CHAPTER 7

Aristotle on Enduring Evils While Staying Happy

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7.1 Virtue, Happiness, and What is Evil for Humans

In what ways and how far does virtue shield someone against suffering evils? In other words, how do non-moral evils affect the lives of virtuous people and to what extent can someone endure evils while staying happy? The central purpose of this chapter is to answer these questions by exploring what Aristotle has to say about the effects of evils in human well-being in general and his treatment of extreme misfortunes.

In Aristotle's ethical treatises, the term *kakon* (bad, evil) is used in a broad sense. It generally applies to things that destroy or hinder happiness (*eudaimonia*), tarnish the joy of the blessed (*makarioi*), or contribute to making someone miserable (*athlios*).[1] Evils are often referred to as "objects of avoidance" (*ta pheukta*),[2] which Aristotle classifies into the shameful (*to aischron*), the harmful (*to blaberon*), and the painful (*to lupêron*) (*NE* II 3 $1104^{b}30$–32), and which have different kinds of impact on our well-being. Among evils we find evils "of the soul" (*peri psuchên*) and, in contrast, evils that are non-moral and mostly due to bad luck (*atuchia*). The first group includes what are often called "*moral evils*," evils that encompass all the failures concerning dispositions of character, including mainly vice (*kakia*), weakness of will (*akrasia*), and brutishness (*thêriotês*) (*NE* VII 1 $1145^{a}16$–17). The second group, which I shall call "*evils of fortune*," comprise both bodily evils (such as sickness, weakness, or ugliness) and external evils (such as poverty, lack of friends, or premature death).

[1] The term most frequently used by Aristotle to mark the opposite of happiness is *athlios*. He uses the term *kakodaimonia* (unhappiness) only three times (at *Poetics*, *Protrepticus*, and the *Fragments*) and never confers to it a central role. (See Mulhern 2008 for a study of the term *kakia* and the related *kak-* expressions.)

[2] See e.g., *NE* III 12 $1119^{a}23$, VII 1 $1145^{a}16$, VII 4 $1148^{b}4$, VII 13 $1153^{b}2$, X 2 $1172^{b}19$, $1173^{a}10$, X 5 $1175^{b}25$, and *EE* VII 2 $1236^{b}37$. About the coextension of evils and objects of avoidance, see e.g., *NE* X 2 $1173^{a}10$: "For if both belong to the class of evils (*kakôn*), then they ought both to be objects of aversion (*pheukta*)." Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Aristotle's works are from Barnes 1984, with some modifications.

The main difference between these two sorts of evils is that while failures of character (evils of the soul) are always bad – i.e., always obstacles to *eudaimonia* – and have the power of making bad everything else, even things which are "generally" (*haplôs*) or "by nature" (*phusei*) good, the evils of fortune are not always bad – instead, their badness depends on the agent's condition. Concretely, many evils of fortune are often not bad for those who have a good character, and sometimes enduring those evils well can even provide some benefit and indirectly contribute to a good person's flourishing. There are, however, limits to the capacity of a good person to deal with evils gracefully, so that numerous or extreme misfortunes will negatively affect the lives of those who suffer them, including good people.

In Section 7.2 I explore the reasons behind the asymmetric effects that fortune has on good and bad people. Aristotle fully embraces the Socratic "*conditionality thesis*" that virtue is necessary to make other good things good;[3] in other words, non-moral goods depend for their value on the presence of virtue. Consequently, those who have defective characters will see non-moral goods, and specifically goods of fortune, turn bad in their hands. Evils of the soul, then, are not only intrinsically bad on account of directly contributing to the agent's misery – they are also indirectly or instrumentally harmful insofar as they make everything else bad.

The main reason for this is that, without virtue, an agent will often inappropriately use the goods of fortune and tend to enjoy them in ways that impede the development of good qualities of character and reinforce bad ones. A crucial failure of non-virtuous people is – as I show in Section 7.3 – that they do not properly grasp the hierarchy and relations of dependency between different kinds of goods and evils, and in particular, the relations between the shameful, the harmful, and the painful. As a result, non-virtuous individuals fail to guide their actions and choices according to an adequate assessment of the weight that different kinds of goods and evils of fortune should have in our lives, and thus they often promote their own misery. In contrast, virtuous people are not only most able to make adequate use of goods of fortune but also can endure misfortunes while staying happy precisely because they have an adequate sense of the hierarchy and relations between the different kinds of objects of choice and avoidance.

In Section 7.4 I investigate how non-moral evils affect the lives of virtuous people by looking at Aristotle's ambivalent relation to Socrates' famous

[3] In many passages, Socrates argues that only the virtuous person can be benefited by natural goods such as health, wealth, power, etc. See e.g., *Apology* 28b2–4, *Meno* 87c–89a, *Euthydemus* 278e–282a.

thesis that virtue is sufficient for happiness (i.e., Socrates' "*sufficiency thesis*"). Aristotle's precise position on this issue is notoriously difficult to pin down, as is familiar from the much-debated question concerning his view on the role of goods of fortune in human well-being. Just as with goods of fortune, Aristotle often seems ambivalent about whether evils of fortune can directly affect the lives of good people. I argue that, although generally optimistic, he ultimately concedes that evils of fortune can have both indirect and direct effects on anyone's well-being and thus can have a direct negative impact also on the happiness of a good person.

In Sections 7.5 and 7.6 I further explore the potential effects of evils of fortune in the lives of virtuous people and clarify why Aristotle has mixed feelings in relation to the sufficiency thesis. Aristotle partly agrees with Socrates on this issue, but maintains some crucial points of disagreement. On the one hand, as I show in Section 7.5, Aristotle holds that in most cases virtuous people can endure gracefully the obstacles presented by external evils and take them as opportunities to exercise their virtues and thus promote their own well-being. This view harmonizes with the sufficiency thesis.

On the other hand, as I show in Section 7.6, Aristotle admits that some evils unavoidably damage or tarnish the happiness of those who suffer them, even if the agents are virtuous people and otherwise have enjoyed a decent life. This view sits in tension with the sufficiency thesis and is due to the peculiar character of the relationship between agency and happiness in Aristotle's account. As I argue, the general criterion that determines the potentially damaging effect of evils of fortune in the lives of virtuous agents is whether they leave room for noble activity – i.e. whether the agents can compensate the pains and losses suffered by achieving instead the noble. Those cases where virtuous agents endure pains or losses while doing noble actions will contribute to their happiness. In contrast, cases where the pains and losses are so intense that they cannot be easily compensated by the nobility of the actions, or where the agent does not have full agency and consequently does not have the opportunity to act virtuously given the circumstances, will unavoidably tarnish the agents' happiness.

7.2 Moral Evils Spoil Goods of Fortune: The Flipside of the Conditionality Thesis

From the first chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle shows his doubts about the possibility of talking about goods and evils in a clean-cut

way. In relation to goods, Aristotle claims that "fine and just actions" (*ta de kala kai ta dikaia*) "exhibit much variety and fluctuation," and that "goods" (*t'agatha*) also exhibit a similar fluctuation "because they bring harm (*blabas*) to the many" (*NE* I 3 1194^{b}14–18). The many, who have no virtue, do not have the ability to reliably make proper use of good things, so that often things that are naturally good turn out to be harmful for them. For example, he adds, for many people wealth and political power are harmful, and even traits that are generally taken to be unconditionally good, like courage, can be harmful when possessed by someone who is not truly virtuous (*NE* I 3 1194^{b}18–19).

At least part of the reason for this fluctuation of the good is that the psychological traits of agents, which comprise their character, affect the goodness or badness of things. Aristotle, like Socrates, holds the "conditionality thesis," i.e., that virtue is the only unconditional good and the condition of goodness for everything else. Although people consider some things to be "simply" or "absolutely" (*haplôs*) good, including the so-called material, external, or competitive goods (such as wealth, honors, and pleasure), these things are not in fact good for everybody. Their goodness depends on the (moral) psychic conditions in which agents find themselves, and they are reliably good only for the good person.

At *NE* I 8 1098^{b}12–16, Aristotle presents a classic and apparently straightforward classification of goods into "external" (*ektos*) goods, goods of the body (*peri sôma*) and goods "of the soul" (*peri psuchên*). But things are more complex than this classification suggests, since between these kinds of goods and between the corresponding evils there is a hierarchy and several dependency relations. For example, certain external goods like wealth or political power are good only for those who have virtue (the main good of the soul) and may be harmful for non-virtuous individuals; similarly, certain external goods like abundant food are good only for those who have health, and so on. In general, the goods of the soul are "the most properly and truly goods" (1198^{b}14–15), and possessing goods of the soul (and concretely, virtue) has priority over the other goods. Even health, which is the most basic good of the body, is guaranteed to be good only for the good person.

These relations of dependency also apply to the different sorts of evils. This point is clear in the case of good or bad bodily conditions, since these often determine the ways in which agents are affected by external goods and evils. For example, health and strength can enable people to thrive even in hostile environments, while sickness and weakness often impede thriving even in favorable situations. Similarly,

conditions of the soul determine the degree to which agents can enjoy the rest of goods or be negatively affected by evils. Virtue typically shields people against all kinds of evils, while vice is often an obstacle to gaining benefits from any goods. In general, evils of the soul (bad character traits) are the clearest obstacles to virtue and, consequently, to the good life; for this reason, they are potentially much more harmful than evils of the body and external evils, and they should always be avoided first.

As we learn in *NE* VII 1, the three big categories of failures of character – vice (*kakia*), incontinence (*akrasia*), and brutishness (*thêriotês*) – are among the "things to be avoided" (*pheuktôn*) (1145^{a}16–17), and this not only because they are bad in themselves, but also because they cause things that are naturally good to turn evil for the agents. Failures of character, then, are both intrinsically and instrumentally bad.

7.2.1 The Intrinsic Badness of Moral Evils

Moral evils are *intrinsically bad* in that they directly contribute to the agent's misery by producing internal conflict, self-hatred, and psychological pain, especially regret (*metameleia*).[4] At *NE* IX 4 1166^{b}6–25, Aristotle claims that people with bad character "are at odds with themselves" (*diapherontai gar heautois*) and for this reason can even be self-destructive:

> These [attributes of self-love] hardly belong even to bad people (*phauloi*); for they are at odds with themselves, and have appetites for some things and wishes for others. This is true, for instance, of incontinent people (*akrateis*); for they choose, instead of the things they think good for themselves (*heautois agathôn*), things that are pleasant but harmful; while others again, through cowardice and laziness, shrink from doing what they think best for themselves (*beltista heautois*). And those who have done many terrible deeds and are hated for their wickedness even shrink from life and destroy themselves (*anairousin heautous*). (*NE* IX 4 1166^{b}6–13)

Bad people are internally divided and frequently suffer psychological struggles. Their souls, Aristotle explains, are "in a state of faction" (*stasiazei*) (1166^{b}19), where different parts pull in different directions. Concretely, what they aim at with their non-rational appetites is different and often in conflict with what they rationally desire or wish. As a consequence, they are often pained about the fact that in the past they were pleased by something bad and now are full of regrets (1166^{b}24–25). For this reason, Aristotle adds,

[4] See Grönroos 2015 for a recent discussion of why Aristotle's vicious person is miserable, and Muller 2015 for a detailed defense of the claim that for Aristotle the vicious person is internally conflicted.

the bad person is not a friend of himself or lovable in any way. Given these internal divisions and tensions, the bad person "is highly miserable" (*lian estin athlion*). In sum, bad character makes people self-loathing, friendless, and miserable, and therefore, "we should strain every nerve to avoid badness" (*pheukteon tên mochthêrian diatetamenôs*) (*NE* IX 4 1166^{b}25–29).

7.2.2 The Instrumental Badness of Moral Evils

In addition to being bad in themselves, moral evils are also *instrumentally bad*, since they make things that are generally good turn out to be bad for the agent. This is the flip side of the conditionality thesis: failures of character have the power of converting things that are naturally good or neutral into harms, given that bad people typically make bad use of the goods of fortune. *Eudemian Ethics* VIII 3 is the *locus classicus* for this view that the so-called goods of fortune, which Aristotle here calls "natural goods" (*ta phusei agatha*), are not good for everyone:

> *A good person, then, is one for whom the natural goods are good*. For the goods people fight for and think the greatest – honour, wealth, bodily excellences, good fortune, and power – are naturally good (*agatha men phusei*), but may be harmful (*blabera*) for some people (*tisi*) because of their dispositions (*dia tas hexeis*). For neither the foolish (*aphrôn*) nor the unjust (*adikon*) nor the intemperate (*akolastos*) would get any good from the employment of them, any more than a sick person (*kamnôn*) from the food of a healthy person, and a weak or disabled person (*ho asthenês kai anapêros*) from the equipment of someone healthy and sound in all limbs. (*EE* VIII 3 1248^{b}26–34)

The foolish, the unjust, and the intemperate – in general, bad people – do not make good use of external goods, and therefore things that are naturally good, or generally good, are often harmful for those with the wrong dispositions of character or intellect. Whether something is good or bad for someone, then, depends on the moral, intellectual, or physical condition of that person.[5] Abundant food is not good for the glutton, abundant wealth is not good for the prodigal person, abundant confidence is not good for those without practical insight, and so on. On the contrary, those things are typically harmful for these people. Similarly, sick people take no benefit from the kind of nutrition that is beneficial for a healthy person,

[5] The inclusion of the foolish person (*aphrôn*) in this passage indicates that the relevant failures on the side of the agent are not just failures of character but also intellectual – in particular, lack of *phronêsis*. For a detailed discussion of the non-virtuous intellectual states and of the vice of *aphrosunê*, see Kontos 2014.

and the tools or equipment of healthy and strong individuals might be of no use to those who are weak or disabled.

*7.2.3 Goods Absolutely (*haplôs*) v. Goods for Someone (*tini*)*

The relevant distinction here is between what is "*naturally*" (*phusei*) or "*absolutely*" (*haplôs*) good or bad, and what is good or bad *for* an individual (*tini*) or for some people (*tisi*). The good person is the only one for whom the external goods, which are absolutely good, are also reliably good and beneficial; for the others, it is not always true that what is *naturally* good is also good *for them*. This point is made explicit in *NE* V 1, where Aristotle explains the relationship of the unjust person to the goods and evils of fortune:

> Since the unjust person is grasping, he must be concerned with goods – not all goods, but those with which prosperity (*eutuchia*) and adversity (*atuchia*) have to do, which taken absolutely (*haplôs*) are always good, but for a particular person (*tini*) are not always good. (People pray for and pursue the same things; but they should not, but should pray that the things that are good absolutely may also be good *for them* (*autois*), and should choose the things that are good for them.) The unjust person does not always choose the greater, but also the less – in the case of things bad absolutely (*haplôs kakôn*); but because the lesser evil is itself thought to be in a sense good, and graspingness is directed at the good, therefore he is thought to be grasping. (*NE* V 1 $1129^{b}1$–10)

Unjust people, who fail to properly apply this distinction between *goods in absolute terms* and *goods for someone in particular* will pursue the so-called goods of fortune in absolute terms and will try to avoid the corresponding evils, even though doing so will not always be good for them or for people with bad character in general. On the contrary, because of their bad character, unjust people will pursue and use the goods of fortune in ways that reinforce their defective dispositions, and consequently, these goods will turn out to be bad for them insofar as they will further their vice and thereby increase their misery.

In contrast, just people (and virtuous people in general) are able to properly enjoy natural goods, since in their case what is good absolutely is also good *for* them. While these two senses of "good" come apart for many people, virtue makes them "be in harmony" (*sumphônêsai*) with one another (*EE* VII 2 $1236^{b}32$–$1237^{b}3$). This is, as Aristotle claims in our passage from *NE* V 1 above, the kind of harmony that we all should pray for, since otherwise we may be shooting in the dark and trying to acquire things that are not really good for us.

7.3 Choosing Well Between the Shameful, the Harmful, and the Painful

In what sense are the goods *haplôs* also good *for* the virtuous agent? In other words, how does virtue equip people with the capacity to benefit from natural goods? And what enables virtuous people to be right about good and evil? Aristotle's view is that virtuous people are the only ones who properly understand the hierarchy and relations of dependency between the different kinds of goods and evils mentioned above, and thus are the only ones able to correctly grasp the place of goods and evils of fortune in their lives. Moreover, good people tend to be right and have a clear view of the complex relation between the different objects of choice and avoidance. In *NE* II 3, Aristotle provides a distinction between three objects of "choice" (*hairesis*) and three of "avoidance" (*phugê*) that is crucial to establishing what the virtuous person gets right:

> There are three objects of choice and three of avoidance, the noble, the advantageous, and the pleasant (*kalou sumpherontos hêdeos*), and their contraries, the shameful, the harmful, and the painful (*aischrou blaberou lupêrou*). About all of these the good person tends to go right and the bad person to err, and especially about pleasure; for this is common to the animals, and also it accompanies all objects of choice; for even the noble and the advantageous appear pleasant. (*NE* II 3 $1104^{b}30$–$1105^{a}1$)

In this framework, the main difference between virtuous and non-virtuous people is that virtuous people can properly sort out the relationships between these three categories of value and appreciate a certain harmony between them. Non-virtuous people, in contrast, often perceive conflict between these values and tend to misjudge their relative worth. Only virtuous people properly grasp, then, the hierarchical relationships between the noble, the advantageous, and the pleasant, as well as between the shameful, the harmful and the painful, and only they are able to organize their preferences accordingly.

This ability to understand and properly apply in practice the hierarchy of objects of choice and avoidance is at least part of what Aristotle is referring to in *NE* III 4, where he explains how the good person has a different conception and perception of the good – and we might add, of evil – than the rest, and asserts that only the good person sees the truth in relation to the noble and the pleasant:

> Each state of character has its own set of things that are noble and pleasant, and perhaps the good person differs from others most by seeing the truth in

> each class of things, being as it were the norm and measure of them. In most things the error seems to be due to pleasure; for it appears a good when it is not. We therefore choose the pleasant as a good, and avoid pain as an evil. (*NE* III 4 $1113^{a}31$-$^{b}2$)

The core of virtuous people's practical knowledge and what makes them reliably good users of natural goods is that they are aware of the relative value of the different kinds of goods and evils – e.g., that the goods of the soul are always preferable over the goods of the body or external goods, that enduring the painful or even the harmful is in general preferable to doing something shameful, and so on. Moreover, virtuous people are able to experience the characteristic pleasures and benefits of nobility in ways that both compensate for the occasional pains and losses required by virtuous action and counterbalance the effects of misfortunes. As we will see in Section 7.4, this ability is the main reason why virtuous people are better prepared to endure many evils of fortune.

In contrast, those with a defective character tend to get things wrong regarding the relationship between the three main objects of choice and the three main objects of avoidance, since they are unable to correctly assess what is truly beneficial and what is harmful for them, and since they have a strong preference for pleasure (or avoiding pain) and gain (or avoiding loss) over the noble (or avoiding the shameful). As a consequence, they often choose things that are bad for them in two senses: their choices contribute to increasing the internal struggles in their souls, since they focus on their own (often conflicting) appreciation of the pleasures or benefits that result from their actions; and insofar as they fail to pay sufficient attention to the nobility or shamefulness of their actions, their choices fail to promote their own virtuous activity and tend instead to reinforce their character failures.

7.4 Evils of Fortune and Virtue: The Limits of the Sufficiency Thesis

While it is well known that Aristotle considers the goods of fortune as important for a good life, the role of evils of fortune is less familiar. Are these evils obstacles to virtue and our well-being? To what extent can their presence ruin the good person's happiness? In the debate about the role of external goods in human well-being we find two main camps: the defenders of the *instrumental* character of the goods of fortune for virtue, and consequently for happiness, who attribute to Aristotle the sufficiency thesis; and the defenders of the claim that the goods of fortune are, together

with virtue, *constitutive* elements of happiness, who hold that virtue is not sufficient for happiness, since external goods are independently needed for the good life.[6] What the discussion of the evils of fortune adds is a confirmation that Aristotle has mixed feelings in relation to the sufficiency thesis; while he mostly embraces it, he also acknowledges some clear exceptions to it.

Aristotle holds that virtue not only enables using the goods of fortune to promote one's *eudaimonia*, but also has the power to mitigate the harms of the evils of fortune; in fact, it can even transform evils into goods by taking them as opportunities to exercise the agent's goodness. It is a sign of good character to be able to deal well with evils of fortune – i.e., the good person will handle misfortunes gracefully and sometimes even in ways that enhance their virtue and their experience of life. The virtuous and happy person, the person able to build a good life and to provide it with stability, is capable of handling everyday misfortunes and of harmonizing them within a happy existence. However, evils of fortune can sometimes present serious obstacles to the good life, even for virtuous people.

Of course, the size, number, and intensity of the misfortunes is relevant to assess their potential positive or negative effect on a person's life. Throughout the ethical treatises Aristotle offers several lists of what here I call "evils of fortune," which typically include evils of the body and external evils of all sizes, degrees of intensity, and degrees of influence on our lives. The evils of fortune encompass both small-scale or ordinary evils (such as sickness, weakness, disability, poverty, and ugliness) and large-scale misfortunes (such as those of Priam, the prosperous king of Troy whose kingdom and family were destroyed when he was an old man).

While the good person will be able to handle small-scale misfortunes with ease, either as good challenges or as manageable inconveniences, she will not so easily be able to withstand large-scale misfortunes. In cases where the evils are many or of grand proportions, Aristotle agrees that they unavoidably affect the lives of any agent in a negative way, including the lives of good people. This, he thinks, is undeniable, unless one is stubbornly committed to a thesis:

[6] The most prominent defender of the view that external goods are instrumental for virtue is Kraut 1989, while Irwin 1985, Cooper 1985, and Nussbaum 1993 defend the claim that external goods are constitutive components of happiness. For a thoughtful treatment of this debate, see Cashen 2012 (esp. 4–8). Both Cashen 2012 and Heinaman 1993 (at 35) distinguish between (a) external goods that are instrumental for the exercise of virtue and (b) non-instrumental external goods.

> For it seems possible to have virtue while being asleep, or inactive through one's whole life, and moreover, while suffering the greatest evils and misfortunes (*kakopathein kai atuchein ta megista*); and no one would call happy a person who was living this way, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs. (*NE* I 5 $1095^{b}32$–$1096^{a}2$)

Similarly, in the discussion of pleasure in *NE* VII 13, Aristotle declares that those who claim that moral goodness is the only requirement for happiness in all circumstances are talking nonsense, since "great misfortunes" (*dustuchiais megalais*) necessarily have a negative impact on good people's lives:

> Those who say that the victim on the rack or the person who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense. (*NE* VII 13 $1153^{b}19$–21)

Contrary to Socrates, who claims that *virtue is sufficient for happiness* and that "a good person cannot be harmed" (*Apology* 41d),[7] in these passages Aristotle calls into question this *sufficiency thesis* and presents clear exceptions. In particular, virtue appears to be insufficient for happiness in those cases in which the agent "suffers the greatest evils and misfortunes" or "falls into great misfortunes." Some evils are so excessive that they can significantly affect anyone's lives, including the lives of virtuous agents.

Indeed, although evils of fortune are sometimes instrumentally good and present opportunities for the exercise of virtue, they can also impede the good life. Just as goods of fortune are instrumentally good (in order to exercise virtue) and good in themselves (as potential constituents of a person's happiness), so, too, evils of fortune are instrumentally bad (on account of providing obstacles to the exercise of virtue) and bad in themselves (on account of directly decreasing a person's happiness).

In *NE* I 8, for example, we find the claim that some external goods (such as friends, wealth, and political power) are necessary instruments to reliably do noble actions, and others (such as good birth, good children, and beauty) seem also to be direct contributors to our happiness:

> Yet evidently, as we said, [happiness] needs the external goods (*tôn ektos agathôn*) as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble actions without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from blessedness, as good birth, satisfactory children, beauty. For the person who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born

[7] Other formulations of the sufficiency thesis in Plato are *Republic* I, 353e10–11 and *Gorgias* 470e. For classic discussions of the sufficiency thesis in Plato, see Vlastos 1985 and Rudebush 1999.

> or solitary and childless is hardly happy. And perhaps someone would be still less so if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with virtue. (*NE* I 8 $1099^{a}31$–$^{b}8$)[8]

Evils of fortune can affect our lives indirectly, by hindering virtuous activity and thereby either obstructing the exercise of an agent's virtuous dispositions or impeding the acquisition of virtue; and also absolutely, by producing pain or loss, even destruction, in the lives of people in such a way that they are immediately worse off, independently of questions about their character.[9] External evils like ugliness, lack of good birth, lack of friends, lack of children, bad children, bad friends, and loss of loved ones are particularly damaging and capable of tarnishing or even ruining happiness, including the happiness of agents with a good character.

Part of the reason why evils of fortune are intrinsically bad is that they cause pain and losses for the agent. This point is supported by the discussions of pity and fear, two emotions that are directed at evils or apparent evils that are generally destructive or painful.[10] For example, in *Rhetoric* II 8 Aristotle offers the following list of objects of pity:

> All unpleasant and painful things that are *destructive* (*phthartika*) excite pity, and all that are *ruinous* (*anairetika*); and all *evils of which fortune is the cause* (*hosôn hê tuchê aitia kakôn*). The painful and destructive evils are: death in its various forms (*thanatoi*), bodily injuries and afflictions, old age (*gêras*), diseases (*nosoi*), lack of food. The evils due to fortune are: friendlessness (*aphilia*), scarcity of friends (it is a pitiful thing to be torn away from friends and companions), ugliness (*aischos*), weakness (*astheneia*), mutilation (*anapêria*); and evil coming from a source from which good ought to

[8] Cf. *Rh.* I 5 $1360^{b}19$–31, where goods of fortune are included among the things that contribute to *eudaimonia* as its "parts" (*merê*), and not just instrumentally. In this list the main "external goods" (*ta ektos agatha*) are "good birth, plenty of friends, good friends, wealth, good children, plenty of children, a happy old age," to which Aristotle adds "honor." In addition, he offers a list of "bodily goods" (*ta en sômati*) as "health, beauty, strength, large stature, athletic powers," the absence of which will make one's life lacking. All these examples are considered here as things that are good in themselves and not as merely instrumentally good, while their absence is not only bad because it would impede virtuous action, but also because it can directly make life worse.

[9] See Cashen 2012 for an interesting discussion of the potential bad effects of evils of fortune in the good life. His view, which I find persuasive, is that these evils present two kinds of obstacles: on the one hand, external evils are instrumentally bad, since they obstruct the exercise of virtue; and on the other, external evils are bad in themselves insofar they produce pain and loss, which are two of the categories of bad.

[10] See the definition of pity at *Rh.* II 8 $1385^{b}13$–16, and of fear at *Rh.* II 5 $1382^{a}21$–22.

> have come; and the frequent repetition of such misfortunes. Also the coming of good after someone has suffered [something bad]. (*Rh.* II 8 1386ª5–15)

All the items mentioned in this list, which mostly overlaps with the list of evils of fortune from *NE* I 8, are seen as deserving of pity because they are taken to be extremely painful or harmful to those who suffer them. Likewise, in *NE* III 6 1115ª10–12, we find a list of fearful things that are evil absolutely (*haplôs*), including disgrace (*adoxian*), poverty (*penian*), disease (*noson*), friendlessness (*aphilian*), and death (*thanaton*). Aristotle explains at *Rh.* II 5 1382ª24 that these things produce fear because they can produce "great pains or destructions."

The *instrumental goodness* or *badness* of evils of fortune, and concretely, the positive or negative impact that they might have in a good person's life by promoting or impeding virtuous activity, becomes most apparent in the discussions of mixed actions and extreme situations. Sometimes evils present opportunities to exercise virtue, such as when agents are able to endure pains and losses while choosing the noble and avoiding the shameful. However, bad fortune often forces good people to choose actions that are in tension with what they would do if their fortune were more favorable (such as in the case of mixed actions),[11] and on other occasions the possibility of exercising virtue is truncated by evils like incapacitating sickness, imprisonment, or death. This is so because, for Aristotle, decisions are always relative to the situation. As a result, we choose things that are not what we would choose in general but are nonetheless adequate responses under the circumstances on account of fear of greater evils (*dia phobon meizonôn kakôn*) or the desire to achieve something noble (*NE* III 1 1110 a 4–5). "For example, if a tyrant were to order one to do something shameful, having one's parents and children in his power, and if one did the action they were to be saved, but otherwise would be put to death" (*NE* III 1 1110ª5–7).

In the examples of mixed actions, Aristotle repeatedly uses the verb "to endure" (*hupomenô*) to refer to the relation of good agents to the shame, loss, or pain that they might occasionally suffer under pressure. Although Aristotle insists that the agents are in these cases the ultimate source of movement, he places some distance between them and their painful or shameful actions by talking about "enduring": "For such actions people are sometimes even praised, when they endure (*hupomenôsin*) something shameful or painful in return for great and noble objects gained" (*NE* III 1 1110ª19–22). It is acceptable, then, to endure a loss, something painful,

[11] For a discussion of mixed actions that takes into consideration similar issues, see Nielsen 2007.

and even something shameful, if the goal is something noble that outweighs the loss, pain, or shame. However, it is not acceptable if there is no noble goal in sight: "in the opposite case they are blamed, since to endure (*hupomeinai*) the greatest indignities for no noble end or for a trifling end is the mark of an inferior person" (1110ª22–23).

Concretely, there is a limit to how much shamefulness an agent can endure to avoid other evils. The example that Aristotle gives is Euripides' Alcmaeon,[12] who killed his mother to escape his father's curse. In cases like this, Aristotle claims, "we cannot be forced to act, but we ought to face death rather than suffering such terrible things" (*NE* III 1 1110ª26–27). In some cases, death is preferable, even if it might seem to be more destructive, since it is better to die than to continue living and engage in horrible and shameful actions. Neither of these options, however, is conducive to happiness.

7.5 The Silver Lining of Manageable Misfortunes

Virtue, then, is, not sufficient for happiness. However, Aristotle does not fully reject the spirit of the sufficiency thesis. He admits that virtue not only enables agents to enjoy the goodness of good things, it also equips them to properly *endure* evil when they encounter it. Virtuous people will have high stability in relation to fortune, since virtue enables them to endure misfortunes with nobility and elegance:

> The attribute in question [stability], then, will belong to the happy person (*eudaimoni*), and he will be happy throughout his life; for always, or by preference to everything else, he will do and contemplate what is virtuous, and he will endure (*oisei*) the turns of fortune (*tas tuchas*) most nobly (*kallista*) and altogether gracefully (*emmelôs*), if he is "truly good" and "foursquare beyond reproach." (*NE* I 10 1100ᵇ18–22)

Moreover, some external evils work well as tests of our character and, in the best of cases, allow virtue to shine:

> Now many events happen by chance and differ in greatness and smallness; small pieces of good fortune (*ta men mikra tôn eutuchêmatôn*) or of its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other, but a multitude of great events (*ta de megala kai polla*) if they turn out well will make life more blessed (*makariôteron*) (for not only are they themselves

[12] *Alcmaeon* is a lost play of Euripides in which Alcmaeon killed his mother Eriphyle to escape the curse of his father Amphiaraos. Aristotle quotes Alcmaeon in *NE* V 9 1136ª13: "I slew my mother; that is my tale in brief."

> such as to add beauty to life, but the way someone deals with them may be noble and good), while if they turn out ill they crush and maim blessedness (*thlibei kai lumainetai to makarion*). For they both bring pain with them and hinder (*empodisei*) many activities. Yet even in these nobility shines through (*dialampei to kalon*), whenever someone endures (*pherêi*) with ease (*eukolôs*) many great misfortunes (*atuchias*), not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul. (*NE* I 10 1100^{b}22–33)

When turns of fortune are handled properly, then, they will "make life more blessed." Aristotle says that "nobility shines through" when the agent "endures" the evils with elegance and ease, and even in difficult situations where the agent may not succeed at bringing about a good solution.

For this reason, Aristotle claims that we ought not to fear some of the so-called evils, which instead should be endured with dignity, insofar as they are not due to vice or to any failure of the agent's character. For example, in *NE* III 6, he suggests this point about poverty and sickness: "Poverty and sickness we perhaps ought not to fear, nor in general the things that do not proceed from vice and are not due to the person" (*NE* III 6 1115^{a}17–18). Virtue gives us resources to deal with and be unafraid of these natural evils. And although the presence of poverty and sickness are often obstacles to the regular exercise of an agent's virtue, they might lead the agent to find new ways of doing things and maintain their virtue with less external resources.

One of the reasons why external misfortunes are manageable for virtuous people and do not ruin their happiness is that, although happiness requires the presence of external goods, it does not require many things or great things:

> We must not think that a person will need many things or great things to be happy, merely because he cannot be blessed without external goods; for self-sufficiency and action do not lie in excess, and we can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea; for even with moderate advantages one can act in accordance with virtue (this is manifest enough; for private people are thought to do worthy acts no less than rulers – indeed even more). And it is enough that we should have so much as that; for the life of the person who is active in accordance with virtue will be happy. (*NE* X 9 1179^{a}1–9)

Although the presence of certain external goods and the absence of misfortunes are necessary conditions for happiness, this requirement does not involve an excessive presence of external goods or an absolute absence of external evils. Here Aristotle agrees with Solon and Anaxagoras that happiness requires only a moderate amount of external goods – and, we could add, happiness can tolerate a moderate amount of external evils – as the exercise of virtue does not require many material resources. It follows,

then, that even in scarcity the good person will be able to act virtuously and be happy.

One of the collateral advantages of ordinary, manageable misfortunes is that they offer a privileged perspective of our moral character by testing how we behave in difficult circumstances. These tests are familiar, for example, in the context of friendship, where time and hardships reveal who are real friends and who are not:

> Time is said to show the friend, and also do misfortunes (*atuchiai*) rather than moments of good fortune. For then it is clear that the goods of friends are common (for friends alone instead of things naturally good and evil – which are the matters with which good and bad fortune are concerned – choose a person rather than the existence of some of those things and the non-existence of others). But misfortune (*atuchia*) shows those who are not really friends, but friends only for some utility. (*EE* VII 2 1138^{a}14–20)

True friends are not easy to distinguish from false friends, and misfortunes offer a golden opportunity to test our friends.[13] Misfortunes present here for Aristotle, then, an epistemic advantage, since they allow us to test something like virtue or love, which is normally hidden and difficult to confirm.

Similarly, war, with all its horrors, offers another good opportunity for knowledge of others, self-knowledge, and character formation, since the context of war is one in which we can see people's true colors and even our own. As Aristotle reveals in the discussion of courage, it is precisely in the face of the greatest evils that people are called upon to show their true character. (This is not to encourage doing courageous actions regardless of the cost, or not fearing the evils of battle at all. In fact, it would be absurd not to fear some evils, given that they are terrifying for anyone who has use of reason.)

7.6 Priam's Problem and the Puzzle of Noble Death

As shown in Section 7.4, Aristotle seems to think that certain evils of fortune have the power to tarnish happiness even in those who are "truly good and wise." He uses Priam as paradigmatic example of the effects of large-scale misfortunes in the life of a decent person. His general view is that if the agents are good and "endure" (*pherein*) the evils of fortune "elegantly"

[13] Aristotle raises this point also at *EE* VII 1 1235^{b}6–9: "Further, some think it easy to acquire a friend, others a very rare thing to recognize one, and impossible without misfortune (*aneu atuchias*); for all wish to seem friends to the prosperous."

(*euschêmonôs*), they will not become miserable. However, great and numerous misfortunes, such as those experienced by Priam, unavoidably affect any agents' happiness and their relationships with others in a way that will be difficult to reverse, and they are a clear obstacle for a blessed life. The relevant passage merits quoting at length:

> If activities are, as we said, what determines [the character of] life, no blessed person (*makariôn*) can become miserable (*athlios*); for he will never do the actions that are hateful and evil (*phaula*). For the person who is truly good and wise, we think, endures (*pherein*) all the chances of life elegantly (*euschêmonôs*) and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command and a shoemaker makes the best shoes out of the hides that are given him; and so with all other craftsmen. And if this is the case, the happy person (*eudaimôn*) can never become miserable (*athlios*) – though he will not reach blessedness (*makarios*), if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam.
>
> Nor, again, is [the happy person] many-coloured and changeable; for neither will he be moved from his happy state easily or by any ordinary misfortunes, but only by many great ones (*megalôn kai pollôn*), nor, if he has had many great misadventures, will he recover his happiness in a short time, but if at all, only in a long and complete one in which he has attained many splendid successes. (*NE* I 10 1100^{b}33–1101^{a}13)

This vulnerability of the virtuous person is due, I think, to the fact that the harmful or painful character of evils of fortune sometimes runs independent from moral considerations. While it is often in the hands of virtuous agents to choose the noble as good and to avoid the shameful as bad, all while downplaying considerations about pleasure, gain, pain, and loss, sometimes people are forced to deal with situations involving pains and losses that have no direct connection to virtuous agency. One of the reasons why Priam is a good illustration of this point is that his misfortunes occurred when he was already old and unable to actively respond to them. He could exercise his agency only insofar as he was actively enduring his misfortunes; however, given his situation, he simply was on the receiving end of a chain of destructive events and could not do anything to stop it.

At *NE* III 6 1115^{a}35–^{b}6, Aristotle uses a more mundane example that also illustrates well his point that sometimes people can suffer evils in situations that leave no room for virtuous action: the case of a courageous person dealing with a destructive storm at sea or with a mortal disease. Aristotle maintains that both illness and natural disasters are situations in which a courageous

person cannot exercise courage, as courage is shown "in situations where there is the opportunity of showing strength or where death is noble" but "cases of destruction" (*phthorais*) due to sickness or storm do not provide opportunities for virtue and nobility. There is nothing noble for the virtuous person to choose while enduring the pains and destructions of terminal sickness or natural disaster; the virtuous person here simply suffers the effects of events that are beyond his control. In these cases virtue or noble activity cannot counterbalance the pain or loss caused by misfortunes, and these will thereby unavoidably tarnish the sufferer's blessedness.

Many great misfortunes, and particularly those that result in premature death or a big loss, typically involve a similar kind of helplessness of the agent, and can have as a consequence a negative effect on the happiness of virtuous people. There is, however, one example of a clearly destructive phenomenon that is nonetheless not truly damaging for the virtuous person but instead an opportunity for the exercise of virtue: noble death in battle.

Although Aristotle does not explicitly classify death as an evil, he does include it with other evils on the list of "the frightening things" (*ta phobera*), and claims that death is "the most frightening of all" (*phoberôtaton*), since "nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead" (*NE* III 6 1115^{a}26–27).[14] In this regard, he claims at *NE* III 7 (and again at *NE* IX 4 1166^{a}10–29), that death is most painful and destructive for good people, since their lives are most pleasant and valuable:

> And the more he is possessed of virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death; for life is best worth living for such a person, and he is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful. (*NE* III 7 1117^{b}9–13)

Why, then, is this "noble death" (*ton kalon thanaton*) on the battlefield to be chosen, despite the fact that it is a terrible thing? For Aristotle, the greatest opportunity for displaying prowess, and thus the context in which death is noblest, is war. For the warrior "the danger [of death] is not only greatest but most noble" (*NE* III 6 1115^{a}30–32). For this reason, this kind of death is not merely an evil that good people simply endure but is rather an extraordinary opportunity to exercise virtue:

[14] Here Aristotle uses the same premise as Epicurus in his famous argument against the fear of death (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 125), but his argument leads to the opposite conclusion. His broader view is what is often called a "deprivation account" of the badness of death, i.e., death is bad because it deprives us from life, which is something good.

> Death and wounds will be painful to the courageous person and against his will, but he will endure (*hupomenei*) them because it is noble to do so or because it is shameful not to do so. (*NE* III 7 1117^{b}7–9)

While Aristotle rejects suicide to avoid mere pains or losses, and while, in general, choosing death is not an acceptable response against the pressure of external evils like poverty, passions, or pains (*NE* III 7 1116^{a}10–15), death is the right choice when the alternative is doing the kinds of shameful things that significantly affect one's character.

For example, Aristotle claims that citizen soldiers are superior to professional soldiers on the grounds that the former prefer dying over fleeing because death is noble while fleeing is shameful, whereas the latter prefer doing something shameful instead of risking their lives in battle:

> Professional soldiers turn cowards, however, when the danger puts too great a strain on them and they are inferior in numbers and equipment; for they are the first to fly, while citizen-forces die at their posts, as in fact happened at the temple of Hermes. For to the latter flight is shameful and death is preferable (*hairetôteros*) to preserving their lives on those terms; in contrast, the former from the very beginning faced the danger on the assumption that they were stronger, and when they know the facts they flee, fearing death more than the shameful (*ton thanaton mallon tou aischrou phoboumenoi*); but the courageous person is not like that. (*NE* III 8 1116^{b}15–23)

Since sacrificing one's life for a noble goal is virtuous, this kind of action is always a contribution to the agent's happiness, even when it results in premature death. Aristotle gives the most explicit explanation of this phenomenon in *NE* IX 8 1169^{a}18–26, where he characterizes the virtuous person as someone who "will throw away both wealth and honours and in general the goods that are objects of competition, gaining for himself the noble." Moreover, the virtuous person chooses to die for others (including his friends and his country) because "he would prefer a short period of intense pleasure to a long one of mild enjoyment, a twelvemonth of noble life to many years of humdrum existence, and one great and noble action to many trivial ones." In general, Aristotle concludes, those who die for others are making a radical choice to get the noble for themselves.

Good people, then, are sometimes able to transform even death, the most terrible of things, into an opportunity to exercise virtue and achieve nobility. In general, they can transform evils of fortune, even

great ones, into goods that contribute to their own happiness. This is because they properly grasp the hierarchy between the shameful, the harmful, and the painful, and they are able to choose correctly even in difficult cases. This is why, given the complex relations of dependency between the different kinds of evils, Aristotle's verdict is that acquiring the virtues of character, i.e., stable dispositions to choose the noble and avoid the shameful on every occasion, is the best strategy to avoid letting misfortunes ruin our lives.