

# Happiness in Ancient Philosophy

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*The article discusses the conceptions of eudaimonia in the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics and argues against the growing tendency to make a sharp distinction between the ancient notion of eudaimonia and the modern notion of happiness. On the contrary, the traditional translation of eudaimonia as happiness is defended because it emphasizes the powerfulness of the challenge that the ancient eudaimonistic theories of ethics provide for our contemporary ways of thinking. Comparison with the ancient views encourages us to reject a purely subjective conception of happiness, defined with a reference to beliefs that one is getting the important things one wants and accompanying pleasant affects. The paradigm of happiness as subjective desire-satisfaction is shown to disregard the notion's more objective aspects which can be uncovered by philosophical reflection.*

At the beginning of his famous *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that his aim is to determine what the ultimate end or good is that human beings aim at in their lives (I 2, 1094a18–28). He spells out certain formal criteria that this final end should fulfill: it is something complete and self-sufficient, something we aim at for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. When we have reached this end, our lives are as good as they can possibly become; nothing further can improve our lives in any way.

Having presented some remarks on the formal specifications of the human good in the first three chapters of the first book of the *EN*, Aristotle says in Chapter 4 that there exists a wide consensus between the majority of human beings and the philosophers on the proper term that should be used for this final good (1095a17–18). This term is the Greek *eudaimonia* and it has been conventionally translated as ‘happiness’.

In this paper, I shall discuss some views concerning *eudaimonia* in Greek philosophy, namely in addition to Aristotle, those of Socrates and the Stoics and show how virtues occupy a central place in all these views. I shall also ask whether these

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Greeks were really speaking of the same thing as we currently do, when we speak of happiness. Furthermore, I shall disagree with the growing tendency to challenge the conventional translation and to find alternatives for it.<sup>1</sup> Some philosophers refuse to translate the term *eudaimonia* at all, whereas others subscribe to meanings such as welfare, well-being, flourishing, and perfection. However, I belong to those who wish to maintain the traditional translation of *eudaimonia* as happiness, just because it emphasises the powerfulness of the challenge that the ancient eudaimonistic theories of ethics provide for our contemporary ways of thinking. I shall come to the conclusion that through interpreting the ancient eudaimonistic theories of ethics as theories of happiness, we can also clarify our own ideas of happiness in important ways. In the following I shall not aim at a comprehensive overview of ancient eudaimonism but concentrate on a particular variety of it. Despite their differences, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics all subscribed to a type of eudaimonism in which the notion of virtue is central. There were other types, too. The Epicureans, for example, argued that *eudaimonia* consists of a certain kind of pleasure, but even they found a place for virtue in their ideal of *eudaimonia*.<sup>2</sup>

Let us, however return to Aristotle, who says: “Both the many and the cultivated call [the highest good] *eudaimonia*, and suppose that living well and doing well are the same as being *eudaimon*. But they disagree about what *eudaimonia* is, and the many do not give the same answer as the wise” (*EN* I 4, 1095a18–21). So lurking below the surface of the initial consensus there is a profound disagreement over the proper nature of *eudaimonia*. Some people think that *eudaimonia* is pleasure, others that it is honour and status, whereas others think it is fundamentally prosperity.

To Aristotle, all these views are in a way mistaken, but they also include elements that can lead us towards a correct understanding of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle now applies his standard method of saving the phenomena to popular views on *eudaimonia*. This means distinguishing between what is right and what is wrong with them and explaining why this is the case. This analysis helps us to construe a philosophical theory of *eudaimonia* that saves the advantages of earlier views and corrects their mistakes. Since these mistakes are explained and corrected with a reference to what is supposed to be acceptable for all, those who

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1 Those who reject ‘happiness’ as the translation of *eudaimonia* include Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986; David Charles, “Aristotle and Modern Realism”, in Robert Heinaman (ed.) *Aristotle and Moral Realism*, London: UCL Press 1995; L.W. Sumner, “Happiness Now and Then”, in Lawrence L. Jost and Roger A. Shiner (ed.) *Eudaimonia and Well-Being. Ancient and Modern Conceptions*, Kelowna BC: Academic Printing & Publishing 2002, 21–40. Those who favour the traditional translation include Terence Irwin in his translation of the *EN* (Indianapolis: Hackett 1985; Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, New York: Oxford University Press 1993; Richard Kraut, “Two Conceptions of Happiness”, *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), 167–197.

2 On the Epicurean moral thought, see Annas 1993, 236–243, 334–350; Philip Mitsis, *Epicurus’ Ethical Theory*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press 1988.

held the views criticised in this dialectical exercise are expected to change their view of the issue accordingly.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle argues that human *eudaimonia* cannot be merely pleasure, even if a happy life is pleasant, since other animals also seek pleasure, whereas humans in fact aim at something in their lives that is proper for human beings and not for any other species. *Eudaimonia* cannot be honour and status either, although happy people are usually respected by others, since honour and status depend on the opinion of others, whereas our final good should be something that we are ourselves responsible for and that which is difficult to be taken away from us. Property cannot be equated with *eudaimonia* either, although a happy life requires at least moderate prosperity, since property is fundamentally a means we use for various ends, whereas *eudaimonia* is something we seek as an intrinsic good for the sake of itself and not for the sake of anything else.

Aristotle's analysis has shown that there is pleasure, honour, and property in a happy life, but none of these things is sufficient to specify what *eudaimonia* essentially consists of. What we are looking for should, however, be something that is peculiar to human beings, something that we are ourselves responsible for and that is difficult to take away from us, and something that is sought for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else.

In the *EN* I 7, another candidate is chosen for discussion. What about virtue? Could we argue that *eudaimonia* fundamentally consists in living in accordance with a virtue or virtues? The term virtue is introduced in a very prosaic sense as referring to a disposition to fulfill one's function in a reliable and appropriate way. I shall discuss some examples, all of which are not mentioned in this particular chapter but still are very much taken in an Aristotelian spirit. For instance, if the function of a knife is to cut meat, the virtue that makes this possible is sharpness. Similarly, if the function of a horse is to pull carriages and carry a rider, its virtue is speed and endurance. Another example is that if a function of a flute-player is to play the flute, his or her virtue is musical skill. According to Aristotle, it is not quite obvious that a human being as such has a function and a virtue in the same sense as artifacts, domestic animals, or artists and professionals. Finally, as a result of a rather complicated or even an obscure argument, the so-called function-argument, Aristotle, nevertheless, draws the conclusion that the human being also has a peculiar function to act in ways only appropriate to human beings and not to any other species, i.e., rationally. Accordingly, we can also speak of human virtue, or virtues, as a disposition to realize the human function, and in Aristotle's view,

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3 On Aristotle's methodology G.E.L. Owen, "Tithenai ta phainomena", in Jonathan Barnes & Malcolm Schofield & Richard Sorabji (ed.) *Articles on Aristotle 1. Science*, London: Duckworth 1975, 113–126; Nussbaum 1986, 240–263; Marja-Liisa Kakkuri-Knuuttila, *Dialectic and Inquiry in Aristotle*, Helsinki: University of Helsinki 1993.

*eudaimonia* for human beings can then preliminary be defined as “the soul’s activity that expresses virtue” (I 7, 1098a17).<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, the *EN* consists of Aristotle’s construction of a comprehensive theory of the virtues. These are divided into two groups, the virtues of character or moral virtues, such as courage, moderation, generosity, and justice, and those of intellect, i.e. practical reason and theoretical wisdom. Aristotle argues that all the virtues of both types presuppose each other and are taken together as being necessary for *eudaimonia*. Each virtue is, however, related to and expressed in its peculiar activities. There is a well-known controversy about which virtues are actually constituent parts of *eudaimonia* and which of them are merely necessary conditions.<sup>5</sup> In the book X, Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* with the activities of theoretical reason above all, whereas elsewhere he seems to argue that activities in accordance with all the virtues are intrinsically valuable parts in a flourishing human life. For the present argument, whether or not Aristotle’s views are inconsistent is not significant, nor whether the tension between the two ideals, practical and theoretical, can be eventually accommodated, since it is in any case obvious that all the virtues are at least necessary conditions if not constituent parts of *eudaimonia*.

It is, nonetheless, important to notice that Aristotle is not quite satisfied with the conclusions of the human function argument. He does not simply identify virtue and *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* requires not only virtue but also what is referred to as external goods, such as friends, children, wealth, political power, and good looks. Having discussed the significance of the external goods, Aristotle revises his preliminary definition of *eudaimonia*, and states that “such person is *eudaimon* who expresses complete virtue in his activities, with an adequate supply of external good, not just any time but for a complete life” (I 11, 1101a14–16).

With respect to the external goods, a controversy arises concerning the correct interpretation of Aristotle. In one reading, Aristotle is interpreted as saying that external

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4 There is a wide variety of very different interpretations of the function argument in the *EN* I 7. See, e.g., Bernard Williams, “Aristotle on the Good – A Formal Sketch,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 12 (1962), 289–296; John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1975; Terence Irwin, “The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle’s Ethics”, in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.) *Essays in Aristotle’s Ethics*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1980, 35–54; K.V. Wilkes, “The Good man and the Good for Man in Aristotle”, in Rorty 1980, 341–358; Martha C. Nussbaum, “Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics”, in J.E.J. Altham & Ross Harrison (ed.) *World, Mind, and Ethics. Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, 86–131. See also Juha Sihvola, “Aristotle and Modern Moral Realism”, in Jussi Kotkavirta & Michael Quante (ed.) *Moral Realism*, Helsinki: Societas Philosophica Fennica 2004, 201–229.

5 See, e.g., Cooper 1975; Nussbaum 1986, 373–377; John M. Cooper, “Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration”, *Synthese* 72 (1987), 187–216; Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989; Juha Sihvola, “Why does Contemplation not Fit Well into Aristotle’s *Eudaimonia*?” *Arctos* 27 (1993), 103–121.

goods are only valuable as conditions that make the exercise of virtue possible.<sup>6</sup> This would in fact imply that virtue is not just necessary but also sufficient for *eudaimonia*, on the condition that it is possible to exercise it. According to this reading, friends are valuable merely because they make it possible for a person to exercise the virtues of generosity and benevolence. The loss of a friend therefore prevents *eudaimonia*, but only because it deprives the person of a chance to exercise the virtues relevant in friendship. As an alternative reading, the external goods can be seen to have independent intrinsic value in the sense that, apart from their role as conditions for the exercise of virtue, external goods directly contribute to *eudaimonia*.<sup>7</sup>

Many modern commentators have found Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* to be strange, owing to the strong role it assigns to virtues. The ancient philosophers, however, disagreed with Aristotle from the opposite direction. Whatever stand we take on the controversy on the exact role of the external goods, it is clear that Aristotle's position was that full *eudaimonia* is not possible without them. Aristotle referred to the King of Troy, Priam, who had lost his family, property and status when the Greeks sacked his city, and says that he "could not be said to be *eudaimon* suffering such a wretched finish" (1100a4–9). Only a philosopher maintaining a thesis at all costs could, in Aristotle's view, call such a person *eudaimon* who has been weighed down by the greatest sufferings and misfortunes (1095b33–1096a2). And again later in the *EN*, "those who assert that the person broken on the wheel or encountering great disasters is *eudaimon*, if he is virtuous, are, intentionally or not, talking nonsense" (1153b19–21).

Aristotle is here probably referring to Socrates as presented in some of Plato's early dialogues, especially the *Euthydemus*, in which Socrates discusses the nature of *eudaimonia* with a young man named Cleinias (278e–282d). Both agree on that all human beings want to be *eudaimon*, and being happy requires many good things that actually benefit us. Cleinias suggests what these good things might be: health, beauty, power, and so on. This means that the starting point for the discussion seems to be very similar to that of the *EN*. Socrates, however, takes a much more radical break from the conventional conceptions of *eudaimonia* than Aristotle in the *EN*. Socrates argues that most people's views are completely mistaken, not just vague and one-sided. *Eudaimonia* is only based on wisdom and virtue, not on any external goods. It is not health, beauty and power that make us *eudaimon* but what we do with them. Socrates' conclusion is that virtue is the only thing that is really good, and what really matters in one's life. Virtue is not just the necessary but also the sufficient condition of *eudaimonia*, whereas everything else is neither good nor bad.

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<sup>6</sup> See especially John M. Cooper, "Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune", *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985), 173–197.

<sup>7</sup> See Annas 1993, 364–384; Nussbaum 1986, 343–372.

Aristotle finds the Socratic way to be too radical and detached from conventional conventions, but many philosophers in the Hellenistic times found the Socratic view to be much more congenial than the Aristotelian one. The Platonist Atticus, for example, argued in the late second century AD that Aristotle's works on virtue included ideas that are "petty, groveling, and vulgar" (fr. 2) just because the sufficiency of virtue for *eudaimonia* was not accepted by him.<sup>8</sup> It was, however, above all the Stoics that developed the Socratic view further, but it should also be mentioned that Plato too seems to have accepted the sufficiency of virtue for *eudaimonia* in his later dialogues, even though in other respects he rather drastically revised the views of moral psychology that were outlined in the Socratic dialogues. But the Stoics definitely held the view that virtue is the only thing that is really good and thereby contributing to *eudaimonia*, and vice is the only thing that is really bad and thereby prevents *eudaimonia*, whereas everything else, .i.e., everything that is external to virtue, is indifferent. The Stoics were emphatic that indifference did not mean irrelevant. They did not claim that the indifferents do not have any value; on the contrary they thought the indifferents to be valuable in a very important way, since they provide the material on which the human beings are assumed to direct their virtue. However, the value of indifferents is of a different type from that of virtue: the possession of indifferents does not contribute to *eudaimonia* in any way. The only thing that matters for *eudaimonia* is virtue, and it is both necessary and sufficient for it.<sup>9</sup>

Now what is the relation of the ancient philosophers' *eudaimonia* to the modern notion of happiness? Here again, the scholarly opinions diverge. All scholars recognize the difference in contents between the ancient Greek notions of philosophical *eudaimonia* and the dominant modern ideas of happiness. But the question concerning the nature of happiness is a different issue from the question of whether the concept that is used is the same or not.

Richard Kraut has argued that the ancient theories of *eudaimonia*, especially Aristotle's theory, are indeed theories of happiness, even though they are rather different ones from the dominant views in our own time.<sup>10</sup> Our disagreement with the ancients is, in Kraut's opinion, substantive and philosophical, but not conceptual or terminological. There are of course crucial differences between the ancient notion of *eudaimonia* and the modern notion of happiness. Aristotle and the ancients held that the fundamental standard of *eudaimonia* is objective: one

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8 On Atticus, see *Fragments/Atticus*. Texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1977. See also Julia Annas, "Should Virtue Make You Happy", in Jost & Shiner 2002, 1–19.

9 There is a huge amount of recent scholarly literature on Stoic ethics, e.g., Annas 1993, 159–179, 262–276, 388–411; Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994; Gisela Striker, "Following Nature. A Study in Stoic Ethics", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 9 (1991), 1–73; Tad Brennan, *The Stoic Life. Emotions, Duties, & Fate*, Oxford: Clarendon 2005.

10 Kraut 1979.

can only be happy if he has virtue, a feature that can be recognized independently of the happy subject's attitudes. The dominant modern theory of happiness, on the contrary, claims that the standards of happiness are subjective: one's life is happy if his or her desires are satisfied whatever they happen to be. However, Kraut argues that the ancient notion of *eudaimonia* also includes an ingredient that connects it to the modern notion of happiness in the concept of happiness. This is a positive attitude towards one's life, and Aristotle and other ancient *eudaimonists* really held that a *eudaimon* person has this kind of attitude towards life. The ancients thought that a positive attitude follows from certain objective features in one's life, whereas the moderns think that it is merely a result from one's subjective feeling. Kraut concludes that there is only one concept of happiness at play here, but two competing substantive conceptions of the contents of that concept. The subjectivity of happiness is a suggestion concerning the contents of the concept, not an integral feature of the concept itself.

Kraut's view is strongly challenged by Wayne Sumner.<sup>11</sup> Sumner claims that in the modern parlance, subjectivity does not merely belong to the nature of happiness, but to the definition of the concept: whether a person is happy is determined not by any objective life conditions but by his or her own attitudes to it. In other words, a person's happiness only requires that one believes that one is getting the important things one wants and these beliefs are accompanied by the pleasant affects that are normally connected to them. No virtues or any objectively defined standards need to be realized. To Sumner 'we moderns' cannot reasonably deny that there can be morally challenged people who are genuinely happy with their lives, if only they consistently believe that they are getting their desires satisfied and if they feel pleasure about these beliefs. It does not even matter whether or not the beliefs in question are false. One cannot, according to Sumner's example, deny that a wife who is cheated on can be happy if she remains unaware of her husband's unfaithfulness. If the ancient theories of *eudaimonia* deny the possibility that vicious or systematically deluded people can be happy, Sumner argues that these cannot be theories of happiness but they must be theories of something else, perhaps well-being.<sup>12</sup>

I do not find Sumner's argument convincing. There are two problems. First, the subjective element is not completely missing from the ancient conceptions of *eudaimonia*. Sumner argues that the ancient *eudaimonists* accepted two claims:

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11 Wayne Sumner, "Happiness Now and Then", in Jost & Shiner 2002, 21–40.

12 Sumner's view might sound rather crude as it defines happiness exclusively with a reference to desire-satisfaction and related subjective feelings without asking about the kinds of things that actually make people happy. But this is exactly his point: the modern view of happiness makes a very sharp distinction between the notion of happiness and the substantive contents of that notion. So he claims that despite the empirical correlations between the things that make different people happy, we all use the notion of happiness without reference to what makes us happy, even if we admit that most people are made happy by the same things.

- (1) It is not possible that there is a person who is *eudaimon* but vicious.  
 (2) Having a positive attitude to one's life (believing that one gets what one wants and feeling pleasure of this) is not sufficient for *eudaimonia*.

If we replace *eudaimonia* with modern happiness both claims become false in Sumner's view. Since a positive attitude to one's life is both necessary and sufficient for modern happiness, it is also possible that there are vicious people, namely those who have a positive attitude to their lives who are also happy in the modern sense. I do not contest that the ancient eudaimonists subscribed to claim (1). Vicious people cannot indeed be *eudaimon* in their view. The ancient philosophers would, however, not accept the second claim, but on the contrary, they would agree with the modern view of happiness that a positive attitude to one's life is both necessary and sufficient for one's happiness. Aristotle, for example, thought that life is pleasant if it consists of unforced actualizations of virtuous activities, whereas vicious or incontinent or even continent life is necessarily unpleasant.<sup>13</sup> The subjective aspect of happiness, the positive attitude towards one's life, is involved in the ancient notion of *eudaimonia*, as its necessary accompaniment, although not as a part of its essence. For Aristotle, a *eudaimon* life is pleasant, but it is not the pleasure that makes the life *eudaimon*. But if we think that the subjective feeling of pleasure or contentment has to be involved in happiness, there is enough of that dimension even in the ancient conception. For this reason, it is not misleading to translate the Greek *eudaimonia* as 'happiness', although it is also true that the ancient philosophers held that objective standards could be provided for happiness and these objective elements constituted the essence of *eudaimonia*.

What needs to be explained is why the ancient eudaimonists thought they were entitled to deny the possibility of a vicious but happy person, even though simultaneously they thought that subjective positivity and happiness necessarily go together just as the so-called 'we moderns'. The answer is straightforward and simple. The ancients made very strong assumptions concerning the natural sociability of human beings. This sociability included both natural moral sense, i.e., a capacity to recognize what constitutes the objectively flourishing human life, and natural moral dispositions to develop virtues aiming at the actualisation of the objective ideal of the good life. If these natural dispositions are actualised in an appropriate way, one's life is both *eudaimon* and pleasant or subjectively satisfying. If they are not, one's life may become, in an extreme case, vicious, or in less

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13 On Aristotle's view of pleasure, see especially *EN* VII 11–14 and X 1–5. See also G.E.L. Owen, "Aristotelian Pleasures", in Jonathan Barnes & Malcolm Schofield & Richard Sorabji (ed.) *Essays on Aristotle 2. Ethics and Politics*, London: Duckworth 1977, 92–103. The notions of continence and incontinence are discussed in *EN* VII 1–10. One is continent if one acts in the same way as the virtuous but without pleasure and having to suppress one's non-virtuous desires. One is incontinent if one has a correct view of one's goals but, due to strong non-virtuous desires, is unable to actualize them.

extreme cases, incontinent or continent. If one is vicious, incontinent or continent, one's life is necessarily more or less disorganised and lacking the pleasure and contentment that is characteristic of a virtuous life. Philosophical anthropology, which was based on the idea of naturally sociable dispositions, rendered the idea of a psychopath with a positive attitude to his or her life more or less inconceivable for the ancient eudaimonists.<sup>14</sup>

There is, however, another, perhaps more serious problem with Sumner's view. I am not sure whether 'we moderns' all subscribe to a purely subjective conception of happiness. Julia Annas, for example, has suggested that the modern idea of happiness is not so unambiguous after all.<sup>15</sup> She proposes that the most common modern paradigm of happiness, the subjective construal of desire-satisfaction, omits the important and more objective elements which can be uncovered by philosophical reflection. She refers to studies in which people who have first defined happiness as desire-satisfaction are asked whether they think they would really become happy if they get what they desire (money, power, respect) merely by accident without any personal effort. The overwhelmingly negative answers seem to suggest that something like a notion of virtue is implicit in the respondents' ideas of happiness, even though they are not necessarily immediately aware of this without reflection. Many of 'us moderns' after all seem to think that we can only become happy if we get our desires fulfilled in a certain specific way. We have to achieve what we desire through living a certain kind of life in which our personal activities and efforts play an important role. Annas' view indicates that ancient *eudaimonia* and modern happiness are not that far from each other. Even though we currently hold less dogmatic views of our natural dispositions than the ancients, we still think that philosophical or intellectual reflection may make us more clearly conscious of our idea of happiness and bring forward more objective elements in it.

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14 Sumner's example of a happy wife completely unaware of her husband's cheating may seem more difficult to explain. As far as I know, there are no examples of such a life led under a complete delusion discussed in ancient philosophy. But if Aristotle, for instance, had been made to face something like this example, he might have been able to say that such cases would be so unlikely that there is no need to reconsider the relation of *eudaimonia* and subjective pleasure.

15 Annas 2002, 18–19.

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