perfect good can also exist which is composed of the separate ends (351). The chief good then could only be one possible end and as such would include all other possible goods. Hence, not only would this missing link validate Aristotle's argument, but it also would show that Aristotle subscribes to an inclusive comprehensive view of happiness.

A further argument for the comprehensive view of happiness lies in Aristotle's description of self-sufficiency. Both J. L. Ackrill and John Cooper believe the self-sufficiency description supports the notion of a comprehensive good. Aristotle's description of a good that is self-sufficient translates as follows: "We think [happiness] most choice-worthy of all things, without being counted along with other things—but if so counted clearly made more choice-worthy by the addition of even the least of goods" (1097b 16–20).

Akrill and Cooper believe that this passage refers to happiness as an end which is unable to be counted among other goods, for it already possesses all possible goods which could be added to it. However, if it could possibly be counted among other goods, which is impossible to actually encounter, it then would be more desirable by adding any good to it. Therefore, happiness must be a comprehensive good since it possesses all possible goods (Kenny 24).

Anthony Kenny also addresses the notion that this passage treats happiness as a comprehensive end. However, he interprets the excerpt from the above passage, "without being counted along with other

things,” to mean that happiness, if it were not to be counted along with other goods, would still be most choice-worthy. Furthermore, the succeeding statement, “but if so counted,” would then mean that in the event that happiness is so counted along with another good, as it very well may be, it would be made more choice-worthy (Kenny 24). This interpretation treats the excerpt, “without being counted along with other things,” as an explanation of how happiness might exist, rather than a condition for happiness to exist. That is, not being able to count happiness among other goods is not a condition for happiness to exist, but is instead an explanation of a case where happiness may exist (25). Although Kenny does not prove his interpretation of the self-sufficiency passage here, he does give an alternative view to the comprehensive interpretation. It allows him to assert that the notion that happiness includes every possible good is not necessarily true. For if his interpretation is correct, happiness could not possibly include every other good, as it would be capable of having a separate good added to itself (24). In other words, if happiness could possibly be counted among other goods that in turn would increase happiness’ desirability when these goods are added to it, then happiness could not include these goods. (If, on the other hand, happiness included all possible goods, we could not add a good which it already contains to increase its desirability.)

Upon establishing that an alternative interpretation may be possible, Kenny evaluates the notion of happiness as a comprehensive good. From a practical viewpoint, the notion of a comprehensive good seems inconceivable. To say that a good is comprehensive would mean that man must perform every conceivable moral and intellectual end to realize the chief good. Yet what man exists that has performed every possible end of moral and intellectual virtue? It is therefore evident that the comprehensive view of happiness would lead one to believe that the good life is not possible for one man to realize (Kenny 27–28). Instead, it would seem that happiness as a comprehensive end is the sum of each individual’s happiness. However, this does not conform to the definition of happiness that Aristotle describes. As a practical philosopher, Aristotle describes happiness as attainable for an individual man, not for society as a whole.

Because of the impracticality of happiness as a comprehensive end, I will examine the second inclusive interpretation, that happiness is an inclusive, non-comprehensive end. This notion seems more plausible

since it allows for moral virtue to be a part of happiness but does not require every single moral end to be present (Kenny 27). In support of this view, we can observe that, although Aristotle explicitly states the necessity of optimizing intellectual virtue (1177b 33–34), he never claims that man must optimize moral virtue. The absence of an optimized moral virtue shows that not every moral end must be performed to realize ultimate happiness (Cooper 167). Thus, at the same time that man possesses a portion of moral virtue, he must optimize his intellectual virtue in order to realize his greatest potential for happiness. It follows that this non-comprehensive view emphasizes the superiority distinction that Aristotle draws between intellectual and moral virtue. Just as Aristotle defines intellectual virtue as the key to realizing man's greatest happiness in Book X, this view also defines intellectual virtue as the primary optimized constituent while moral virtue is simply a secondary constituent.

It is necessary to understand that this non-comprehensive, inclusive view does not treat moral virtue as a mere condition for happiness. Throughout his *Eudemian Ethics*, moral virtue is an essential ingredient of happiness. Aristotle seems to support this inclusive notion that a "mixed life" of both intellectual and moral virtue is the flourishing life. In that account, he refers to the good life as a life consisting of both virtues, rather than a life restricted to one single virtue (Cooper 167). Similarly, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he explicitly outlines the necessity of moral virtue in obtaining the greater end, intellectual virtue, that allows man to realize the good life:

It is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue (1144b 30–32). Again [moral virtue] is not supreme over philosophic wisdom . . . for [moral virtue] does not use [philosophic wisdom] but provides for [philosophic wisdom's] coming into being. (1145a 7–9)

Accordingly, happiness must consist of both moral virtue and intellectual virtue, moral virtue providing a foundation for intellectual virtue's existence. It would appear, then, that the richer mixed life of both virtues produces the perfect happiness which Aristotle refers to in Book X (1178b 8–9), while the solitary life of pure moral virtue produces only secondary happiness (1178a 8–9).

Timothy Roche also gives a compelling argument for the inclusive view of happiness based upon the definition of man's function. When Aristotle defines the function of man to be an activity of soul in accordance with reason, he does not specify the activity to be the highest intellectual activity, that of theoretical contemplation (1098a 12–13). Subsequently, human good is the function of man in accordance with the best and most perfect [*teleion*] virtue (1098a 16–17). If Aristotle believes that intellectual virtue is the sole constituent of human good, he would simply define the function of man to be theoretical reason, and human good to consist of the function of man in accordance with virtue. Yet he does not define it this way. Aristotle precisely states that the greatest good is the function of man in accordance with the best and most perfect virtue (Roche 183). From this it follows that in this instance *perfect* would seem to denote *complete* rather than *final*. For if we instead assumed that perfect virtue meant final virtue, man's function would have to be an activity in accordance with the most final virtue, intellectual virtue, which would indicate that this activity must be theoretical wisdom. Yet as previously stated, Aristotle does not define man's function as theoretical activity in accordance with reason. It is simply any activity in accordance with reason. Thus, we must assume that in the definition of human good, Aristotle does not refer to man performing his function in accordance with the most final virtue, but rather the most complete virtue. Therefore, in agreement with Ackrill, Roche maintains that Aristotle uses *teleion* to mean complete, thereby giving an inclusive interpretation of the definition of happiness: the function of man in accordance with the virtue that contains the most goods, the most complete virtue. Once again we conclude that as the highest virtue, intellectual virtue contains more than the one single end of theoretical wisdom. Rather, it is a combination of theoretical wisdom and separate moral ends which in turn form the chief good.

While it appears that the non-comprehensive, inclusive view of happiness must be what Aristotle asserts in his definition of the good life, John Cooper introduces a theory that is in harmony with the inclusive view's assertions, but at the same time draws a subtle distinction which affirms the dominant position. He maintains that the mixed life which Aristotle declares to be the good life in the *Eudemian Ethics* is nothing more than the life of moral virtue, the best possible human good (Cooper 166–67). Likewise, when Aristotle speaks of the necessity of

moral virtue to gain intellectual virtue and subsequently live the good life, he simply speaks of the human good life. Furthermore, towards the end of Book I, Aristotle asserts that human virtue leads to human happiness. Although the life of human virtue is thought to mean the life of moral virtue, it is not plausible to say that human virtue consists only of moral virtue, excluding intellectual virtue. Similarly, human happiness should not exclude the happiness that man experiences from intellectual virtue (Cooper 166). This theory would support Aristotle's definition of the function of man. Man realizes human good not only through functioning in accordance with moral virtue, but also through exercising his rational intellect. Just as Roche maintains that the function of man should not exclude moral virtue, Cooper asserts that it should not exclude intellectual virtue with regard to human good. Thus, the preceding arguments for happiness as an inclusive end are correct but only when we consider them for the human good life. On the other hand, the life of intellectual virtue does not consist of experiencing the human good life. It is associated with the divine element within man and is therefore associated with the divine good life, ultimate happiness. We are to regard ultimate happiness as something completely separate from mere human happiness (178–89).

Cooper's assertion introduces the dominant view that ultimate happiness consists in exercising intellectual virtue exclusively, independent of moral virtue. The dominant position seems to fit better with Aristotle's assertion in Book X than does the inclusive position. Here, Aristotle clearly refers to theoretical wisdom as the greatest activity for man rather than the moral activity of practical reasoning. In chapter 7, he states that to achieve the greatest happiness, man must engage in an activity which is in accordance with the highest virtue. Such a virtue would reflect the closest element of the divine within man, and as such would yield supreme happiness. Aristotle identifies this highest virtue as intellectual virtue on the basis that the greatest human activity possible is contemplation, or theoretical reason. This is so because intellectual virtue governs the activity that man has in common with the gods, contemplation.

In this sense, we do not view moral virtue as unsuitable for a man who possesses ultimate happiness. Rather, people who experience ultimate happiness may possibly engage in morally virtuous activities merely because other people surround them. They cannot escape their earthly

surroundings and consequently they practice moral virtue simply because of their locale. However, they do not engage in moral virtue for the sake of practicing moral virtue. Just as Aristotle maintains that the gods do not practice moral virtue because they have no need for any external means, so also men who experience divine ultimate happiness have no need to practice moral virtue. Moral virtue, then, is merely a result of living in a human environment (Cooper 164–65). It is not a constituent of ultimate happiness. This dominant position does not contradict Aristotle's previous statement that moral virtue is necessary for the development of intellectual virtue. Such a development leads to the richer, mixed life that Aristotle would call complete human happiness, yet distinct from ultimate divine happiness.

W. F. Hardie extends the notion that man does not require moral virtue to experience ultimate happiness. He contends that the dominant intellectual view allows for man to be immoral in his quest for contemplative activities. Furthermore, moral altruism and a dominant end seem to contradict each other according to Aristotle's definition of happiness. The definition states that man must function in accordance with virtue in a complete life if he is to realize the ultimate end. In other words, one day of contemplation will not produce automatic ultimate happiness. Contemplation is a life-long activity whereby man realizes his ultimate end. To illustrate how moral virtue contradicts this principle, Hardie cites the example of a man sacrificing his life for another in war. This action obviously exercises moral virtue, yet because it immediately ends the man's life, he is unable to realize his full potential for obtaining intellectual virtue. His shortened life deprives him of a complete life, thereby depriving him of ultimate happiness. Thus, to reach the highest end, divine happiness, man must selfishly place his contemplative activities above all other ends included in moral virtue (Hardie 293).

This assertion does not seem plausible in Aristotle's view of moral virtue and the good life. After he extensively outlines the value of moral virtue in Books II through V, it does not seem sensible for Aristotle to not only give up the idea of the necessity of moral virtue, but also to permit the practice of immoral actions in order to obtain a greater good. While Aristotle does describe the development of both virtues through different means, he never claims that obtaining one virtue inhibits the development of another. Consequently, it is plausible

to think that he extensively elaborates on moral virtue simply because the higher end of pure intellectual virtue is not attainable for most men. Likewise, he could elaborate on moral virtue because human happiness is separate and distinct from divine happiness. But once again, no matter how distinct the two virtues are, Aristotle never implies that they interfere with each other. Hence, the extreme dominant view of Hardie does not seem permissible in Aristotle's ethical system.

Cooper's view on the dominant end of happiness answers Hardie's challenge that ultimate happiness allows for immoral actions. Because the highest intellectual function is independent of human actions, it does not depend upon sense perceptions of the body. Conversely, moral and immoral actions do depend upon the body. It follows that contemplation is not subject to moral or immoral actions. As a result, in ultimate happiness, man practices neither moral virtue nor vice; he simply contemplates. Similarly, just as in the *De Anima* when Aristotle distinguishes the difference between the highest intellectual powers and the other psychological and biological behaviors, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he makes the same distinction between intellectual virtue and moral virtue (Cooper 175). He maintains that while psychological and biological behaviors are connected to the body, the highest intellectual power is not connected in any way (*De Anima* 413b 25–32). From this, we can infer that moral virtue corresponds to the body while pure intellectual virtue exists separately and independently, corresponding to the soul (Cooper 175). Subsequently, as mentioned previously, a man possessing ultimate happiness who appears to exercise moral virtue only performs these actions because he has a physical existence where people surround him. However, just as the gods' happiness does not depend upon moral actions (for they cannot exercise moral virtue), man's happiness does not depend upon his moral actions.

Upon examining happiness as a dominant end, we see that moral virtue is not a constituent of ultimate happiness and consequently, ultimate happiness is not an inclusive end. However, moral virtue still seems necessary before contemplation is possible, due to man's mortal existence. Because ultimate happiness is synonymous with godly happiness, we can think of man's ultimate happiness as an archetype of a god's life. However, man is not a god. The gods are able to attain ultimate happiness merely through contemplation only because they exist in an eternal realm where moral practice is not possible. In Book X, Aristotle

explains this notion that because moral virtue requires means whereby one can practice moral activity, it necessitates external factors with which one can interact. Yet as a perfect being, a god cannot need anything; external factors are non-existent in a god's realization of happiness (1178a 34–1178b 11). Thus, it is impossible for a god to practice moral virtue. Conversely, man exists in a mortal realm where moral practice is possible. From Aristotle's description of human good, it would seem that so long as we are human, moral practice is not only possible, but necessary as well (Devereux 258). Thus, in our mortal state of being, it seems natural that man must progress from human happiness to divine happiness. Man cannot simply forego the life of moral virtue and arrive at divine happiness through mere contemplation. Instead, man must first live the morally virtuous life, which, as Cooper believes, must include the practice of both moral and intellectual virtues. Following this human good life, man can progress to a life in which his happiness is based solely upon pure intellectual virtue. In this state of ultimate happiness, he still practices moral virtue because of his mortal existence, yet his happiness is not based upon that practice.

This assertion does not entail that ultimate happiness includes moral virtue. Rather, it defines moral virtue as a necessary condition to reach ultimate happiness. In other words, ultimate happiness consists of the dominant end of intellectual virtue, yet also presupposes moral virtue for man.

Aristotle appears to support this notion of a gradual progression towards ultimate happiness when he speaks of developing good habits before teaching. In Book II, he explains that man acquires moral virtue through habit. It cannot be taught in an instructional sense, but rather, man must learn it by practicing it. On the other hand, man acquires the separate end of intellectual virtue not by habit, but through teaching. Its origination and development depend upon teaching, independent of all other actions. He does not show any relationship between these two methods until Book X, chapter 9, when he states, "argument and teaching, we may suspect, are not powerful with all men, but the soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habits" (1179b 24–25). Before man participates in teaching, he must prepare his soul through his habits. Although the soul is separate from the body, the body still prepares the soul for experiences. That is, developing moral virtue must occur before the single constituent of ultimate happiness,

pure intellectual virtue, is possible. Hence, the acquisition of pure intellectual virtue seems to rely upon the condition of moral virtue.

Thus, ultimate happiness is not an inclusive end; nor is it a dominant end that man can acquire as completely independent of moral virtue. To obtain the life of ultimate happiness, man must first exercise moral virtue before he can seek the separate dominant end of contemplation.

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