Rationality, Eudaimonia and Kakodaimonia in Aristotle*

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“For while it is clearly best for any being to attain the end, yet, if that cannot be, the nearer it is to the best the better for it.” – Aristotle, De Caelo 292b17-19

“Always for each person that is most worthy of choice which is the highest he can achieve.” – Aristotle, Politics 1333a29-30

“For eudaimonia does not consist in relief from evil, it seems, but in not possessing evil to begin with.” – Plato, Gorgias 478c

No student of Aristotle’s ethics can fail to realize the central part played in it by the concept of eudaimonia. Specification of the content of eudaimonia is the fundamental issue for Aristotle’s ethical theory and his answer affects most other topics addressed in the ethical works. But I believe that the imposition of an excessively teleological framework on Aristotle’s views has resulted in commentators inflating the role of eudaimonia beyond anything ever intended by Aristotle himself. This extremely common view, based in large part on Nicomachean Ethics Book I, is often expressed by saying that Aristotle is a “eudaimonist”: somebody who believes that

1. An action is rational only if the agent does it in order to promote his eudaimonia.1

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Richard Kraut says that the eudaimonia aimed at need not be the agent’s own (Aristotle on the Human Good (Princeton, 1989), p. 145), but the present paper only

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This claim is linked with several others about value, desire, deliberation, and the explanation of action which are also commonly attributed to Aristotle. For example:

2. A desire is rational only if it is for eudaimonia or for what promotes eudaimonia.

3. A practical reason for action is rational only if it is based on the belief that the action promotes eudaimonia.

4. Practical deliberation is rational only if its immediate or ultimate aim is eudaimonia.

5. Eudaimonia is intrinsically valuable and anything else is valuable only if it promotes eudaimonia.

6. An action is morally good only if it promotes eudaimonia.

7. Everybody desires eudaimonia and desires anything else only if they believe it promotes eudaimonia.

8. Every action an agent performs is done in order to achieve eudaimonia.

9. The explanation of an action must show how the action is believed by the agent to promote eudaimonia.²

considers the egoistic version of eudaimonism. I explain below (n. 58) why I think Kraut’s alleged examples of a rational agent aiming at the eudaimonia of others while not aiming at his own highest good rest on a misunderstanding. On my interpretation Aristotle is a kind of egoist though not of the eudaimonist variety: one should always do what maximizes one’s own good. While this may be too weak to be properly called ‘egoism,’ I will not try here to pin down the precise sense in which Aristotle is an egoist.²

² In (1)-(6) ‘eudaimonia’ refers to the specific content which Aristotle gives to that concept while in (7)-(9) it refers to whatever content an agent may give to it.

Some examples of attributions of the listed theses to Aristotle:


7: J. Cooper, Reason and Human Good in Aristotle, p. 92.

8: W.D. Ross, Aristotle, p. 230.

9: R. Audi, Practical Reasoning, p. 36.

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