



THE NICOMACHEAN APPROACH TO ETHICS: The Argument of *Ethics* I and II

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Aristotle's approach to ethics has been described as teleological in nature. A teleological approach is one that looks to the end, goal or purpose (*telos*) of human existence in order to determine how we ought to act. For Aristotle, everything in the universe had a purpose, so it is hardly surprising that he would think that human action would have some kind of purpose as well. Because Aristotle, like most of his Greek contemporaries, believed that this purpose was somehow directed towards the attainment of happiness, he begins his investigation of Ethics with an examination of the nature of human happiness.

Searching for the Happy Life

The *Nicomachean Ethics* opens with the observation that “[e]very art...and every action and choice, seems to aim at some good; the good therefore has been well defined as that at which all things aim” (NE 1094a 1-3). Whatever we do in life, according to Aristotle, we do for the sake of some good, or at least something we perceive to be good. Thus the politician who dedicates his life to serve his community, and the thief who spends his life robbing his neighbors both are striving for something that they perceive to be good. Whether or not these things actually are good is quite another matter entirely. Aristotle goes on to make a distinction between those goods which are desired for their own sake (the health of our bodies) and those which are desired for the sake of something higher (money for the sake of buying clothes or a new home). Most of the goods for which we strive, furthermore, form a hierarchy, wherein lower goods are desired for the sake of higher ones. For example, if I was to inquire why a particular student is attending a philosophy class, the student would probably maintain that he wants to get a good grade in the class. If he was pressed further, he might acknowledge that he wants to do well so that he will graduate with honors, which in turn will help him get a well-paying job, which will enable him to live a comfortable life, and so on.

Aristotle goes on to inquire whether there is some good that we desire purely for its own sake: “Now if there exists an end (*telos*) in the realm of action which we desire for its own sake, an end which determines all our other desires; if, in other words, we do not make all of our choices for the sake of something else—for in this way the process would go on

indefinitely so that all our desires would be futile and pointless— then obviously this end will be the good that is the highest good” (NE 1094a 17-22). The problem, as Aristotle sees it, is that either there is an infinite series of goods desired for the sake of something higher—in which case one’s desires can never be satisfied—or there must be some highest good that is desired for its own sake and for which everything else is desired. In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097 a 25 he goes on to elaborate upon the formal criteria that such an end must satisfy if it is to truly serve as the highest good for all our activity:

Since there are evidently several ends, and since we choose some of these...as a means to something else, it is obvious that not all ends are final. Thus if there is only one final end, this will be the good that we are seeking; if there are several, it will be the most final and perfect of them. What is chosen as an end in itself and never as a means to something else is called final in an unqualified sense...We arrive at the same conclusion if we approach the question from the standpoint of self-sufficiency. For the final and perfect good seems to be self-sufficient. For the present, we will define as ‘self-sufficient’ that which taken by itself makes life something desirable and deficient in nothing.

The highest good, then, according to Aristotle must be final (*teleion*): that is, it must be desired for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. It must also be self-sufficient (*autarkes*): it must, in other words, make one’s life such that it is lacking in nothing. Julia Annas observes that for Aristotle a life that is characterized by self-sufficiency is not one that contains everything that is worth having, but rather one that implies a comprehensiveness that includes all a person’s other ends (Annas 40-41) This highest, final and self-sufficient good Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*.

Understanding *Eudaimonia*

Although *eudaimonia* is commonly translated as “happiness,” such a translation often fails to capture the specific sense of the term as Aristotle uses it. The problem is that our popular conception of happiness often amounts to little more than a mood or feeling (as in “I feel happy today.”). Although this kind of subjective understanding of happiness is certainly significant, the ancient sense of the term carries with it a more objective connotation. When Aristotle inquires what happiness is, for example, he is much less concerned with the subjective state of “feeling happy” than he is with the formal conditions whereby a person can be called *eudaimon*. It is for this reason that Aristotle rejects the idea that happiness is connected to feeling (*pathos*) and says that it should rather be understood as an activity (*energeia*) (NE 1105b 27) It is also the reason why he is disposed to think of happiness in terms of a whole human life rather than as a temporary state, and why he would further dispute the claim that a person is in fact happy simply because he perceives himself to be so (Annas 45-46; Kenny 67-80). With this understanding in mind, some scholars have suggested that *eudaimonia* be translated as “human flourishing” or “well-being” since these terms capture the active and objective sense of *eudaimonia* far better than “happiness” does (Nussbaum 15)

This more ancient understanding of human happiness actually makes considerable sense if we examine the phenomenon of happiness from a philosophical perspective. As Charles Griswold correctly points out, one’s subjective experience of happiness may be quite mistaken. What a person perceives to be necessary for his immediate and long-term happiness, what he chooses to pursue and to avoid for the sake of happiness, may be in-

correct, and indeed often is (Griswold 15). For example, a sophomore in college may choose to drop out of school and take a job in the belief that doing so will make him happy. However, the immediate pleasure gained from having a little extra money in the present is outweighed by the long-term unhappiness that he will ultimately experience by not having a college degree.

One's perception of happiness could also be the result of deception. Richard Kraut offers the following example to illustrate the point that most individuals intuitively recognize that there is a significant difference between a subjective and objective notion of happiness:

Suppose that, as a cruel trick, someone is voted the most popular student in his high school. In actuality, his fellow students can't stand him, but he is benighted enough to take their vote at face value. After a day of euphoria, he discovers that he has been tricked. Years later, he is asked what the happiest day of his life has been. If that day in high school was the one in which he felt most intensely happy, must he say that in fact it was the happiest day of his life? I think not. I can understand his saying that it was actually the unhappiest day of his life, however happy he felt (Kraut 179, fn 22.)

Certainly very few people would argue that this student was truly happy despite the fact that his happiness came as a result of being deceived. Most of us would probably agree with Kraut that while he may *feel* happy he is not necessarily leading a happy life. Thus the terms "I feel happy" and "I am happy," while used interchangeably in everyday language, must be treated as two distinct phenomena in a philosophical analysis of the happy life.

John Wilson further observes that a person could be happy *about* a particular aspect of his life (his job or his marriage, for example) or about a particular period in his life (his childhood) or about a particular event (his upcoming marriage), but this is not the same as calling someone a happy person or saying that they have a happy life (Wilson 14-15). It is precisely for this reason that Aristotle maintains that one must look at the course of a complete life in order to determine whether a person should be called happy. "For one swallow," he writes, "does not make a spring, nor does one sunny day; similarly one day or a short time does not make a man blessed (*makarios*) or happy (*eudaimon*)" (NE 1098a 19).

It is technically incorrect then ever to refer to a young person as happy. When we call a child happy, says Aristotle, we do so on the basis of the hopes that we have for his future; we certainly cannot make any final judgments about his life because we do not know how it will ultimately end: "Many changes and all kinds of contingencies befall a man in the course of his life, and it is possible that the most prosperous man will encounter great misfortune in his old age, as the Trojan legends tell about Priam. When a man has met a fate such as his and has come to a wretched end, no one calls him happy" (NE 1100a 1-9). On the other hand, a man might be able to call himself happy (according to the objective sense of the term) even if in the immediate present he might be quite wretched, if in fact his life as a whole was well worth living. This is the reason why many authors in antiquity can describe Socrates as happy, even though he was condemned by Athenian society and forced to take his own life.

Misconceptions About Happiness

We have seen, then, that an Aristotelian understanding of happiness involves three major

presuppositions: first, that happiness is the goal of all human activity, second, that happiness should be understood in an objective rather than in a subjective sense, and, third, that happiness must be seen as a life-long project. These presuppositions would certainly have been accepted by most, if not all, of Aristotle's contemporaries; it is only when we come to the question of what constitutes happiness that conflict begins to arise. There is no doubt for Aristotle that most popular understandings of happiness are radically deficient:

when it comes to defining what *eudaimonia* is [most people] disagree, and the account given by the common run differs from that of the philosophers. The former say it is some clear and obvious good, such as pleasure, wealth or honor; some say it is one thing and others another, and very often the very same person identifies it with different things at different times; when he is sick he thinks that it is health, when he is poor he says that it is wealth; when people are conscious of their own ignorance, they admire those who talk above their heads in accents of greatness (NE 1195a 15-25)

Aristotle abruptly dismisses these popular conceptions—or rather misconceptions—of happiness. Although many people believe happiness is the same as pleasure, if this were the case, he says, happiness would be more suitable for the life of cattle than for human beings. A more refined individual might believe that happiness is to be found in honor, but as Aristotle recognizes, honor is more dependent upon those who bestow it than upon those who receive it. We can think of many worthy individuals in our own day who merit great honors, but who never receive them, and conversely, some rather superficial individuals (actors and models) who have received the highest accolades the society is capable of bestowing. Finally there are those crass individuals who equate happiness with the possession of wealth, but anyone with sense would recognize that we desire money simply for the sake of what we can get with it (a nice home, a good car, etc.), and never for its own sake (NE 1095a 15-25).

So we now know what happiness is not, but we still don't know what it actually is. To find out we have to shift our discussion a bit and ask what appears to be a rather strange question from a modern perspective: what is the function of a human being? According to Aristotle, it is only when we understand what the function of a human being is that we will begin to come to a complete understanding of human happiness.

Happiness and the Function of a Human Being

For Aristotle everything in the world has its own unique function. The function of a knife is simply to cut, the function of a horse would be to run swiftly and to carry a rider, and so on. Various parts of the body also have their own function: that of the eye, for example, is to see. If all things have a function, he asks, is it not also likely that a human being would have his own unique function as well? It would certainly seem so. But what is that function?

Aristotle presents some likely candidates. We know that human beings take in nutrition and grow. Might this be our function then? Aristotle thinks not, because this ability is shared in common with all living things, even plants. When we are looking for the function of a human being, we are looking for something specific to them. A second candidate he names is sense perception; but once again human beings share this function with all other

animals. Is there not some other function, he asks, that is proper only to human beings, which distinguishes them from all other living things, and which makes a human being fully human? The answer for Aristotle is that reason alone satisfies these conditions, and therefore if we are seeking the function of a human being, it will have to be found in “an activity of the soul in conformity with [reason]” (NE 1098a 7)

Almost as soon as we have settled on the ability to reason as the best candidate for the function of a human being, Aristotle makes a qualification. When we ask what the function of a flute player is, we do not simply mean someone who plays the flute in any old way. Rather, a flute player fulfills his function properly when he plays his flute excellently. The same is true with other things as well: the function of a knife is not just to cut, but to cut well; the function of a sculptor is not simply to create any kind of statue, but excellent ones. The function of a human being, consequently, will be not simply to make use of his reasoning faculty but to make use of it in the best possible way—to reason, in other words, excellently. The Greek term for excellence is *arete*, which has been translated into English as “virtue” (from the Latin *virtus*). For Aristotle, then, the function of a human being, the good for a human, that which will ultimately make him happy consists in an “activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue” (NE 1098a 16)

The Golden Mean

The next question that Aristotle raises is, how do we achieve the excellent use of reason in the realm of human action? Most moral action, he says, concerns itself in one form or another with the emotions. “By emotions,” he specifies, “ I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, affection, hatred, longing, emulation, [and] pity.” (NE 1105b 20-22). For Aristotle there is nothing either good or bad about the emotions themselves; what is good or bad is how we chose to act upon them in a particular situation (NE 1105b 30-33). The role of reason, therefore, is not to eliminate the emotions, but rather to regulate them, so that they do not get out of hand or lead us into trouble.

But what exactly is the right way for reason to control the emotions? Aristotle uses the analogy of a good work of art. For a Greek the perfect work of art is one in which nothing can be added to or taken away from it. Think of a great work of art such as Michelangelo’s “David” or Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, for example: there is a harmony to these kinds of works that makes them seem totally complete in themselves. We wouldn’t want the artist to add or take away anything from them for fear of ruining their perfection. This kind of excellence in a work of art, then, would be destroyed though excess or defect. Excess and defect are also possible in the realm of human action: we can get too much or too little food, too much or too little exercise—both of which would prove harmful to a human being. In the realm of human action, then, Aristotle thinks that we ought always to strive for what the Latins called the “golden mean” (*aurea mediocritas*) or, to put it in his own language, a mean state between two extremes, excess and defect, with respect to action and emotion. This mean state is nothing other than what Aristotle signifies by the term “virtue” throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Illustrating the Virtues

A few examples will help to illustrate Aristotle’s theory of the virtues. Let’s take the virtue

of courage as our first example. Aristotle defines courage as a mean state between the two extremes of cowardice and recklessness with respect to the emotion of fear. A courageous person in this view feels just the right amount of fear when confronted by a dangerous situation; the cowardly person feels much more fear and he should; and the reckless feels much less. Aristotle's treatment of courage might strike some as a bit dubious since many of us have been led to believe that a courageous person is someone who actually feels no fear at all. But if we take time to analyze the nature of courage we shall see that Aristotle's view actually makes much more sense than our popular notion of courage.

Imagine for instance that you and a friend are passing a building that is on fire. The building is being rapidly consumed by flames, but the local fire department is not yet on the scene. On the second floor of the building a child is crying out for help from an open window. How would a courageous person respond in such a situation? We know that a cowardly person would probably avoid getting involved for fear of being burnt alive. If you were a coward, you would probably argue that it is best to wait for the fire department to arrive, since they are trained to handle this kind of emergency. In the meanwhile, however, the trapped child will have been burnt alive. Another option is for you to rush into the burning building without a moment's hesitation or forethought, battle the smoke and flames, and try to climb up to the second floor to rescue the trapped child. Even if you managed to reach the child under these conditions, it is not certain that you would be able to carry him out of the house before the roof or stairway collapses. Both you and the child would end up dead, and all of your heroic efforts would have been in vain. While some might describe your actions as courageous, Aristotle would correctly observe that you were in fact foolhardy rather than courageous—that is, that you didn't have the right amount of fear that you should have had in such a life-threatening situation.

So if you were a truly courageous person what would you do in this kind of situation? First, you would quickly size up the extent to which the house is being burned, the location of the child, and the resources that are available. If the child could in fact be saved by rushing into the house, you might risk it even though there was a chance that you yourself might be trapped; if there is no chance of saving the child that way, you would look for another option. If the child was small enough, for example, you might have him jump out the window into your arms, or if a neighbor was at hand (and there was enough time) you might have the neighbor get a sheet to use as a safety net. Whatever option you chose, it is certain that you would still feel some degree of fear—at the very least for the child whose life is in danger. Aristotle is certainly correct then, when he maintains that a courageous person, unlike a foolhardy one, feels fear. He just isn't crippled by it the way a coward would be.

Another important virtue for Aristotle is that of generosity, which he describes as a mean between the extremes of extravagance and stinginess with respect to the giving and taking of money. A stingy person is someone who exceeds in taking but is defective in giving. We can think of a miserly old person—Dicken's Scrooge, for example—who is excellent at making money from his dealing with other people, but who is horrible at giving it away, even for a good cause. Once again, we might be tempted to think of a generous person as one whose gives without thought to anyone in need, but for Aristotle this would be an extravagant person, not a generous one. This kind of person he says exceeds in giving but is defective in taking. I have know people, for example, who, filled with the spirit of Christian "charity," have given away much of their money to worthy causes or individuals in need. Unfortunately, many end up not having enough left to pay their monthly bills, and

are forced to borrow money from friends or family to survive. This kind of person, while appearing to practice the virtue of generosity is actually not virtuous at all, since he gives from other people's pockets rather than his own.

Finally, for Aristotle, even-temperedness is a means between the extremes of short-temperedness and apathy with respect to the emotion of anger. The even-tempered person is not that individual who never gets angry under any circumstance. There are certainly occasions when even the most mild-mannered person would demonstrate extreme anger—when a great injustice has been committed, for example. If he was protecting the life of someone he loved his anger might even compel him to lash out with great violence. At all times, however, he directs the correct amount of anger towards precisely the right object in order to accomplish his goals. The short-tempered person on the other hand responds to many of life's adversities with an excessive degree of anger and often directs it at the wrong object. He might, for example, be humiliated at work by his boss. Instead of directing his anger at the appropriate source (his boss), in the right way (preferably in private) and to the right degree (firmly but not in a shrill or volatile manner), he takes his hostility out on wife and children, towards whom his anger should not be directed at all.

Examining Aristotle's account of the different virtues, we might be tempted to believe that the life of virtue in general is fairly easy to achieve. All we have to do, after all, is find the mean and strive to attain it in our actions. What could be easier than that? Aristotle, however, immediately dispels any facile ideas we have about virtuous living. In no uncertain terms he warns us that practicing virtue in real life is extremely difficult and requires a considerable amount of diligence:

That is why it is a hard task to be good; in every case it is a task to find the median: for instance, not everyone can find the middle of a circle, but only the man who has the proper knowledge. Similarly, anyone can get angry—that is easy—or can give away money or spend it; but to do all this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, for the right reason, and in the right way is no longer something easy that anyone can do. It is for this reason that good conduct is rare, praiseworthy, and noble (NE 1109a 24-29)

Aristotle believes that hitting the mean in every circumstance is extremely difficult for those who haven't been trained properly. To help us in our efforts to achieve the mean, he gives us some fairly helpful guidelines. First, he says, we should always try to avoid that extreme that is more opposite to the mean. For example, it would certainly appear that cowardice is further from the mean of courage than foolhardiness. If we find it impossible to behave courageously, then, it is preferable to be foolhardy than cowardly. Second, he suggests that there are undoubtedly certain vices to which we are more prone than others, and we should avoid these like the plague. For example, if I know that I can't sit at a table without overeating, I should probably be extremely scrupulous about how much food I consume. To force myself to break the habit of gluttony, I may even want to go to the other extreme of fasting regularly. Just as we might turn a sagging bookcase shelf over on its other side temporarily to straighten it out, so too might we try to practice the opposite extreme of that particular vice to which we are most prone in order to eventually return to the mean. Finally, he warns us always to be on guard against pleasure, since the craving for pleasure often inspires human beings to engage in behavior that can be vicious (NE 1109a 20 - 1109b 25).

Acquiring Virtue

We have seen that for Aristotle all human action aims at happiness and that happiness is connected to a life of virtue. If we accept this starting point of Aristotelian ethics, the next question that should automatically be asked is: how do we learn to become virtuous men and women? In answering this question Aristotle begins by making the distinction between intellectual virtues, such as practical wisdom, and moral virtues, such as courage, generosity, and the like. Intellectual virtues, he believes, are acquired by education; moral virtues by habit. In other words, Aristotle rejects the notion that a child—or even an adult for that matter—can be taught to be good:

Argument and teaching, I am afraid, are not effective in all cases: the soul of the listener must first have been conditioned by habits to the right kind of likes and dislikes, just as land must be cultivated before it is able to foster the seed. For a man whose life is guided by emotion will not listen to an argument that dissuades him, nor will he understand it. How can we possibly persuade a man like that to change his ways? And in general it seems that emotion does not yield to argument but only to force. Therefore, there must first be a character that somehow has an affinity for excellence or virtue, a character that loves what is noble and feels disgust at what is base (NE 1179b 23-31)

The problem as Aristotle sees it is that if a person does not already have a virtuous disposition, then he will not be open to moral education, and if he already has a virtuous disposition then he really doesn't need it.

All human beings, Aristotle believes, are born as blank slates, without either good or bad characters. The character that we ultimately develop is a result of upbringing, and this character can get better or worse depending on the specific kind of training that we receive growing up. Parents, therefore, need to mold the characters of young people in right way to help them become virtuous adults. Aristotle uses the example of learning to play a musical instrument to demonstrate the right way to go about training young people to be moral. Certainly no one believes that they can simply teach a child to become the next George Gershwin. To learn to play the piano well, a child must constantly practice, starting with the most basic notes and working his way to the most complex scales. At first the child will inevitably stumble over the notes he is learning to play, but eventually, if he is diligent enough and practice every day, he will be able to play the piano as though it was second nature to him. According to Aristotle a similar process is involved in training a child to behave virtuously. When a child is first being trained, he finds it difficult and often has trouble doing what his parents expect of him. As he constantly practices specific virtues, such as honesty and generosity, he will eventually find it easier and easier to behave virtuously, until it becomes extremely difficult for him to even conceive of engaging in any kind of vicious behavior.

Aristotle connects the process of moral habituation with the experience of pleasure and pain, suggesting that these can be used as a benchmark of how well we have been trained in the virtues. It is pleasure, he writes, “that makes us do base actions and pain that prevents us from doing noble actions. For that reason...men must be brought up from childhood to feel pleasure and pain at the proper things; for this is correct education.” (NE 1104b 10-12). The person who has been trained correctly, according to Aristotle, will experience pleasure when he behaves well and pain when he behaves badly. A person who has been incorrectly trained, on the other hand, will feel a certain amount of pain as a result of

performing good actions, and probably will derive at least some pleasure from performing certain bad ones. Thus for Aristotle, the woman who experiences displeasure when she regulates her eating habits is not self-controlled, but actually self-indulgent; likewise, the man who forces himself to give to charity at Christmas but who grumbles about it every year is not generous but stingy. If both these individuals were truly virtuous they would derive pleasure, not pain from their virtuous actions.

Implicit in Aristotle's theory of moral education is the idea that the person who has been habituated to virtuous behavior will demonstrate complete unity of public and private persona. The average man on the street typically has a bifurcated persona—that is, he wears one face to the world and another behind closed doors. He might be pleasant, well-mannered and gracious when he is around other people, but might also be quite despicable in his private life. Certainly we have all heard cases of men who appear to be extremely gentle in the workplace, who are horribly abusive to their spouses or children. "I never would have guessed that about him," is the typical response that people will make when confronted by this kind of conflict in a person's character. The person of virtue, in contrast, is one who has so completely embodied the right way to behave that he exhibits this in all aspects of his life.

In his essay, "Of Repentance," Michel de Montaigne, who is certainly well-versed in the Aristotelian tradition, writes, "It is a rare life that remains well ordered even in private. Any man can play his part in the side show and represent a worthy man on the boards; but to be disciplined within, in his own bosom, where all is permissible, where all is concealed—that's the point." Montaigne illustrates this principle with the story of Julius Druses, who, he says, was approached by local workmen, offering for 300 crowns to redo his house so that his neighbors would no longer be able to look into it as they could before. Julius replies that he would give 600 crowns if they could make it so that everyone could see from all sides (Montaigne, 182-183). The point of this story is that while most of us would prefer to keep our private actions out of the public eye because they often conflict with the kind of person we are perceived to be, the truly moral person—that is, one who has been trained properly in the virtues—would be able to live a life that is a completely open book. To behave any differently in one realm of his life than in another would be completely inconceivable to him.

The Status of "Worldly Goods"

Reading the above description of Aristotle's theory of the virtues, one could easily be led to believe that the possession of virtue alone was sufficient to ensure a happy life. In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, Aristotle maintains that while happiness must indeed be connected with a life of virtue, certain external goods are also necessary in order to make life supremely happy. In the *Rhetoric*, he specifies that these goods include "noble birth, numerous friends, good friends, good children, numerous children, a good old age; further bodily excellences, such as health, beauty, strength, stature, fitness for athletic contests, a good reputation, honor, good luck, virtue" (*Rhetoric* 1360b 3-4). The absence of such goods, far from being indifferent to the virtuous man, will, in fact, affect his happiness:

fortune brings many things to pass, some great, some small. Minor instances of

good and likewise of bad luck obviously do not decisively tip the scales of life, but a number of major successes will make life more perfectly happy....On the other hand, frequent reverses can crush and mar supreme happiness in that they inflict pain, and thwart many activities. Still nobility shines through even in such circumstances, when a man bears great misfortunes with good grace not because he is insensitive to pain but because he is noble and high minded (NE 1100b 25-35).

Aristotle is convinced that major successes in life can make the virtuous man even happier, and that the strength of his character enables him to bear *minor* setbacks and adversities. He even seems to reject the idea that brief experiences of pain or suffering could affect one's happiness, since this would mean that pains received in honorable battle, for example, could deprive someone of happiness. He does maintain, however, that severe misfortune—the death of one's children or the complete loss of one's reputation—can spoil happiness: “Those who assert that a man is happy even on the rack and even when great misfortunes befall him, provided that he is good, are talking nonsense, whether they know it or not” (NE 1153b 20). But even in the case of severe losses, Aristotle is confident that the virtuous man can recover his happiness after a lengthy period of time, provided that he has been able to achieve other distinctions. Despite the ambiguity in his treatment of the role of worldly goods in attaining happiness, in the end, Aristotle must acknowledge that one's happiness is dependent upon various goods that are subject to the whims of fortune.

An example from Plato's *Republic* (361b-362c) might serve to clarify Aristotle's often ambiguous understanding of the importance of worldly goods on the attainment of happiness. In the second book of this work Plato has Adeimantus object to Socrates' claim that the life of virtue is its own reward and ultimately brings happiness. Adeimantus asks Socrates to imagine two individuals, one who is completely virtuous, who scrupulously obeys all of the laws of his society, and who treats all those he encounters justly. Unfortunately, this virtuous man is believed by everyone to be a complete scoundrel, and so lives a life of poverty and misery, and ultimately dies in disgrace. Adeimantus then asks Socrates to imagine yet another individual who is in reality completely vicious and unjust, but because of his cunning manages to get everyone to believe that he is a paragon of virtue. Because he has such a fabulous reputation he lives a life of wealth, power and respect and dies revered by all.

Which one of these two individuals can best be described as living a happy life? Adeimantus implies that it would be the cunning villain, since he possesses all the worldly goods that anyone could desire. A Stoic, on the other hand, would argue that the moral, but disgraced, man actually is the one who is truly happy, since he possesses virtue, and this alone is necessary to ensure happiness. Aristotle's position would actually be more subtle than either of these positions. Neither man, he would argue, can be said to have lived a truly happy life. The villain can't be happy, because he lacks virtue, and the moral man can't be happy because he lacks far too many of the goods that are necessary for happiness.

On the surface, Aristotle's view seems almost as cynical as Adeimantus'. Certainly, we would all like to believe that a truly good person could be stripped of everything and still remain happy. In reality, however, we know that there is a limit to how much misery human beings can endure before they reach their breaking point—before they lose all hope and start to despair. It may take much longer for a truly virtuous person to reach that breaking point than it would for ordinary individuals, but it is a mistake to believe that he could

be completely impervious to all suffering in life. The virtuous person may have to lose everything first—wife, family, friends, reputation—but eventually he will come to a point where he believes that his life is just not worth living any longer.

In the end, we must acknowledge that Aristotle is indeed correct when he argues that happiness is quite impossible while one is being torn apart on the rack.

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