COLLOQUIUM 3

HAPPINESS AND AGENCY
IN THE STOICS AND ARISTOTLE

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ABSTRACT
Is virtue sufficient for happiness? That question has had two different histories. Cicero writes that the defining question in ethics since Aristotle was what happiness consists in. In contemporary debate, by contrast, the sufficiency question is usually taken to have been settled by Aristotle. The second history makes the first unintelligible. I argue that the first history has it right, because the Stoic case for sufficiency was stronger than the Aristotelian case against it. The Stoic case rested on two theses: (1) that happiness consists in activity, and (2) that the attachments within which we act are not constituents of those activities. Thesis 1 rests on deep eudaimonist commitments about goodness, I argue, so an attack on the sufficiency thesis should offer an alternative to 2. I sketch such an alternative, and show how the resulting view of the self alters the modern view of the debate.

The defining question for every ancient school of ethical thought concerned the nature of the greatest good in life, and in particular whether virtue is sufficient for happiness or not. So Cicero tells us, who says that “Whoever disagrees about the highest good, disagrees about the entire philosophical system,” and that once we determine that good, we shall have found out how to live and how we ought to act, and therefore the standard to which we should refer. From that point, we can do what every-one wants to do—discover and construct a plan for living happy lives. (Cicero, de Finibus V 14, 15)

And so throughout the entire Hellenistic period, a central point of debate was whether virtue suffices for happiness, Stoics arguing that it does and Aristotelians that it does not. Yet the question whether virtue is sufficient

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1 It is also worth noting that while the views of many of the key figures in the Hellenistic debate have come down to us as little more than sound-bites, nonetheless those sound-bites all represent distinctive moves on the question of the highest good that are designed to fortify the position of one’s philosophical school in the sufficiency debate. On this latter point, see e.g., White 2002, White 2004, and Annas 1990, esp. 85.

2 The locus classicus of Aristotle’s own denial of the sufficiency thesis is Nicomachean Ethics (= EN ) I 8-10. It is worth pointing out at the beginning that the virtues in question in the sufficiency debate are the familiar practical virtues of character, such as courage and justice. Consequently, even if there are “virtues” of some other sort, such as the purely contem-
for happiness is little more than a footnote for modern virtue theories, largely because most philosophers and scholars agree that there is little left to be said about it. To be sure, there is still important scholarly work to be done in tallying and commenting on the various moves made by Stoics and Aristotelians in the ancient sufficiency debate, but there is widespread consensus that the sufficiency debate, as a pressing philosophical debate, ended in the ancient world. It is that picture of the sufficiency debate that I want to reject here, and if I am correct, then the sufficiency debate must still be open. That would change our understanding of the ancient debate. But it would also mean that the modern eudaimonist must argue afresh for his or her position on the sufficiency question.

In particular, I want to reject two reasons commonly given for thinking that the sufficiency debate is over. One of them is this: *Aristotelians fought a winning battle, and Stoics a losing battle, over sufficiency*. The Stoics, at least on the majority view, defended the thesis that virtue is sufficient for happiness primarily as a way of shoring up the comforting thought that no good person can be harmed. For instance, Martha Nussbaum argues that for the Stoics, all goods but virtue are held

to be, strictly speaking, worthless, on the grounds that they can . . . be cut off or impeded by accidents beyond our control. But the wise man must be self-sufficient; his life is always *eudaimon*, no matter what happens (*TD* 5.83). (Nussbaum 1994, 363)³

In other words, the Stoics start from the sufficiency thesis, and construct a theory of emotion and value to suit.⁴ But in that case, the Stoics fight a losing battle, because the price of securing a philosophical guarantee of invulnerability is (as Nussbaum argues) failure to make any real and deep attachments with persons and projects in the world. We are therefore better off holding to the clearly more intuitively plausible view of Aristotle and his followers; this is a battle that the Stoics cannot win. Note that the

³ Nussbaum reads the Stoics as arguing from the sufficiency of virtue for happiness to the claim that goods of fortune therefore cannot make a difference for happiness. Nussbaum cites Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* (*TD*) V 83 in support of this view; see also Brennan 2005, 122. But that is extraordinary, since in that passage Cicero understands the Stoics as arguing in precisely the *opposite* direction, from a particular theory of goodness to the sufficiency thesis. See also Annas 1993, 394.

⁴ It is important, I think, to distinguish between the philosophical basis of the Stoic sufficiency thesis and the therapeutic implications of that thesis. While it is true that Stoic therapy starts from the sufficiency thesis, and thus works towards altering our beliefs about the good (see, e.g., Sherman 1997, 18, Cicero *TD* V 40-41), the Stoics’ philosophical grounds for the sufficiency thesis start rather from a prior theory about the nature of the good.