

Aristotle vs. Theognis

George Couvalis

Aristotle argues that provided we have moderate luck, we can attain eudaimonia through our own effort. He claims that it is crucial to attaining eudaimonia that we aim at an overall target in our lives to which all our actions are directed. He also claims that the proper target of a eudaimon human life is virtuous activity, which is a result of effort not chance. He criticises Theognis for saying that the most pleasant thing is to chance on love, arguing instead that virtuous activity is the most pleasant thing. I argue that although Aristotle's view is insightful and carefully worked out, he fails to show that Theognis is wrong. Effort is not necessarily the path to human eudaimonia and important things we attain by chance seem to have an irreplaceable value.

Introduction

Aristotle argues that we can through our own effort attain a eudaimon life, a life we would have if we were watched over by a benign spirit, provided we have some moderate luck and some external goods. He thinks his view is threatened by a remark he takes to be so important that he quotes it near the start of book 1 of Eudemian Ethics. The remark, which the ancients attributed to the poet Theognis, is that “the most just is finest (kalliston), best (loston) is health; but most pleasant (hediston) is to chance on what we love (tis era to tuchein)” (EE 1214a:5–6). (The Greek word “tuche” means both chance and luck.) Aristotle prefaces his subsequent comments by declaring that “we will not agree with him [Theognis], for eudaimonia is at once the finest and the most important (ariston) of all things — it is also the most pleasant” (EE 1214a:6–7). (Before quoting the same remark at Nicomachean Ethics [NE] 1099a:27–8 he comments that these qualities are not separate [ou dioristai].)¹

¹ I follow the usual convention in referring to passages in Aristotle, which is to refer to the page numbers and column letters of the standard edition of the works of Aristotle, edited by Bekker. These page numbers and column letters are repeated in all modern editions of Aristotle's works.

The relationship of the Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics is a matter of much debate. Some of the books now in the Nicomachean Ethics may have originally belonged in the Eudemian Ethics. The

Aristotle tells us that the remark was inscribed on the gateway to the temple of Leto on the island of Delos — an island sacred to the wise god Apollo. So presumably people thought it was profound and this is why Aristotle wants to rebut it. He understands the remark to be saying that the good (agathon), the fine (kalon) and the pleasant (hede) are not all aspects of the same thing. His criticism elsewhere of the idea that chance (or luck) plays a significant role in the best life suggests that he also takes Theognis to be saying both that chance rather than our own effort is crucial in whether we have a successful life and that what is attained by chance is as worthwhile as what we attain through our own effort.

To understand Aristotle's claim, it is important to stress that eudaimonia here does not mean happiness in the ordinary sense, because that can be transitory and consist of disconnected segments of pleasure. He takes it that eudaimonia means something like success in life. A eudaimon life is not only pleasant, it lacks no important human good. In addition, a eudaimon life is connected by an overall structure which makes it one thing and transforms the significance of painful events it contains.

It is useful to turn to Daniel Russell's recent account of Plato to get a better grasp on Aristotle's view of how a eudaimon life is unified (Russell, 2005). Russell argues that Plato has a directive rather than an accumulative view of eudaimonia — for Plato, a eudaimon life is not a life consisting of an accumulation of pleasant experiences but a life focussed on a broadly defined worthy goal which gives it a structure and gives experiences an overall emotional significance. Aristotle has a similar directive conception. It seems that on his account even very painful experiences can acquire a positive character which depends not on their intrinsic features, but on their role in such a life. So, for instance, what would otherwise be merely a painful and frightening experience can acquire a positive valency if it is part of a process of courageous activity which is proper part of a virtuous life. This means that we can enjoy it even though it is not pleasant. Indeed, given our overall life goal, we enjoy it in part because it is not pleasant. (Compare the painful experiences of an athlete who is building up to competing in the Olympic games.) Note, however, that Aristotle is unwilling to push the directive conception as far as Plato — for instance he is unwilling to say that Priam led a eudaimon life because he was virtuous to the end (NE 1100a:7–10). (Aristotle is here presumably thinking of the absurd claim that even when Priam ended up on the rack at the end of his life, his city destroyed, his sons killed, his wife sold into slavery, and his daughter murdered for being the sex slave of Agammemnon, he attained eudaimonia because he was virtuous to the end.)

Aristotle's commitment to the directive conception of eudaimonia may explain why, shortly after his very brief discussion of Theognis, he takes himself to have already laid down that "... everybody who has the power (dunamis) to live according to his own choice should set himself a target (skopon) for a fine life, whether it be honour

Eudemian Ethics may have been written before the Nicomachean Ethics. For the purposes of this paper I will treat both as putting forward a unified view.

or glory or wealth or cultivation (paideian), on which he will be focussing (pros ti apoblepon) in making (poisetai) all his actions (praxeis) — for it is a mark of much folly (aphronesis pollus) to have not organised one's life by directing it towards an end (telos)..." (1214b:7–13). In understanding this claim, we should note that although Aristotle talks as if the eudaimon life is the life of a monomaniac, he indicates elsewhere that he means that a eudaimon *human* life must include attention to other people such as parents, children, a wife and fellow citizens. Humans are social animals (1097b:8–12).

It is difficult to know what precisely Theognis meant or what precisely Aristotle is rejecting. In what follows, I will interpret Theognis to be making what I think to be a profound claim which I will interpret Aristotle to be rejecting. I will argue that despite Aristotle's valuable insights, he fails to deal adequately with the problems raised by Theognis.

Aristotle might be taken to understand Theognis's background reasoning to be this: people who are devoted to justice are highly admirable. However, in pursuit of justice, they end up with few resources and put themselves under great strain and into danger. Health is a great good, but people who are particularly healthy are healthy because they are self-interested individuals who are niggardly with their resources and do not worry much about injustices — they thus fail to be admirable. People who seek to live very exciting lives take great chances — they are not careful to protect their health and are not admirably just. Nevertheless, through their chancy life, they sometimes hit on what they love most. When they hit on it they are most pleased not only because of what they have attained but because of the thrill of having chanced on it. Human life is tragic and a life in which one attains all the worthwhile things is impossible.

Before continuing, I should stress that Theognis's remarks are compatible with treating chancing on what one loves as the acme of a life devoted to taking great chances. The target of such a life would presumably be winning the best goods



Plato and Aristotle. Marble panel, Italy.
Duomo Works Museum, Florence

through taking great chances.² Certainly he does not seem to be merely saying that there is a thrill from getting the best goods quite unexpectedly. Aristotle puts this aside without argument when he treats the rational life focussed on a target as one in which the target could not be what may be attained only through very risky choices. In partial defence of Aristotle, it might be said that the goal of attaining good things in life through taking great chances is so ill defined and would involve so little detailed control over what happens that it can hardly be said to direct one's behaviour in any full blooded sense.

For Theognis understood in the way I suggest, human life almost invariably includes tragic loss because we are caught in two important dilemmas. The first is that we have to choose between a life devoted to paying little attention to morality but acting in our interests, and a life devoted to being morally upstanding but damaging our interests. The second is that we have to choose between a life devoted to carefully promoting our interests or to moral monotony, and a chancy life. Aristotle argues that it is in our power not to suffer tragic loss. In this paper, I will focus on the second dilemma. However, to understand Aristotle's argument I will start by discussing his way of dissolving the first dilemma. It is important to understand that the two dilemmas are connected. To devote oneself to a life of moral monotony (or to the careful promotion of one's interests) at the expense of the chancy life is apparently to miss out on an important good — the exciting pleasures that come when things turn out very well through taking great risks. In solving the dilemmas posed by Theognis, Aristotle will have to show that we can live a most exciting and morally upright life in which we still satisfy our deepest interests.

Aristotle's solution

Aristotle argues that it will promote my good to be ethical via arguing that a human who wants to achieve eudaimonia will carry out virtuous actions primarily for the sake of the fine (*tou kalou eneka*) (NE 1122b:6–7). He also wants to say that the virtuous activity is undertaken for the sake of itself, so I understand him to be saying that virtuous activity is a logical or constitutive part of the fine (*kalon*) in ethics. The fine is not separate from virtuous activity. There has been a long debate on what Aristotle means by the "*kalon*" in ethics. As far as I can tell, those who argue that he is using the term in a way that is in part aesthetic have won (Cooper, 1999:270–276, Rogers, 1993, Richardson-Lear, 2004:126–146). Aristotle is arguing that in a fully virtuous person, there is great beauty in the fact that actions are made appropriate to their objects. For instance, in explaining the sense in which virtue is a mean, he explains that "anyone can become angry or spend money, but to give money to the right person in the right

² "Tuchein" means something like "chance on" or "luck on", which is why Rackham translates the crucial phrase as "...to win one's desire is pleasantest" (Aristotle, 1952:199). Woods' reading, which seems to miss the point that chance is crucial, is "...most pleasant is to achieve one's heart's desire" (Aristotle, 1992:1).

amount at the right time in the right way for the sake of the right end is not something of which everyone is capable and is difficult. Indeed, it is rare, praiseworthy and fine” (NE 1109a:27–30). In *Topics*, Aristotle explicitly identifies the fine with the appropriate or fitting (*prepon*) (135a:13–14). In NE the magnificent man whom he greatly admires has the virtue of *megaloprepia* — he explains that the term comes from “*megathi pre-pousa*” (great fittingness — fitting expenditure on a grand scale) (1122a:22–26).

A virtuous life is a life in which a whole person has made himself into a kind of work of art which responds in precisely the way which is correct. A crucial part of its appeal is that having acquired practical wisdom (*sophrosune*), something which is far harder to acquire than any Olympic skill (which is only demanding in a one-sided manner), we now responds effortlessly and with great enjoyment to many life-situations. We egoistically take great pleasure in our fine activity, being justifiably proud of what we have made of ourselves. However, I think Gabrielle Richardson-Lear is also right to emphasise that it is not appropriate response to the object which is crucial to Aristotle, but what is appropriate for the acting *subject*. It is crucial for Aristotle that fully virtuous behaviour is in some sense a completion of human nature. Virtuous activity is a human being attaining his natural end (*telos*) as human. The aesthetic pleasure virtuous people take in their activity is part of a broader perception that they are in some sense attaining their human end. This makes clearer why Aristotle thinks it is in *my* interest to be virtuous — in acting virtuously, I am not merely making myself as a kind of work of art of which I can be proud. I am also aware that I am realising my central end as a human being. What is important, however, is not only that I am realising my central end merely by being virtuous, it is also that I am showing that I am worthy of the goods I have by using them. When I use them appropriately I attain being worthy (*axios*), a kind of self respect — the way Aristotle talks makes it clear that he is committed to the view that a kind of retrospective desert casts a benign light over my whole life.³ Presumably he means to say that I could not get the crucial good of worthiness or self-respect (*axiotita*) if I got these goods without then using them in a worthy way.

This sketch shows us how Aristotle wants to solve the first dilemma. We get a glimmering of how he wants to solve the second dilemma in a passage in which he clarifies the sense in which he thinks it is correct to be a self lover while also loving your friends for themselves. In the surrounding discussion, he says that the many think that it is obvious that it is good to be a self lover. However, he argues that the many understand this in the wrong way — presumably the many wrongly think that a career of dubious vice is rational. He then says that:

It is also true of the excellent man (*spoudaiou*) that he will do many acts for his friends and for his fatherland, and if necessary die for them. For he will give up wealth and

³ As Kelly Rogers points out, Aristotle seems to want to say that my fine acts transform the natural goods into expressions of my fine character — the natural goods then become part of my fineness (Rogers, 1993:348).

honour and all the goods for which men struggle, procuring for himself the fine; because he would prefer a short time of intense pleasure (hesthenai sfodra) to a long stress free period (polin herema), a fine year of life to many years of happenstance (pollu eti tuchontos), and one great and fine action to many small actions.⁴ Perhaps this is what happens with those who die for others — in this way they choose great fineness (mega kalon) for themselves. Also they will give up wealth so that their friends get more. For his friends become wealthier but he gets to be fine — he retains the greater good. And he behaves in the same way regarding offices and honours. For he will give up all these for his friend. For this is fine and praiseworthy. He is properly believed to be excellent, for he will always prefer to choose the fine. He will even accept that fine acts should be performed by his friend, and it is finer (kallion) for him to be the cause of his friend bringing about fine acts. In sum, in all worthy conduct it is manifest that the excellent man takes more of the fine for himself (1169a:18–27).

So the claim is that the life of the excellent man includes the most intense and exciting pleasure where it is tied to appropriate moral action. For while being worthy of the natural goods he owns, in the right circumstances he will give up everything others struggle over for the sake of the ultimate good of fineness. His great action will give him a brief and presumably exciting period of intense pleasure which is a deep enjoyment at completing a fine life.

Discussion of Aristotle's View

Aristotle's attempt to deal with Theognis's problem shows considerable insight into the problems raised by the apparently monotonous nature of moral demands. Nevertheless, I think it suffers from serious problems.

Theognis says that chancing on the important good of erotic love has a value that nothing else has. There is a thrill about getting erotic love in this way that makes it the most pleasant thing we can get. The point can easily be expanded beyond erotic love, even if erotic love may be a paradigm case. There is a thrill about being in situations in which we are unsure what will happen next because we have taken a punt, particularly when they are fraught with various dangers. If things turn out well by chance, we feel a great sense of exhilaration, something which is not replacable by the enjoyable sense of control and worthiness we get from fine moral action. The good Theognis is describing, if indeed it is a good, seems to be by its nature a good that cannot be attained through planning. A life devoted to such goods would be left as open as possible. We would shun commitments as they would not allow us an openness to happenstance that we would think life required.⁵

⁴ Note that the word I have translated as happenstance, "tuchontos" is derived from "tuche". Aristotle's claim seems to be that the spoudaios will prefer to lose many years of unmerited and unfocussed life to a short life guided by his target of attaining great fineness.

⁵ Of course, there is a problem about how we individuate goods which cannot be discussed in detail here — roughly, if goods are individuated in part by the kind of attitudes we have or by the intentional

Despite the fact that Theognis is making an important point, we need to consider Aristotle's reasons for his position before concluding that Aristotle is wrong. Aristotle thinks that what people want is to be worthy of the goods they have — a kind of self respect is central to a good life. This self respect can only be acquired through our effort. This is crucial to his argument for a life devoted to the central end of moral virtue, as he thinks what makes the enormously difficult task of leading a virtuous life worthwhile is that we gain the great good of self respect. So Aristotle would argue against them by saying that we cannot get this central good through a life devoted to the goods we can attain through chance. Aristotle also takes it that we need to justify our life as a whole. If much of our life is not justified it is wasted. If he is right about this but central goods come without being in any sense deserved it is hard to see what the point is of much of our lives (EE 1215b:19 – 1216a:27 shows that one of Aristotle's important concerns is what makes life worth living).

Nevertheless I think this is an inadequate reply to Theognis. For while self respect might be an important good, it is still true that if Theognis is right the virtuous life involves an important loss. Indeed, Theognis can be taken to be implicitly already conceding at the outset that the life devoted to virtue is finest because it gives us the important good of self respect and makes our whole life worthy and hence worthwhile. He could even concede that the good of self respect is more important than the thrill of chancing on love, and still argue that a life lacking this thrill is not eudaimon. (In any case, since the two goods are so different, it is hard to see how there can be any justification for judging one good superior to the other.)

For Aristotle to reply adequately to Theognis he needs to show that the good so prized by Theognis is not really an important good. It only appears to be such because we have a distorted understanding of ourselves or of the good in question. Perhaps this is really what he wants to do in claiming that the life of virtue can be thrilling. Perhaps the real point is that Theognis's (and our) judgements are clouded by a false romanticism. Perhaps what is really good for us is what uses and develops our characteristic powers as human beings and we are deluded into romanticism because our lives are so filled by mediocrity and boredom. However, to show this Aristotle would need arguments which are not present in his works on ethics. In any case, yearning for happenstance seems to be just as characteristically human as yearning for what is attainable through directed action. Perhaps the real problem is that we value incompatible things — we value self-respect and what we attain through effort, but we also value the thrill of attaining wonderful things through taking chances. If so, eudaimonia is impossible, as Theognis thought.

objects involved in our justified desires, then goods directed at one kind of intentional object are fundamentally different from goods directed towards another kind. For instance, the thrill of chancing on erotic love is not at all the same kind of good as the thrill of doing morally fine acts. On the other hand, if the strength of our satisfied desires for them is crucial to making goods good, then all goods really form a single kind. In much of his writing, Aristotle seems to assume that goods are individuated in part by our propositional attitudes or by the nature of the objects that are good. However, in

Bibliography

Aristotle, 1934

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. With an English translation by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. London: Harvard University Press.

Aristotle, 1952

Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution, Eudemian Ethics, Virtues and Vices*. With an English translation by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. London: Harvard University Press.

Aristotle, 1992

Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*. Translated Michael Woods. Second Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Cooper, 1999

John Cooper, *Reason and Emotion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Richardson Lear, 2004

Happy Lives and the Highest Good. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rogers, 1993

Kelly Rogers, "Aristotle Conception of To Kalon", *Ancient Philosophy* 13:355–71.

Russell, 2005

Daniel Russell, *Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

his rebuttal of Theognis, he talks as if goods can be easily compared to one another. For instance, in EE he says that eudaimonia is the finest and most pleasant and in NE he stresses how incredibly pleasant a great and fine act can be (presumably by comparison to other pleasing things).