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Virtue and eudaimonia[1]

(This handout follows the handouts 'Aristotle on eudaimonia, function and virtue', 'Aristotle on virtue'. You should read those handouts first.)

In this handout, we discuss Aristotle's theory of the relationship between eudaimonia and virtue. Aristotle argues that the good life for human beings is eudaimonia. In developing his theory, he doesn't draw a distinction between a life that is good for me and a life that is morally good. But we do commonly draw a distinction between what is in our self-interest and what is morally required, and many people feel that the two can come into conflict. What is the relationship between my living a good life and moral virtue?

Morality can require self-sacrifice; sometimes the morally right thing to do – and so the thing that the virtuous person would do – requires me to give up something good for myself and perhaps even harm myself. For example, giving to charity is important, but how does it contribute to a good life for me? Or again, if someone lives under an unjust dictatorship, courage and justice may lead them to stand up for what is right but be imprisoned or killed as a result. It seems, then, that eudaimonia and the morally good life can come apart. If so, this is an objection to Aristotle's theory.

This objection leads to a second. Is Aristotle's account of virtue, as a trait that contributes to the individual's eudaimonia, correct? Can there be virtues that are not in our self-interest?

In her book *Virtue Ethics*, Christine Swanton provides some potential counterexamples to Aristotle's theory of virtue. A woman works as a medic in a foreign country, ceaselessly saving lives and relieving suffering, often far from civilization and under difficult circumstances. She is often ill and tired, and doesn't experience joy in her work, just the conviction that it is needed. She dies prematurely from a virus. Her life looks like a morally good life, one in which demonstrates many virtues – of kindness, compassion, generosity, perhaps justice – but not one in which she, personally, 'flourishes' or 'lives well'. Another example: A man is dedicated to preserving the environment. He works hard to publicise the dangers of our current way of life, but finds that other people simply won't listen to him. He becomes very stressed and dies, in despair, of a heart attack. His commitment to a good cause looks virtuous and he practices honesty and justice, yet he hasn't flourished.

Swanton argues that we shouldn't require virtues to contribute to the eudaimonia of the person who has them. There are other values (other 'final ends'), including

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[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 315-8

the good of others, the environment, knowledge, art, and so on. Virtues are dispositions to respond to and pursue these values in appropriate ways. Because sometimes these values call on us to sacrifice our own well-being, Aristotle is wrong to think virtues are traits that contribute to one's own eudaimonia.

In her article 'Virtue ethics', Julia Annas provides an extended response to these objections, arguing that they misunderstand the concept of eudaimonia. Our contemporary concept of 'self-interest', like 'happiness', is far too narrow. If we read Aristotle as equating eudaimonia and self-interest, then the claim that eudaimonia is our final end is a form of egoism. And philosophers have mistakenly objected that Aristotle makes ethics self-centred, all about the 'best life for me'. But in Aristotle, we don't have an account of what eudaimonia – flourishing – is for human beings before considering the virtues. We can't first specify what it would be to live 'a good life for me' and then investigate whether having virtues would enable this life or not. Aristotle's argument is that living in accordance with the virtues gives us the best account of what counts as a flourishing life. If someone else claims that eudaimonia involves getting what you want, having money and power, then they haven't agreed with Aristotle about eudaimonia but disagreed about whether the virtues are necessary – they have a different conception of eudaimonia to start with.

To aim at getting what you want without concern for the interests of others is egoism. On Aristotle's virtue-based account of what it is to flourish, aiming at eudaimonia isn't egoism. Someone who aims to live in a fair, generous, courageous, just way isn't self-centred. Having these virtues means being committed to other people's well-being, and having these commitments is part of what it is to flourish. To live this best life, you must treat people in certain, morally good ways. We can illustrate this with friendship. It is a very important part of leading a good, happy life that one has friends. But someone who is a friend just out of self-interest is not a real friend. He will miss out on the good things – the feelings, the character, the state of mind – that come from being a real friend. On the other hand, someone who does not find friendship a beneficial and important part of their life – who is a friend without feeling that they gain from it – is also missing out on what is important in friendship.

Aristotle's theory entails that the flourishing life involves commitments to values beyond one's own interests, narrowly defined. Each person aims at their own flourishing, says Annas, just in the sense that each person leads their own life. It makes no sense to think of your eudaimonia as the final end of my life. Eudaimonia isn't a state of person that someone else can bring about, but a quality of the activity of living life. Only you can live your life and I can live only my life. But in pursuing (my) eudaimonia, I needn't privilege my interests above those others, and being virtuous may well lead one to stand up for what is right when it doesn't 'benefit' oneself in any narrow sense.

Does this answer the objections? We have a general account of Aristotle answers the questions 'what is good for me?' and 'what is morally good?' together, so that any supposed example of eudaimonia that doesn't involve the virtues simply begs the question. But the counterexamples still retain some force – aren't there virtuous lives that don't involve the person's flourishing? One response is that the

unhappy medic and environmentalist both live lives of integrity. It would be a mistake to say that their lives would be better for them if they hadn't acted on the values that they hold most dear.

But, pressing the objection, surely they still lose something good from their lives by living as they do; we still have an idea that their lives good have gone better for them. Integrity is not the same as flourishing. Perhaps what Swanton's objection shows is that, given the different things that are good, what is really wrong with Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia is that 'the good life for human beings' is not a coherent unitary whole. There is no single, complete final end. Virtues can pull in different directions, and flourishing in one sense may lead to not flourishing in another sense.