In Defense of an Alternative View of the Foundation of Aristotle’s Moral Theory

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1. Introduction

In the opening chapters of the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle identifies what he refers to as “the best good” or “the human good” with happiness (eudaimonia). He takes happiness to be some sort of ultimate end of human conduct, and on the basis of this idea, he proceeds to develop his moral theory. This much is uncontroversial. However, interpreters have despaired over the passages where Aristotle invokes this notion of an ultimate end. For it has been thought that in these passages Aristotle appears to ground his moral philosophy on a patently indefensible psychological generalization.1 The psychological generalization, in its strongest form, is the proposition that every person does whatever he does with the aim of promoting his own happiness. This doctrine, which we may call “Strong Psychological Eudaimonism”, is not only mistaken in its own right,2 it is also inconsistent with other views Aristotle espouses in the Ethics.3 Conse-

1 Allusions to the problem are too numerous to cite. For a perspicuous statement of the issue, see Irwin 1980, esp. pp. 35 and 47.
2 It is obvious that many people do not even possess a coherent and steady plan of life, much less a plan which calls for the achievement of some overarching aim. And as Kenny has argued, not all of those who do possess such a plan are properly described as always pursuing happiness, or even as taking happiness to be their principal concern in life (Kenny 1977, pp. 29-30). It has been objected that “happiness” is not an adequate translation of the word “eudaimonia”, and so it remains an open question as to whether everyone aims at eudaimonia in all that they do (cf. Ackrill 1974, pp. 340-349). But as I argue above (section 7), given the various features which Aristotle assigns to the generally accepted concept of eudaimonia, it is still clearly false that eudaimonia, so conceived, is the aim of all the acts everyone (or everyone with a rational plan of life) performs.
3 As some interpreters have acknowledged, Aristotle’s recognition of the fact of incontinence (or weakness of will) is in conflict with this doctrine (cf. Dahl 1984, pp. 105, 260 n.10, Kenny 1977, p. 28, and McDowell 1980, p. 360). Aristotle takes the incontinent agent (akratés) to act contrary to her decision about how, in a given case, it is
quently, some scholars have sought to advance interpretations of Aristotle according to which he is not committed to the doctrine, despite appearances to the contrary. Typically, these interpretations attempt to show that although Aristotle endorses a position which might be called “eudaimonist” in some sense of that expression, it is a position which is different from, and considerably weaker than, the doctrine of Strong Psychological Eudaimonism.

It has been suggested, for example, that Aristotle would not defend the view that literally everything anyone does is done for the sake of the agent’s happiness but would maintain only that every action (praxis), or every performance which is the result of a rational decision (proairetis), is undertaken for the sake of the agent’s happiness. I refer to this position as “Weak Psychological Eudaimonism”.4 Another view is that Aristotle’s opinion on

best to act (EN 1146b19-23; cf. 1145b10-14, 1151a5-7, 29-33, 1111b14-16). Thus if, in a given case, Roberta decides that the best act to perform is the one – assuming there is just one – which contributes to what she conceives eudaimonia to be, then, if she acts incontinently in such a case, she cannot regard her act as contributing to what she conceives eudaimonia to be. Moreover, Aristotle holds that (1) the object of wish (boulēsis) for each individual is that which appears good to that individual (Top. 146b36-147a5, Metaph. 1013b27-28, EN 1113a24, Rh. 1363b17-18), (2) virtually everyone believes that eudaimonia is the best good (EN 1095a18-20), and (3) one may wish for what is impossible or not in one’s power to achieve (though one cannot choose prohairesis) either of these) (EE 1225b32-37, EN 1111b21-25). Now 1-3 allow that a person might wish for what she conceives eudaimonia to be but not be in a position to do anything to promote that end. If such a person realizes she is not in a position to do anything to promote that end, then, assuming she is rational, she would not regard the actions she undertakes as making any contribution toward its realization. This is so obvious it is implausible to think that Aristotle failed to recognize it. But the recognition of this fact is not consistent with the espousal of Strong Psychological Eudaimonism. I elaborate on these points below (section 7).

4 McDowell 1980, pp. 360-364 defends this position. He does so in order to show that Aristotle’s alleged eudaimonist stance does not necessarily conflict with his (Aristotle’s) recognition of incontinence (cf. above, n.3). According to McDowell, if Aristotle does not suppose that all behavior simpliciter is undertaken for the sake of eudaimonia, but only that all behavior issuing from proairetis is so undertaken, then no contradiction arises from the claim that incontinent acts are not undertaken for the sake of the agent’s conception of eudaimonia. For these acts, McDowell argues, do not issue from proairetis (cf. Anscombe 1965, pp. 143-150 and Dahl 1984, p. 36). However, I do not see any compelling evidence for this interpretation. The relevant texts on the topic (principally in books III, VI, and VII of the EN) do not obviously imply that Aristotle would eliminate proairetis from all incontinent behavior. It may be argued that, for Aristotle, a person who deliberates about how to reach a goal she wants only incontinently may arrive at a proairetis to do those things which contribute to that goal (cf. EN 1142b18-20). The proairetis she fails to act on in such a case is just the one she knows she should act on (cf.