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## Virtue and the Good in Plato and Aristotle

Professor T. H. Irwin, in a recent paper ('Glaucou's Challenge: Does Aristotle Change his Mind?' in R. Heinaman (ed.), *Plato and Aristotle's Ethics*, Ashgate, 2003) attributes to Plato the following nine theses:

- (1) *The Conditional Thesis*. Non-moral goods and evils are only conditionally good and bad; they are good when used virtuously, bad when used viciously.
- (2) *The Sufficiency Thesis*. Virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness.
- (3) *The Non-instrumental Thesis*. Virtue is to be chosen for its own sake, not only for its consequences.
- (4) *The Stability Thesis*. One ought always to stick to virtue, no matter the cost.
- (5) *The Comparative Thesis*. For happiness, virtue is to be chosen over all other goods.
- (6) *The Composite Thesis*. The good includes more than one choiceworthy goods.
- (7) *The Comprehensive Thesis*. The good includes all choiceworthy goods.
- (8) *The Dominance Thesis*. In happiness, virtue trumps all other goods.
- (9) *The Eudaimonist Thesis*. If I have sufficient reason to be just rather than unjust, I must be happier by being just rather than by being unjust.

Irwin enquires to what extent Aristotle concurs with these propositions. He begins his enquiry with a full treatment of the *Magna Moralia*, which he regards as a report of an early course of Aristotle's, worthy of being treated as seriously as if it was an authentic work of the master. He then investigates the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in that order. He comes to the conclusion that over his lifetime Aristotle changed his mind about the Comparative Thesis and the Dominance Thesis. It is in the *NE*, he maintains, that Aristotle shows the most evident sympathy with Plato's own position, while in the *MM* both these propositions are ignored.

Professor Irwin's paper is rich and stimulating and forces one to think hard about Aristotle from unfamiliar angles. I agree with a very great deal of what it contains. But I must admit that I am a little uncomfortable with the structure of the paper. Essentially, Irwin offers Aristotelian answers to Platonic questions. It is not always easy to match an answer to a question, and following Irwin's discussion can feel like trying to take the measure of an Aristotle wearing an ill-fitting suit. One problem concerns the central concept of virtue. 'Virtue' in Irwin's Platonic texts is not often *arete*; the quotations are more likely to concern particular virtues such as justice and temperance. Aristotle might well give different answers to the questions put if 'justice' were substituted for 'virtue' in their formulation. This is partly because he made a systematic distinction between moral and intellectual virtues, and placed a special emphasis on the latter. Admittedly, in the middle books of the *Republic*, justice includes some pretty heady intellectual activity; but most of the Platonic texts on which Irwin relies concern moral virtue.

More important than the distinction between moral and intellectual virtues in Aristotle is the distinction between virtue as a state on the one hand, and the exercise or use of virtue on the other. The distinction between possession and use goes back to a passage in Plato's *Euthydemus* (280b7–d7)—but there what is in question is the possession and use of external goods, not of virtue. By contrast, in all three of the Aristotelian ethical treatises, happiness is identified not with the having of virtue, but with the

exercise of virtue. This is in my view the most significant advance in Aristotle's theory.

In *NE* 1. 8 Aristotle, having said that the human good is 'activity of the soul in accordance with virtue', goes on to relate this definition to those offered by others. With regard to those who define it as virtue, or a virtue, he says, 'It makes no little difference whether we place the supreme good in possession or in use, in state ( $\epsilon\acute{\xi}\iota\varsigma$ ) or in activity' (1098b31–4). It is the view of all three treatises that the mere possession of virtue, as opposed to its exercise, does not amount to the supreme good for human beings.<sup>1</sup> The terminology used to contrast the possession and the exercise of virtue differs, however, in the *NE* from the other two treatises. Virtuous behaviour, as contrasted with the mere possession of virtue, in the *NE* is by preference described as a person's 'activity in accordance with virtue'; in the *EE* and (to a lesser extent) the *MM* it is described as a 'use of virtue'. The contrast is striking, but I do not believe that it denotes a difference of substance between the treatises.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of the distinction means that we have a complicated task in giving Aristotelian answers to Irwin's Platonic questions. When the word 'virtue' appears in the question we may have to give two different answers, one related to the possession of virtue, the other to the exercise of virtue. Aristotle's answers to the Platonic questions will often need bifurcation.

<sup>1</sup> *NE* 1099a1 ff.: 'the state may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity cannot'.

*NE* 1176a33–5: '[happiness] is not a state; for if it were it might belong to someone who was asleep throughout his life, living the life of a plant, or again, to someone who was suffering the greatest misfortunes'.

*NE* 1153b19–21: 'Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense.'

*EE* 1219b9 ff.: 'We crown the actual winners, not those who have the power to win but do not win... This clears up the difficulty sometimes raised—why for half their lives the good are no better than the bad, for all are alike when asleep; the cause is that sleep is an inactivity, not an activity of the soul.'

*MM* 185a10: 'That [happiness] is an activity can be seen also from the following consideration. For supposing someone to be asleep all his life, we should hardly consent to call such a man happy.'

<sup>2</sup> Statistics of usage for the *NE* and the *EE* are given in my *The Aristotelian Ethics* (OUP, 1978), 68.

Bearing this distinction in mind, I will now give my own answers to Irwin's Platonic questions, but I will reverse his order of tackling the treatises, and I will start with the *NE*, and then move to the *EE* and to the *MM*. The chronological sequence that will probably come naturally to most people here is neither Irwin's order nor mine, but rather *EE*, *NE*, *MM*. I am not putting my own ordering forward as a chronological one, for I believe the relationships between the ethical writings in the corpus are too complicated to be explained by a simple temporal sequence. I am simply adopting another approach to the detection of differences of doctrine between the treatises. It is, of course, only if we regard the differences between the treatises as being due to chronology that we can regard the differences as being evidence of a *change of mind*. In considering the individual texts I will concentrate on their treatments of happiness, not magnanimity and self-love.

### The *Nicomachean Ethics*

I will first set out the Nicomachean position in respect of the Platonic theses enunciated earlier.<sup>3</sup>

(P2) Is virtue sufficient for happiness? Virtue itself is not: the virtuous man may be asleep or overtaken by disaster. The exercise of the appropriate virtue, however, is not only sufficient for happiness: it is what happiness consists in.<sup>4</sup>

(P3) Is virtue choiceworthy for its own sake? Yes: both virtue itself (1097b2–4) and also virtuous actions (1176a6–9).

(P4) Should virtue be stuck to at all costs? It is hard to give a precise answer, because of the vagueness of 'stuck to'. But we can point to the following relevant passages, which support a positive answer. There are some actions one must never do (1107a14–18).

<sup>3</sup> Like Irwin, I find no answer to the question whether the *NE* accepts P1 (the conditionality of goodness).

<sup>4</sup> This is so whether one regards Aristotle as holding an inclusive view of happiness (it consists in the exercise of all the virtues) or a dominant view (it consists in the exercise of the virtue of *Sophia*).

Virtuous actions are the most stable thing in human life, and the happy person will always by preference do and contemplate what belongs to virtue (1100b12–20).

(P5) Is virtue the choice most productive of happiness? Since happiness consists in the exercise of virtue, no one can be happy without virtue, which is a necessary condition for its exercise. But the mere possession of virtue is not sufficient for happiness, if the exercise is obstructed (e.g. by illness, or by the lack of necessary means, or grave misfortune). A virtuous person who, because of one of these impediments, is not in a position to choose virtuous actions ceases to be happy. However, such a person will never become wretched because he will never do anything wicked (1100b30–1101b8).

(P6) Is the supreme good composite? In my view, it is not. The supreme human good that is happiness, for the *NE*, consists in philosophical contemplation and that alone.<sup>5</sup> It is true that at 1101a14–17 Aristotle says:

Why then should we not say that he is happy who is active in accordance with perfect virtue, and is sufficiently endowed with external goods, not for some chance period, but through a perfect life?

Some have taken this as indicating that the endowment of external goods is an element constitutive of happiness.<sup>6</sup> But this passage is not a definition of happiness—it is a thesis about the happy person. At any given time a happy person will be doing many other things (e.g. digesting and breathing) besides the activity, or activities, that constitute his happiness. The wise man will need the necessities of life, but it is not in the use of them, but in the exercise of his mind that his happiness consists (1177a28–33, b19–24).

(P7) Is the supreme good comprehensive? It is complete and self-sufficient, but that does not mean that it includes all goods worth choosing for their own sake.

<sup>5</sup> I have argued for this in many places, notably in *The Aristotelian Ethics*, 190–214, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (OUP, 1992), 86–93, and *Essays on the Aristotelian Tradition* (OUP, 2001), 17–31.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. John Cooper, in ‘Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune’, *Philosophical Review*, 94 (1985), 173–96, an article I have discussed on pp. 40–2 of my *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*.

(P8) Is virtue the dominant component in happiness? Virtue itself is not; it is insufficient for happiness. But the exercise of the appropriate virtue is not only the dominant but the sole component of happiness.

(P9) Are all reasons for action premised on the pursuit of happiness? Yes, on the face of it: ‘it is for the sake of [happiness] that we all do everything else’ (1102a2). However, there is room for discussion about the appropriate interpretation of ‘for the sake of’ in this and similar passages.

So, once we pay attention to the distinction between virtue and its exercise, we can tease out, from the *NE*, answers to the questions set us by Irwin; but in several cases, as we have seen, the answer is neither ‘yes’ nor ‘no’ but ‘*distinguo*’. If we turn to the *EE*, however, matters become more complicated, but also, in certain ways, clearer.

### The *Eudemian Ethics*

One clarification introduced in the *EE* is an explicit distinction between the constituents of happiness and the necessary conditions of happiness.

We must first define for ourselves without haste or presumption in which of our possessions the good life consists, and what are the indispensable conditions of its attainment... Some people take as elements of happiness things that are merely its indispensable conditions. (1214b16, b26)

Among those proleptically condemned by the *EE* we must include, I think, the author of the *MM*, who appears to regard external goods as part of happiness; we must also include a number of modern authors. Their error, according to the *EE*, is parallel to that of someone who thought that meat eating and walking after dinner were parts of, and not just necessary conditions of, bodily health.

Keeping in mind this distinction, as well as the one between virtue and its exercise, (which is emphasized in 1218a30–8) let us question how far the *EE* subscribes to the nine theses.

(P1). Are goods other than virtue only conditional goods, whose goodness depends on their proper use? The *EE* answers by a distinction: they are good by nature, but good for individual people only conditionally.

The goods people compete for and think the greatest—honour, wealth, a wonderful body, fortune and power—are naturally good, but may be hurtful to some because of their dispositions: neither a foolish nor an unjust nor an intemperate person would get any good from making use of them. (1248b26–31)

(P2) Is virtue sufficient for happiness? As in the *NE*, virtue by itself is insufficient to be the supreme good, the reason now given being that an activity is better than a state, and therefore happiness, which is the best thing in the soul, must be not so much the best state of the soul, as the best activity of that best state (1218a31–5).

(P3) Is virtue choiceworthy for its own sake? Here again Aristotle explicitly distinguishes between virtue and virtuous action, though he gives a positive answer in each case. Among goods, he says, those that are chosen for their own sake are ends. Some ends, like health and strength, are merely good; but some ends are not merely good but noble. A good is noble if it is an object of praise. Into this class fall both the virtues (justice and temperance, for instance) and the actions to which they give rise (1248b18–24). But there is an important difference, in the *EE*, between the choiceworthiness of virtue and the choiceworthiness of virtuous action. Every good person chooses virtuous actions for their own sake (i.e. because they are virtuous, and not because of their consequences). But among good people some choose virtue because of the non-moral goods that result from virtue: Aristotle calls these people Laconians. Other good people choose not just virtuous actions for their own sake, but virtue itself for its own sake. These people, Aristotle says, are not just good, but noble, *καλοικαγαθοι*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The subtlety of Aristotle's argument at this point has been well expounded by Sara Waterlow Broadie in her *Ethics with Aristotle* (OUP, 1991), 376 ff., which I followed in *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 9 ff.

(P4) Should virtue be stuck to at all costs? As in the *NE*, Aristotle insists that there are some acts that are in themselves wicked (1121a22).

(P5) Is virtue the choice most productive of happiness? To answer this question, I turn to the Disputed Books, which I regard as belonging with the *EE*. There we learn (1153b19–21) that the good man on the rack is not happy; but this does not mean that by giving up virtue he could be more happy, because he would then not be in a position to exercise virtue, and it is in this alone that happiness consists.

(P6) Is the supreme good composite? There is an important difference here between the *EE* and the *NE*. In the *EE*, I believe (and in the Disputed Books), the supreme good is composite: it consists in the exercise of all the virtues, and not just in the philosophic contemplation of the intellect.<sup>8</sup>

(P7) Is the supreme good comprehensive? Not if being comprehensive means including, in addition to the exercise of virtue, also the natural goods—the *απλως αγαθα* or prima-facie goods—which are in the gift of fortune. These are, up to a point, necessary conditions for happiness, but not constituents of it—though of course the virtuous *use* of them may be part of happiness, for instance the use of wealth in the expression of liberality.

(P8) Is virtue the dominant component in happiness? As in the *NE*, the answer to this falls out immediately from the thesis that happiness consists solely in the exercise of virtue.

(P9) Are all reasons for action premised on the pursuit of happiness? There is, I think, a difference between the eudaemonism of the *NE* and the *EE*. The *NE* seems to state eudaemonism as a fact about human nature; the *EE* seems to propose it as a desirable human attitude (or perhaps, rather, a desirable gentlemanly attitude). ‘We must enjoin everyone that has the power to live according to his own choice to set up for himself some aim

<sup>8</sup> I have argued this in *The Aristotelian Ethics*, 191–200, 206–14 and in *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 93–102.



of noble living,—whether honour, or reputation, or wealth, or culture—to keep his eye on in all of his actions.’ In several ways the *EE* formulation seems to me preferable. Factual eudaemonism seems a false thesis about human nature and ‘keeping an eye’ on the supreme good seems a more reasonable programme than always ‘acting for the sake of’ happiness. Exhortatory eudaemonism, unlike factual eudaemonism, is compatible with the recognition, in the third of the common books, of the existence of incontinent people (i.e. most of us) who act for the sake of pleasure now and then without necessarily thinking it will contribute to our overall happiness (1146b23–45).

### The *Magna Moralia*

With regard to the *MM* I will be briefer, merely noting points where I disagree with Irwin.

(P1) Are goods other than virtue only conditional goods? The *MM*'s answer is similar to that of the *EE*: office, wealth, strength, and beauty are goods, but they are not choiceworthy without qualification, because they can be used ill (1183b28–31; 1184a3). Irwin sees this as a disagreement with Plato, since in the *Euthydemus* we are told that wealth, health, and beauty are in themselves worthless. But the reason that the *MM* gives for saying that they are genuine goods—namely that their worth is to be judged by the good person's use of them—is one which would surely commend itself to the mature Plato.

(P2) Is virtue sufficient for happiness? Irwin argues that the *MM* denies this, since it says that if we are happy we lack nothing else and that the best we are seeking is not a simple thing (1184a11–14; 33–4).<sup>9</sup> But the suggestion that happiness includes also non-moral goods seems to go counter to the statement repeated several times in chapter 4 of the first book that happiness consists in living in accordance with the virtues (1184b27, 30, 36, 39).

<sup>9</sup> Irwin bases his claim also on the long argument about ‘counting together’, 1184a15–39. I will have occasion to comment on this passage in the next chapter.

(P<sub>3</sub>) Is virtue choiceworthy for its own sake? Irwin claims that the *MM* gives a positive answer to this; but the passage he cites (1184b1–6) merely says that virtue, as one of the goods of the soul, belongs to the best class of goods. The *MM* comes nearer to a positive answer when it says that justice and the other virtues are everywhere and everyhow choiceworthy (1184a2).

(P<sub>4</sub>) Should virtue be stuck to at all costs? I believe the *MM* would say yes, but like Irwin I find it difficult to give chapter and verse.

(P<sub>5</sub>) Is virtue the choice most conducive to happiness? Irwin thinks the *MM* leaves this question open; but this is because he thinks that happiness includes goods other than the exercise of virtue, which I contest.

(P<sub>6</sub> and P<sub>7</sub>) Is happiness composite and comprehensive? Irwin credits the *MM* with a positive answer to both questions. I believe that like the *EE*, the *MM* accepts that happiness is composite, in the sense that it involves the exercise of more than one virtue (1184b37) but not that it is comprehensive in the sense of including all non-moral goods. The good man will not be corrupted by wealth and power, but there is no reason to believe that their possession will constitute part of his happiness (1208a3). Not even all activities of the soul are part of happiness (1135a35)

(P<sub>8</sub>) Is virtue the dominant element in happiness? Irwin believes that the *MM* takes no account of this principle, but for my part I can see no difference between the *MM* and the *EE* on this point.

(P<sub>9</sub>) Are all reasons for action premised on the pursuit of happiness? Irwin believes that the *MM*'s treatment of self-love shows that it rejects eudaimonism, but he is prepared to give this up if some other passage supports eudaimonism. I have been unable to find such a passage.

### Aristotle's Development

I conclude with a brief note on Aristotle's philosophical biography. I find the treatment of happiness in the *EE* superior to that in

the *NE*. The *NE* is an easier read, but the *EE* (even if we leave the Disputed Books out of consideration) is philosophically more sophisticated. (1) A clear distinction is made between constituents and necessary conditions of happiness. (2) An inclusive conception of happiness is more credible than a dominant one. (3) Exhortatory eudaimonism is preferable to factual eudaimonism. (4) The subtle distinction between the good person and the *καλοσκαγαθος* adds a degree of philosophical reflection absent from the *NE*. However, the differences between these two treatises may be explained by differences of audience or editor, rather than chronology, and in any case I am unconvinced that our *NE* existed as a single whole in Aristotle's lifetime. With regard to the *Magna Moralia*, I do not find it possible to take it seriously as an authentic work of Aristotle. The crawling pace of its myopic pedantry seems a whole world away from the cavalier intellectual charge of Aristotle in full tilt. I continue to think that it is most likely to be a student's notes of a course closely resembling the *EE*.