Happiness, The Life of Virtue and Friendship: Theological Reflections on Aristotelian Themes

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Part I: On Being Temporarily Happy

THE PROBLEM WITH HAPPINESS

I am not happy with happiness. I do not trust being happy and I tend not to trust happy people. For how can anyone who is happy know what the world is like? We live in a world of suffering and tragedy that defies attempts to be happy. I especially distrust people who try to be happy because happiness, whatever it is, does not seem to be something we can accomplish. The kind of self-involvement that trying to be happy entails is simply incompatible with the disinterestedness which is characteristic of genuinely good people.

I particularly distrust the notion of happiness when it is associated with religion. For example, when Christianity is commended as a religion of happiness it always seems to lose any critical bite. It becomes a religion promising satisfaction for the well-off such that the radical demands of the gospel are overlooked or explained away. As a religion of happiness, Christianity becomes a general form of religiosity that is so functionally useful the question of whether it is true hardly makes any difference. Moreover, if Christianity is about happiness then what are we to make of the repeated and insistent claims that suffering is the hallmark of the Christian life?

Because of this general unhappiness I have tended to avoid the language of happiness when thinking or writing about matters moral. This seems a bit odd,
however, as no one has influenced me more that Aristotle, and the Nichomachian Ethics begins and ends with a discussion of happiness. Moreover, accounts of the moral life that stress the importance of virtue usually involve a teleological account which entails some sense of self-fulfillment. In my attempt to avoid happiness as a theme, therefore, I have used, somewhat arbitrarily, only the middle books of Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics and have developed an ethic of virtue that only promises faithfulness which may accidentally provide a sense of fulfillment.

Yet I suspect there is something deeply wrong with any attempt to give an account of the moral life that avoids happiness or at least makes it a secondary phenomenon. It may be that happiness is wrongly thought to be the end of the moral life, but it is quite another matter to think it has no relevance to living well. Moreover, no account of Christian ethics can avoid dealing with happiness, not only because it is such a prominent human concern, but also because the very nature of the Christian life entails a sense of well-being that is surely not entirely unlike what some have meant by happiness.

My sense of ambiguity about happiness is captured best by two scenes from the recent movie, Tender Mercies. In the first, Mac Sledge, after being told his daughter has died, is seen hoeing weeds in his garden. His new wife, who has helped him recover some sense of dignity, stands silently at the edge of the garden. Mac, without looking at her, says several times, “I don’t believe in happiness.” She makes no attempt to persuade him otherwise. Yet the movie closes with Mac throwing a football with his young stepson as if nothing else mattered. Like Mac, I do not believe in happiness, but I do believe in throwing footballs with stepsons. The problem is knowing how to describe the latter as a way of life.

I am going to try, therefore, to develop an account of happiness that I hope will do justice to our moral experience as well as suggest the role happiness might play in the life of those who desire to be Christians. As a way to explore the nature and role of happiness in the moral life, I am going to undertake an analysis of Aristotle’s account of happiness. That turn to Aristotle is not surprising because it is a common assumption that his account in many ways still remains unsurpassed. I must say, however, that while I hope the analysis I develop is true to Aristotle, my primary interest is not interpreting Aristotle correctly--whatever that would mean. Rather, I am primarily concerned to use Aristotle to further how Christians ought to think about happiness. In the process, however, I hope to suggest why Aristotle’s account is still so important--not only for what he says but for how his analysis is structured.

Of particular interest to me is Aristotle’s claim that happiness “requires completeness in virtue as well as a complete lifetime” (1100a3-5). Much of what I will attempt is to try to understand what such an observation could possibly mean. It is not only unclear what or how we could ever have completeness in virtue, but even more puzzling is the claim it takes a complete lifetime. For example, one of the implications of such a claim would seem to be that feeling happy is no guarantee we are happy. Put even more strongly, if you think or feel you are happy it is a good indication you are in the grip of an illusion or, even
worse, are deeply self-deceived. For according to Aristotle, it seems that happiness comes not during, but at the end of our life—thus the fear of untimely death. Happiness is the characteristic of those who live in a manner such that the end of their life confirms the way they have lived. As I hope to show, the happy person, thus, is one who can claim their death as their own.

Objections to such an account of happiness seem obvious since it seems we can be sure we are truly happy only when it is too late to enjoy that state. Yet I want to show that Aristotle’s account of happiness is more plausible than it may at first appear. For I think Aristotle is rightly struggling to take account of the contingent and temporal character of our existence. That may not seem very significant if we fail to acknowledge, either personally or in our moral theory, how time can appear to be the great enemy of morality. For example, just think how, on a personal level, what appeared to be so clearly right later appears as pathetic if not positively corrupt. So often, both existentially and in theory, morality seems to be an attempt to defeat the necessity of such retrospective judgments in the hopes of securing moral consistency—a consistency that seems crucial if we are to achieve happiness.

Recognition of the timefulness necessarily means we must deal with questions of moral change and continuity. We usually think we ought to do some changing in our lives, but it is by no means clear how that conviction is compatible with our sense that a person of character has a stability that insures we can trust them to be who they are. As we shall see, Aristotle’s analysis of the kind of person we must be to be capable of true happiness manifests rather than resolves this ambiguity. Exactly because his account of happiness does this, I hope to show that it is a particularly rich resource for helping understand what it might mean for Christians to be happy.

HAPINESS AS THE GOOD AND FINAL END

Where do you begin an analysis of the moral life? It has been the tendency of modern ethicists to begin their reflections on morality from as formal and minimal a starting point as possible. They have done so in the hopes of finding a foundation for ethics that is non-arbitrary and rationally compelling—that is, one not temporally determined. Aristotle begins in quite a different manner. He simply asks what most people think living life well involves—that is, what is the highest good. He suggests that many claim morality is about being happy, and he is willing to begin with that assumption. Yet Aristotle, in Socratic fashion, does not assume he knows what happiness entails for that is exactly the issue that needs investigation. Therefore, Aristotle accepts the common assumption that the highest good has to do with happiness only in the hope of tempting us to follow him with an investigation of that claim. We must be careful, therefore, not to assume any one statement adequately summarizes Aristotle’s views about happiness as he constantly nuances his first formulations by further argument.

For example, Aristotle begins by observing that though all agree that happiness is the “highest good attainable by action,” when they try to define happiness there is little agreement. Many say that happiness is some pleasure and/or
wealth; some identify happiness with different things at different times (thus, when sick it is health, when poor it is wealth, and so on); and some, the more cultivated who have thought about such matters, think happiness cannot consist in a list of goods but must be a good in and of itself which is the cause of all these goods (1095a20-30). Obviously the initial agreement on happiness as the "highest good" requires further analysis in order to be plausible.

Yet it is important to note that Aristotle does not assume that such analysis can be successful by ignoring what people actually want and desire. Happiness is not the result, as later Stoic thinkers would claim, of the eradication of desire. We will not be happy, according to Aristotle, if we purge our lives of all desires, but only when we desire the right things rightly. But even the most cultivated desires, such as that for honor, cannot bring happiness since honor depends on the opinions of others. Therefore, to be happy, Aristotle suggests we must desire that which cannot easily be taken away from us (1095b25-28).

As we shall see, this is a particularly important aspect of Aristotle's account of happiness. For though he says it can only be a "guess," at this point he continues to assume that happiness must be that which we cannot lose either through the actions of others or by outrageous fate. Thus he maintains that the happy person will have the attribute of permanence and he will remain happy throughout his life. For he will always or to the highest degree both do and contemplate what is in conformity with virtue; he will bear the vicissitudes of fortune most nobly and with perfect decorum under all circumstances, inasmuch as he is truly good and "four-square beyond reproach" (1100b16-23).

Even more strongly he argues that

no supremely happy man can even become miserable, for he will never do what is hateful and base. For in our opinion, the man who is truly good and wise will bear with dignity whatever fortune may bring, and will always act as nobly as circumstances permit, just as a good general makes the most strategic use of the troops at his disposal, and a good shoemaker makes the best shoe he can from the leather available, and so on with experts in all other fields (1100b35-1101a6).

Yet Aristotle notes that there are reversals in fortune that can happen even to the happy man that can prevent him from being "supremely happy." Thus in Book Seven he says,

those who assert that a man is happy even on the rack and even when great misfortunes befall him, provided he is good, are talking nonsense, whether they know it or not. Since happiness also needs fortune, some people regard good fortune as identical with happiness. But that is not true, for even good fortune, if excessive, can be an obstruction; perhaps
we are, in that case, no longer justified in calling it “good fortune,” for its definition is determined by its relation to happiness (1153b20-24).

We thus have an increasingly complex picture. Aristotle accepts the general assumption that happiness is the satisfaction of desire, but the question of the kind of desire we should have to be happy is not easily determined. He suggests that it must be a desire for that which is not easily lost, that is, that which will not be subject to the fortunes or time; yet it is unclear what could possibly satisfy such a demand.

In order to investigate this issue we must return to Aristotle’s claim that happiness is the final end. As we have seen, Aristotle begins his account of happiness assuming that happiness has to do with an end, that is, the highest good attainable by action. This assumption reflects his general view that “all knowledge and every choice is directed toward some good” (1095a15). Every human activity has some good such that it is one thing in medicine, another in strategy, and another again in each of the arts. What, then, is the good of each? Is it not that for the sake of which everything else is done? That means it is health in the case of medicine, victory in the case of strategy, a house in the case of building, a different thing in the case of different arts, and in all actions and choices it is the end. For it is for the sake of the end that all else is done. Thus, if there is some one end for all that we do, this would be the good attainable by actions; if there are several ends, they will be the good attainable by action (1097a17-24).

It is important to note the conditional in the last sentence, for Aristotle at this point does not assume that there is any one end for all that we do. He notes that it is obvious that there are many ends—e.g., wealth, health, power—that are means to something else. Thus, it is not obvious that all ends are final, but if there is one good it must be something final. But what would it mean for such an end to be final? It is an end, he suggests, that can be pursued for itself and not for something else. It is not a means to anything. And such a description seems to apply to happiness above all else:

for we always choose happiness as an end in itself and never for the sake of something else. Honor, pleasure, intelligence, and all virtue we choose partly for themselves—for we would choose each of them even if no further advantage would accrue from them—but we also choose them partly for the sake of happiness because we assume that it is through them that we will be happy. On the other hand, no one chooses happiness for the sake of honor, pleasure, and the like, nor as a means to anything at all (1097b1-7).

Such a claim, however, is anything but obvious. Is Aristotle suggesting that
happiness is dominant in the sense that everything that we do is ultimately done for it? If so, such a view seems to presuppose a view of human action that is clearly mistaken. I may jog to lose weight, and I may desire to lose weight to better my health, and I may desire to better my health in order to live longer, and I may desire to live longer because--well, I am not sure why I desire to live longer. The reason I am not sure why I desire to live longer is not simply because I lack a clear aim in my life that requires more time, but because "desiring to live longer" is a complex set of desires that involves everything from wanting to see the Cubs win a World Series to enjoying a friendship. To describe the final end in such a singular manner simply fails to do justice to the complex nature of our desires.

Moreover, there simply seems to be something wrong about Aristotle's assumption that one action is always a means to something else. I may jog, even as boring as jogging is, for my health, but it is by no means clear that my jogging can best be described as a "means" at all. On the contrary, I jog because I like to jog. While I am glad that jogging can result in better health, the reason that I jog cannot be so easily explained. Indeed, any explanation for jogging, like any account of why we should desire to live longer, necessarily turns out to be complex.

Before we get too taken with such criticism, however, I think we need to reconsider what Aristotle is trying to say. Certainly Aristotle is not suggesting that simply because every action has an end, even if that end is itself, that therefore all actions have a common end. Nor is he suggesting, though it is easy to be misled here by his examples, that there is some particular act to whose end all others are subordinate. Rather we must be particularly careful to note why Aristotle calls happiness a "final" good for he does not mean happiness is one among others. The point is that happiness, rather than being analogous to other goods we desire, is different in the sense it is sufficient in itself. And by "self-sufficient" he means that "which taken by itself makes life something desirable and deficient in nothing" (1097b15).

The criticism I made above of Aristotle's suggestion that all our activities are a means to the end of our happiness turns out to be misplaced. For this is exactly the notion Aristotle needs to display how happiness is a final end. As Ackrill says,

_Eudaimonia_--what all men want--is not the result or outcome of a lifetime's effort; it is not something to look forward to (like a contented retirement), it is a life, enjoyable and worthwhile all through. Various bits of it must themselves be enjoyable and worthwhile, not just means for bringing about subsequent bits. That the primary ingredients of _eudaimonia_ for the sake of _eudaimonia_ is not incompatible with their being ends in themselves; for _eudaimonia_ is constituted by activities that are ends in themselves.3

Only if _eudaimonia_ has such a character could it be a good that cannot easily be taken away from us. Indeed, that is why it might even be possible to be happy on
the rack even though by being such we may not be supremely happy.

If this is the case, then we can see why many commentators on Aristotle resist translating eudaimonia as happiness. For happiness is not an “end” that can be pursued or achieved separately from the kind of life we lead. Our life is not a means to some end called happiness. Rather eudaimonia is the name Aristotle gives to “the best possible life,” which means it is impossible to abstract the meaning of happiness from the display of such a life—thus the virtues. We can now understand why since it is not so much an end or a way of life. But if not one end among others, how is such a way to be specified? How are we to understand the material content of happiness so construed? To answer these questions, we must turn to Aristotle’s understanding of the ergon (function) of man.

WHAT EUDAIMONIA IS AND HOW IT IS ACQUIRED

The ever-candid Aristotle observed that it is “perhaps a little trite” to call eudaimonia the highest good and a clearer account is still required. He suggests that perhaps this can best be done by asking what is the proper function (ergon) of man (1097b21-25).

For just as the goodness and performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfills some function or performs some action, are thought to reside in his proper function, so the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in his proper function (1097b25-30).

Aristotle’s appeal to “function” at this point in his argument has often been criticized as viciously circular or as an unnecessary piece of metaphysics, since it only results in telling us that certain excellences are essential for happiness. Moreover, some have taken him to mean that the “good of man” that correlates with his function is a single thing in a manner that excludes all other goods. However, the latter criticism is clearly wrong. Aristotle, as I have tried to suggest, assumes that there are many different goods for man. Again, I think it is crucial that we not be misled by Aristotle’s appeal to “a function,” by remembering that he only proposes it as a way to explore further the nature of happiness as a characteristic of all our activities.

To discover man’s proper function Aristotle notes that just as the eye, hand, or foot has its proper function, so must man have some function over and above the functions of his various parts. That function cannot be just living as he has that in common with the plants. Nor is man’s function that of perception, as he has that in common with every animal. That leaves

an active life of the rational element. The rational element has two parts: one is rational in that it obeys the rule of reason, the other in that it possesses and conceives rational rules. Since the expression ‘life of the rational element’ also can be used in two senses, we must make it clear that we mean a life determined by the activity, as opposed to the mere
possession, of the rational element. For the activity, it seems, has a
greater claim to be the function of man. The proper function of man,
then, consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational
principle or, at least, not without it (1098a2-8).

Again many have found fault with Aristotle's concentration on "reason" as
the distinguishing mark of the human. It is often pointed out that there are
countless things people do besides reasoning. Moreover, if there is any distin-
ctiveness to human activity qua human activity, it does not reside in any one
"mark"; but rather consists in the complex ways people have learned to coordi-
nate the capacities and skills they share with all life. While Aristotle's use of the
language of function leaves him open to such criticism, it is clear, I think, that he
does not mean to suggest that the many things which people do are inconse-
quential to understanding human activity. Rather his point is the more simple--
namely that "rationality" is simply not one activity among others that men do,
but it is the activity that pervades all we do. Indeed it is exactly that power that
allows us to coordinate the many capacities and skills we possess.6

Moreover, once having made the suggestion that the distinctively human is
exhibited in our rational activity, Aristotle proceeds immediately to muddy those
already cloudy waters. He says that by "proper function" he means the same
kind as the function of an individual who sets high standards for himself: thus the
proper function of a harpist is that of one who has set high standards for himself
(1098a8-10). Therefore "rational activity" is not some minimum possessed by all,
though all men have the potential to possess it, but rather it is a high standard
that is a mark of distinction.

Thus in a summary passage Aristotle says,

On these assumptions, if we take the proper function of man to be a
certain kind of life, and if this kind of life is an activity of the soul and
consists in actions performed in conjunction with the rational element,
and if a man of high standards is he who performs these actions well
and properly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in
accordance with the excellence appropriate to it; we reach the
conclusion that the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity
with the best and most complete. But we must add 'in a complete life.'
For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one sunny day;
similarly, one day or a short time does not make a man blessed and
happy (1098a12-20).

So, rationality as the function of man is but the means Aristotle uses to note
the whole set of virtues man needs to live well over the span of a life. For even
though Aristotle distinguishes between theoretical and practical reason, and
later suggests that contemplation is the form of life that most nearly approaches
happiness (1177b24-26), he in fact assumes that practical reason is as much the
source of happiness as the theoretical. Indeed it seems odd that he should sug-
suggest that the practical life is happy only in a secondary sense (1178a9); while he bases his claim of the superiority of contemplation on its similarity to the gods (1178b25-30), that would make man's happiness based on an attribute which is not in his power, which is not his own function. Perhaps that is why Aristotle says that "happiness is some kind of study or contemplation," (1178b31) thus leaving vague the kind of activity he takes as his ideal.

Aristotle's emphasis on contemplation as the highest ideal certainly gives good grounds for those who would criticize him for an overly intellectual account of human activity. Yet such criticism fails to note the life of contemplation is impossible if we are not first living a virtuous life that entails the whole great gamut of human activities. Moreover, Aristotle never loses his good sense, for even though he is attracted to contemplation because of its promise of self-sufficiency, yet he maintains even the contemplative man

will need external well-being, since we are only human. Our nature is not self-sufficient for engaging in study: our body must be healthy and we must have food and generally be cared for. Nevertheless, if it is not possible for a man to be supremely happy without external goods, we must not think that his needs will be great and many in order to be happy; for self-sufficiency and moral action do not consist in an excess (of possessions) (1178b31-1179a22; see also, 1099a30-32).

The significance of these last considerations has often been overlooked by those who criticize Aristotle's account of happiness as too intellectualistic. As I have tried to suggest, happiness for Aristotle is not some single activity

to whose end the needs of all other human activities should be subordinated. He is not saying that there is some one end, the same one, of all particular actions. Virtuous activity or living humanly well do not signify one thing because there are different kinds of virtue and our happiness or perfection or ultimate end is constituted, not by some one virtue, but to the degree this is possible by them all.7

Happiness, it turns out, is thus a name of a set of virtuous activities. As Aristotle says, "eudaimonia is some kind of activity of the soul in conformity with virtue. All the other goods are either necessary prerequisites for happiness, or are by nature co-workers with it and useful instruments for attaining it" (1099b25-28).

But why then all the emphasis on "rationality as the function of man" and the corresponding suggestion that contemplation promises to be our best chance for happiness? Aristotle's own account of the complexity of practical reason certainly provides little basis for the assumption that theoretical reason is superior. Indeed, from the point of view of how we must actually live our lives, the moral virtues and the virtues of the practical intellect take precedence over those of the theoretical. Our final end, therefore, is not some particular good among others but is "constituted by a plurality of virtuous activities."8
I think one of the reasons Aristotle emphasized so strongly the importance of reason and contemplation as the ultimate form of the happy life was due to his haunting sense of the effect of time and fortune on the moral life. For contemplation, thinking on those things that cannot be other than they are, seems to promise the kind of permanence that can make us impervious to outrageous fate. Yet he never assumed that contemplation was sufficient to insure an eudaemonistic life since what finally makes such a life possible, even one of contemplation, is our having a character sufficient to bear the vicissitudes of fortune nobly (1100b17-21). As I noted above, Aristotle was keenly aware that frequent reverses can crush even the supremely happy. Only those who are noble and high-minded cannot be changed by such reverses, not because they are insensitive to pain, but because, as he says, they will never do what is hateful and base (1100b28-35).

Only if we are persons of virtue, therefore, is it possible for us to be happy through time. We cannot have happiness unless we have acquired the virtues necessary to be people of character. To have character means we have a history that allows us to make our lives our own. In contrast, bad people cannot be happy for they “do not have the element of constancy” and thus do not “remain similar even to themselves” (1159b5-8). Goodness, as determined through the virtues, provides the skill necessary for us to be steady through the good and bad fortune of our lives. Thus, happiness is not so much acquired as it is discovered in the process of living virtuously.

That is why I suspect Aristotle cannot quite make up his mind whether happiness is a gift or is acquired. For, as he says,

if there is anything at all which comes to me as a gift from the gods, it is reasonable to suppose that happiness above all else is god-given; and of all things human it is the most likely to be god-given; inasmuch as it is the best. But although this subject is perhaps more appropriate to a different field of study, it is clear that happiness is one of the most divine things, even if it is not god-sent but attained through virtue and some kind of learning or training. And if it is better that happiness is acquired in this way rather than by chance, it is reasonable to assume that this is the way it is acquired...To leave the greatest and noblest of things to chance would hardly be right (1109b10-25).

Perhaps now we are in a position to understand better why Aristotle insists that happiness requires completeness in virtue as well as a complete life. For in spite of his talk of happiness as the final end, we see happiness is not some ideal which is realizable only in the distant future. Indeed happiness is not so much an end, but the way. Happiness is the sense of self that comes from having acquired the virtues necessary to transverse the dangers and opportunities of our existence—dangers and opportunities that are intrinsic to the timeful character of our existence. Thus, happiness is not something that can be accomplished all at once. Rather it seems to be more like the ability to look back over our life and
be glad it is ours—in short, unless we have acquired a history, a life capable of narration, we have nothing about which to be happy. That is why happiness may not be possible for the young, as they have not yet lived long enough, they have not acquired the virtues necessary, even to know what it means to say they are happy. Yet that is also why Aristotle thinks it so crucial to initiate the young into the life of virtue. For only such a life can give us the skill to look back truthfully and still claim our life as our own.13

ON BEING HAPPILY A CHRISTIAN

A fuller understanding of Aristotle's account of happiness obviously requires a discussion of the virtues and friendship. However, on the basis of the analysis of happiness I think some tentative theological observations can be made. As I suggested at the beginning, I think Aristotle can help us understand in what way it makes sense for Christians not only to be happy, but to desire to be happy. Let me now try to say why that is the case.

Some may feel that all this is a false problem. Of course Christians can and should be happy. After all, they are just like anyone else. If being Christian does not contribute to our happiness, what good is it? Yet many in the Christian tradition have challenged just that assumption. They have done so because of their fundamental conviction that the gospel is meant to challenge, if not destroy, our presumptions about what will make us happy in this life. Christianity does not promise fulfillment, but rather a way to live in the world truthfully and without illusion. It is, after all, a little hard to believe that a people who take as their central belief a crucified God can believe that life is finally about happiness. From such a perspective, Christian convictions are more nearly true not because they underwrite our assumptions about what constitutes human fulfillment, but because Christianity challenges our facile presumptions that God is primarily concerned with our happiness.

Therefore many Christian writers have suggested that suffering rather than happiness is the hallmark of the Christian life. While the Christian is certainly not encouraged to seek out bad fortune, at least for some, a bit of bad luck is seen as a positive aid for learning to live as a Christian. For such suffering tests the genuineness of the Christian's conviction that they live not for their own glory, but that of God.

There is no doubt that there is something right about this emphasis. Moreover, in a culture like our own that seems bent on the satisfaction of every desire no matter how shallow, such a challenge appears positively salutary. In a time when the desire of many for happiness results in a desperate devaluing of all questions of significance, any challenge to the superficiality of our desires seems more likely right than wrong.

Yet there also seems something wrong with any account of the Christian life that denies all moral significance to happiness. For the salvation wrought in Jesus of Nazareth, we believe, offers a new way of life that certainly brings with it a sense of satisfaction. The issue is how that satisfaction is to be understood. And in this respect I think that Aristotle is a critical resource.
Aristotle reminds us that happiness is not so much a goal as a way; or perhaps more accurately, happiness but names the kind of a person we must be if we are to face the nature of this existence with courage and faithfulness. In this sense, Aristotle helps us understand why we rightly understand the kind of life we are called to live as Christians as a journey rather than an answer. For what we are offered as Christians is not a formula for successful living, but a way to go on such that we will be able to look back over our lives with a sense of satisfaction— that is, happily.

Let me put it this way. One of the difficulties of taking up any significant way of life is that we never adequately understand what we are doing. Significant commitments are asked of us that we are not in a position to appreciate when we first undertake them. For example, we never know what we are doing when we get married. Indeed, you do not even know what kind of commitment you have made until you can look back on it twenty years later. You do not even know what it would mean to call a marriage happy until you have lived it for many years. But if that is the case then why would we ever undertake such a life? We do so, I think, because we do not know what we are doing.

But what if the same is true of taking on the story of being a Christian? Most of us have done so not knowing what we were doing. In effect, our being Christian is more a matter of fortune than something we have done. We may regret or rejoice that we are so identified, but there seems little we can do about our having been identified. But if Aristotle is right, that is the character of life itself. There is no way to avoid the temporal character of our existence. Our desire for happiness forces us to be one thing and not another. Yet that very desire also becomes the way that we can test the authenticity of the concrete embodiment of that desire. For any truthful way of life must admit as well as promise an answer to the question— "Are you happy?"

I take it that fundamental to Christian convictions is the assurance that anyone who has followed the way of life we call Christianity will be able to look back on their life and say, "I would not have it otherwise." And to say this is the happiest thing anyone can say, if they say it truthfully and without self-deception. Therefore, Aristotle’s account of happiness helps us understand the structure of Christian convictions insofar as he helps us understand in what manner they make us happy.

The difference between Aristotle and Christianity is not that the one teaches us to desire happiness and the other does not. Rather, I think we will find the profoundest difference is the kind of person we must be if we are to be capable of happiness. For Aristotle, it seems we can only be happy if we achieve a self-sufficiency that guards us against outrageous fortune. The Christian claim that our lives can be satisfying only to the extent they are formed in reference to a concrete historical individual could only strike Aristotle as the height of absurdity. For that is to make our happiness depend on a historically contingent starting point, a piece of luck, that we cannot control. Yet it is the claim of Christians that only when we learn to live our lives on that basis will we be on the way to living a life of happiness.
To return to the point I made at the beginning, it is the Christian claim that to the extent we learn to have our lives determined by the God we find in Jesus of Nazareth will we have the resource to make our deaths our own. Moreover, it is that resource that gives us the power to stand against the world whose power derives from its false promises to give our lives significance. In contrast, Christians claim that our death, even untimely, cannot be robbed of meaning, for God has in fact insured our life and death through the cross and resurrection of Christ. Thus we can die confident that we will be remembered by those future generations God will call to be His Church. Doesn’t that sound like good news?

Notes


2. J. L. Ackrill, “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 17. The essays in this volume make one of the best commentaries on Aristotle’s ethics available. In his *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), John Cooper notes that in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1097b16-209) “a number of good things rather than as demonstrated by a single end, on the ground that flourishing must be the consummately best thing, whereas any quantity of a concrete good thing can be bettered by the addition to it of some quantity, however small, of another good thing, however slight.” p. 99.


4. Ibid., p. 24. Again as Cooper suggests, “Morally virtuous action may then be a ‘means’ to the ultimate end of flourishing, not in the sense that it tends to bring it about, or doing favors for the right people makes a government functionary rich, but in the sense that it is one constituent part of the conception of flourishing which constitutes the virtuous person’s ultimate end” (p.82).


6. Ralph McInerny, *Ethical Thomistica* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1982), p. 22. Aquinas, I suspect, suggests the heart of Aristotle’s view when he says, “In man it is one thing that he is a mortal rational animal, and another that he is an animal capable of laughter. We must, therefore, consider that every delight is a kind of proper accident resulting from happiness or from some *part* of happiness, since the reason that a man is delighted is that he has some fitting good, either in reality, or in hope, or at least in memory,” *Summa Theologica* I, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 2.6.
7. Ibid., p. 23.

8. Ibid., p. 24.

9. Political considerations also concerned Aristotle. As Amelie Rorty rightly notes, “It is only in a corrupt polity that the contemplative life need be otherworldly, and only in a corrupt polity that the policies promoting the development and exercise of contemplative activity would come into conflict with those establishing requirements for the best practical life. Aristotle’s discussion of friendship in Book 9 helps show what contemplation can contribute to the comprehensive practical life. By placing that discussion in the middle of his treatment of pleasure, Aristotle shows how virtuous friendship enables a person of practical wisdom to recognize that his life forms a unified, self-contained whole, itself an *energeia*. The discussion of friendship provides a transition from the Book 7 account of pleasure as the unimpeded exercise of basic natural activities to the Book 10 account of pleasure as perfecting activities—an account that makes sense of a person finding pleasure in contemplating the whole of a virtuous life” (“The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Rorty [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980], p. 378). Aristotle’s problem was the absence of any good polity and as a result his account of contemplation sounds sufficient to itself. For a good discussion of the place of contemplation in Aristotle’s ethics see Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle’s Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 94-106.

10. These are the issues that are at the heart of Martha Nussbaum’s wonderful book, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). She depicts the Greek concern to find a way to live so that our lives might not be subject to the unpredictable vicissitudes of life—that is, that we might to some extent be self-sufficient. Yet at that same time they saw that part of the peculiar beauty of human excellence, the virtues themselves, makes our lives more vulnerable. Courage is essential if we are to be steadfast, but if we are courageous we cannot help but make our existence more dangerous. Therefore, the very means necessary to make our lives less subject to chance cannot help but make our lives more vulnerable. I cannot take the time here to explore Nussbaum’s extraordinary account of the relation between the Greek tragedians, Plato and Aristotle. On the whole I think she is right that at least in some of Plato’s work we see an attempt to overcome the role of fortune (and tragedy) in the moral life, an attempt that finds its final and most complete expression in Kant’s account of the morality, and that Aristotle is about a recovery of the tragedians’ insight in his work. However, I think that Aristotle’s account of the highminded man who is always ready to give but not receive, who wants his friends near him when he has benefited from good fortune but not bad, still manifests the desire to give an account of the moral life that is impervious to fortune. Yet Aristotle’s willingness to philosophize within the “appearances” as well as his account of friendship as integral to the good life means his account of *eudaimonia* cannot avoid some sense of the tragic. For a more extended set of reflections on Nussbaum, see my “Can Aristotle be a Liberal? or Nussbaum on Luck,” *Soundings* (forthcoming).

11. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, p. 75-76. Sherman rightly emphasizes the temporal as integral to Aristotle’s account of the moral life. She suggests that Aristotle’s understanding of the temporal constraint on rationality is not simply that a given end requires the setting of true intentions which constrain immediate action as few of our rational
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desires are so simply displayed. Our moral life is constituted by a network of ends so that we are constrained not merely by the isolated pursuit of separate ends over time, “but by a desire to see these ends optimally coordinated in some coherent pattern in and through time. This integration problem emerges when one begins to consider how to live in an ordered way.”

12. There is an important distinction to be drawn between the kind of luck we experience as integral to our moral projects and that which is just “dumb.” Thus the courageous know that by being such they may have to expose themselves to unexpected dangers, but they cannot expect to get cancer. Having gotten the latter they may be expected to respond to it with courage, thus turning their fate into destiny. But Aristotle raises here the very possibility that our ability to develop character may be a matter of luck. Of course that is exactly the possibility that Kant wanted to avoid as he labored to ground morality in rationality qua rationality, thus insuring that anyone had the capacity to be “moral.” In contrast, Aristotle, and I think Christians, cannot avoid acknowledging that the moral life is a contingent matter. That is the reason that the Christian witness is such an imperative, for without the example of the other we die.

13. Of course crucial to such retrospective judgment is forgiveness. We are unable to make our past our own unless we are capable of accepting forgiveness for what we have done even when we were not “fully responsible.” Yet forgiveness is a troubling notion for Aristotle, for to be capable of accepting forgiveness seems to make us vulnerable to the very aspects of our lives that threaten self-sufficiency. For further reflections on these matters, see my “Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue,” Notre Dame English Journal, 15 (Summer, 1983): 26-54.

14. I have sometimes said that the primary relationship between Christianity and marriage, particularly when the latter is understood as life-long fidelity, is that they are both meant to teach you that life is not about happiness. Both involve the undertaking of a commitment that we could not understand prior to the living out of that commitment. But, ironically, they both teach us that happiness is only possible retrospectively.

15. John Wesley, in his “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” suggested that one of the most important questions you can ask anyone is “Are you happy?”, assuming that the question of the rationality of religion was not separable from questions of happiness. For he says, “You eat, and drink, and sleep, and dress, and dance, and sit down to play. You are carried abroad. You are at the masquerade, the theatre, the opera house, the park, the levee, the drawing-room. What do you do there? Why, sometimes you talk; sometimes you look at one another. And what are you to do tomorrow, the next day, the next week, the next year? You are to eat, drink, and sleep, and dance, and dress, and play again...Are you, can you, or any reasonable man, be satisfied with this? You are not. It is not possible you should. But what else can you do? You would have something better to employ your time; but you know not where to find it upon earth. And, indeed, it is obvious that the earth, as it is now constituted, even with the help of all European arts, does not afford sufficient employment to take up half the waking hours of its inhabitants. What then can you do? How can you employ the time that lies so heavy upon your hands? This very thing which you seek declare we unto you. The thing you want is the religion we preach. That alone leaves no time upon our hands. It fills up all the blank spaces of life.” The Works of John Wesley, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 8:18-19.