

## The Meaning of Eudemonia in Aristotle's Ethics

Dr. Patrick Ouma Nyabul<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Joseph Wanyama Situma<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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This paper is concerned with the problem of interpreting Aristotle's conception of eudemonia in his treatise, *Nicomachean Ethics* which will henceforth be referred to in its abbreviated form as *NE*. Aristotle said that the ultimate end of humans is eudemonia, a concept whose meaning is not quite clear. We (Dr. Patrick Nyabul and Dr. Joseph Situma) have discussed the conflicting views about Aristotle's doctrine of eudemonia and reached the conclusion that Aristotle was not undecided about the concept's comprehension. We have defended Aristotle from the accusation that he showed a wavering indecision between a comprehensive view of eudemonia and a dominant view. we argue (like W. F. R. Hardie) that Aristotle conceived of eudemonia as consisting in the single dominant end of contemplation and disagree with those authors (like J. L. Ackrill) who attribute to him an inclusive understanding of eudemonia. we support the dominant interpretation of eudemonia but reject the inclusive thesis.

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### Aristotle's Conception of Eudemonia

Aristotle's conception of Eudemonia in his *NE* has been a subject of much controversy. It is the source of problems of interpretation. In this paper, we, the authors, argue that Aristotle presented a 'dominant' theory of eudemonia rather than an 'inclusive' one. According to some interpreters, Aristotle recommended the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Nairobi, Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies, P. O. Box 30197, 00100, Nairobi. Kenya.

It is our contention that those who advocate the inclusive interpretation of eudemonia have misinterpreted or misunderstood Aristotle's ethics. We can as well ask whether Aristotle's version of eudemonia is the true meaning or the only meaning of the term.

There is also the problem of translating the Greek term into English besides that of interpreting how Aristotle used it. There may not be a perfect translation of the word into English, but for lack of a more appropriate term, eudemonia has been applied here to mean happiness though some translators prefer the words 'human flourishing', 'well-being', 'welfare', 'prosperity', 'doing well' or 'success.'

Some writers contend that Aristotle presented a dominant and an intellectual theory of eudemonia, while others argue that Aristotle's theory of eudemonia includes much more than contemplation. According to the former school of thought, Aristotle had a "dominant," or an intellectual view of eudemonia, but according to the latter, he had an "inclusive," composite or a "comprehensive" view of eudemonia. One group of authors sees eudemonia as a single, monolithic, supreme, determinate end, while the other takes it to be a composite of intrinsically desirable ends, a whole made up of different but co-ordinated ends. There are thus two conflicting opinions about Aristotle's understanding of eudemonia.

Aristotle himself may have been responsible for the apparent confusion, misunderstanding or controversy among his readers. Sometimes he seems to suggest that eudemonia is a single end and at times he argues as if it is one compound of many ends. It seems as if he presents two conflicting conceptions of eudemonia. He is *probably* undecided concerning the nature of eudemonia. Consequently, some readers have concentrated on the inclusive view while excluding the exclusive view while others have highlighted the exclusive view while excluding the inclusive view.

## The Exclusive View

W. F. R. Hardie is notably one of the defenders of the intellectual thesis. He is credited with the introduction of the key words 'dominant' and 'inclusive' into the debate about Aristotle's conception of eudemonia. Uyl, D.D. and Machan, T. R. (1983) define these terms as follows: "A dominant end is a single specific end which has more importance than all other ends. An inclusive end is one which falls into an overall life-plan or network of ends." In other words, a dominant end is an exclusive and supreme end while an inclusive end is a comprehensive or composite end.

Like Thomas Nagel, Hardie accuses Aristotle of failing to distinguish between these ends. He accuses Aristotle of mixing up the dominant and the inclusive theories of eudemonia.

We do agree with him when he argues that Aristotle generally advocated a dominant theory of eudemonia though he should have advocated an inclusive view of eudemonia. As far as he is concerned, this is not what Aristotle advocated. But as far as his opponents are concerned this is exactly what Aristotle advocated.

However, Ackrill argues against Hardie's contention that Aristotle confused the two kinds of the ultimate end and that he advocated a dominant concept of eudemonia. Aristotle did not classify ends into dominant or inclusive ones. He was not concerned with the distinction between dominant and inclusive ends. The problem that concerns us here is whether Aristotle thought that there was only one ultimate end or a compound of ultimate ends that we should aspire to achieve.

Aristotle (1985, p. 19) states that "goods are divided ... into three types, some called external, some goods of the soul, others goods of the body; and the goods of the soul are said to be goods to the fullest extent and most of all, and the soul's actions and activities are ascribed to the soul."

These ends have been described as either 'complete' or 'incomplete.' In Aristotle's view, "an end pursued in itself ... is more complete than an end pursued because of something else; and an end that is never choiceworthy because of something else is more complete than ends that are choiceworthy both in themselves and because of this end; and hence an end that is always {choiceworthy, and also} choiceworthy in itself, never because of something else, is unconditionally complete" (1985, p.14). Some critics have taken issue with this criterion of completeness.

This suggests that there is a hierarchy of ends and degrees of completeness, with different ends successively becoming more complete than the lower ones, thus culminating in the most complete end, eudemonia.

For Hardie, the perfectly happy person does not necessarily need to aim at a theoretic life as the ultimate goal. He argues that it is needless to seek contemplation as an ultimate and dominant end. We should also pursue other ends. This does not mean that he rejects the dominant interpretation of Aristotle's conception of eudemonia.

This is the theory that he attributes to Aristotle whom he criticizes for holding it. Though he admits that there are passages of the *Ethics* where Aristotle argues in favour of the inclusive view of eudemonia, he argues that Aristotle eventually concludes that intellectualism alone is the highest human goal.

Hardie advocates for an intellectual or a dominant-end interpretation of Aristotle's conception of eudemonia. For him, Aristotle's conception of eudemonia is that it is the single end of contemplative activity. Aristotle meant that all goods are sought for the sake of happiness to which they are subordinate. The optimum good consists in the pursuit of contemplation. Other goods should be pursued to the extent that they lead to contemplation.

The dominant interpretation of eudemonia regards the phrase 'the best and most perfect virtue' as a clear reference to theoretical wisdom. However, this does not mean, as Kraut (1989, p. 197) puts it, that in "NE I there is just one kind of happy life for human beings - the theoretical life discussed in X. 7-8." These chapters say "that although perfect happiness consists solely in contemplation, one can also be happy (to a secondary degree) if one lives a life devoted to ethical activity as one's ultimate end ... perfect happiness consists in exercising theoretical wisdom (the most perfect virtue), while a secondarily perfect happiness consists in exercising the practical virtues (the ones that are not most perfect)" (pp. 197-198). Alternatively, both theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom are the most perfect virtues, except that the one is basically most perfect whereas the other is most perfect only secondarily or derivatively. "For no matter which of the two goals one adopts as one's ultimate end, one will lead a good life - if one is adequately supplied with other goods, so that one can regularly engage in virtuous activity over the course of a lifetime" (p. 198).

Thus, there are two aspects of the good life or the happy life, the life according to practical virtue (in which this is the ultimate end pursued in action) as well as the kind of life in which theoretical virtue is the ultimate end. Since theoretical virtue is greater than practical virtue, according to Aristotle, the kind of life in accordance with it is better than the one according to practical virtue. Indeed the theoretic life is regarded as the best of all kinds of human life.

The inclusive thesis claims that Aristotle is “saying that happiness is a composite of all the goods that are desirable for themselves: it is not to be equated with virtuous activity alone, for that is not the only good that is desirable in itself” (*ibid.*).

According to the advocates of the inclusive thesis, Aristotle says that happiness is self-sufficient and complete since it is composed of all intrinsic goods. In this case, it cannot be identified with a single good, namely the activity of virtue, much less with one virtuous activity - the activity of contemplation.

On the contrary, the dominant interpretation of Aristotle’s conception of eudemonia states that the conclusion of the function argument identifies happiness with virtuous activity only. The ultimate end is only one type of virtuous activity, namely, contemplation. The dominant interpretation rejects the rival interpretation that purports “that the ultimate end of the best life consists not just in contemplation, but in a composite of many different types of virtuous activities” (p. 199). Even if this argument is granted, “the function argument is still equating the human good with virtuous activities and with no other type of good” (*ibid.*). Even Book I is not “treating human happiness as a composite of all intrinsic goods. On such a reading, Aristotle is contradicting himself within a single chapter: first ... he says that happiness is an all-inclusive composite, and then ... he equates it solely with virtuous activity ... that contradiction can be avoided by reinterpreting the first of these two passages” (pp. 199-200).

According to the *NE*, goods are arranged in a hierarchy that terminates in a single ultimate good. That is, each good is pursued for the sake of eudemonia. However, there is a common objection that states that there is no textual evidence to show that the hierarchy has a single definite end.

## The Inclusive View

According to the inclusive interpretation of Aristotle's view of eudemonia, happiness is a composite of all intrinsically desirable goods. The supreme good is neither contemplation nor virtuous activity. It is an all-inclusive good. As a composite whole, eudemonia or happiness is superior to any of its individual parts. In this case eudemonia may be likened to a cake made of many necessary ingredients, none of which is self-sufficient.

The causal relation advocated by Ackrill is a mysterious one. For the components of the composite of happiness seem not to have any connecting link. They are merely conglomerated within the compound of happiness.

The final good must be the most inclusive good, since the more intrinsic goods it contains, the better it becomes.

"Now, if there need be no connection between any one component of happiness and any other, then there is no explanatory value in the statement that some single good is desirable for the sake of the larger whole ... since that relation is mysterious, we should not attribute it to Aristotle without strong textual reason for doing so" (pp. 212-213). The inclusive view seems to have no textual basis.

According to the dominant interpretation, Aristotle said that ethical virtues ought to be pursued for the sake of contemplation. However, according to the inclusive thesis pursuing A for the sake of B means that the former is a part of the latter.

Akrill claims that Aristotle committed a fallacy in the passage at *NE* 1094a18-22. For he seemed to move "from the claim (a) that every activity aims at some end, to the conclusion (b) that there is some one end aimed at by every activity." (p. 217) According to Ackrill's reading of Book I.2 Aristotle is trying to prove that every action aims at a definite end. But, for Ackrill, if this statement is understood to mean that every end is pursued for the sake of other ends then it makes sense and Aristotle did not commit a fallacy in the stated argument.

Before his presentation of the function argument in Book I.7, Aristotle admits that it is possible for the good life to be characterized by various ultimate ends. However, if this is the case, then there are as many different conceptions of the best life as there are different ends. But there can only be one ultimate end in the same series of ends; there cannot really be more than one ultimate end, in the true sense of the word 'ultimate'.

But this alone does not prove that the good as the ultimate end is a compound of many intrinsic goods. Indeed, the points that Aristotle makes about politics and the ultimate end favour the dominant interpretation rather than the inclusive view of Ackrill who uses the claim that the end of politics embraces the ends of all other crafts as the evidence for his inclusive interpretation of the good. For he takes Aristotle's conception of the good to be a composite as opposed to a single dominant good. For him, however, eudemonia is not the composite of all kinds of goods; it is the composite of intrinsic goods.

Yet the end of political science, namely, the good, embraces other intrinsic ends in the sense that these are pursued for its sake. Contrary to Ackrill's suggestion, it does not embrace them in the sense that they are its ingredients.

According to the dominant interpretation of eudemonia, Aristotle says that the best and the second-best choices for the ultimate end are contemplation and ethical virtuous activity, respectively.

In the NE Aristotle is seeking a certain single good that is the ultimate end of all other goods. Ackrill opposes this interpretation of the three kinds of ends.

For him, happiness is the end that comprises every intrinsic good. A good is said to be more perfect than another one if it contains more goods than the other one. And happiness is taken to be the most perfect good because it is the composite of all intrinsic goods. Ackrill thinks that the concept of eudemonia is inclusive of all goods that are desirable in themselves. Although he tries to attribute it to Aristotle, the latter really does not interpret eudemonia in this way. Eudemonia is the highest good precisely because it is perfect and cannot be improved upon by any additional good, not because it contains enough goods already, but because it is the final good.

Eudemonia is unique in the sense that it requires no extra good other than itself to perfect it; it is already perfect. But goods other than eudemonia may be improved by additional goods.

Aristotle's observation that the best virtuous activity is the highest good implies that it is our only ultimate goal. Since it is not only a good but the ultimate good, it has all the three properties of an ultimate end: it is desired for its own sake and not for the sake of anything other than itself. Besides, other goods are desired for its sake. Aristotle takes the most perfect good not to be a means to any further end, but a good that is the end of all other goods or ends.

According to the dominant interpretation of eudemonia, Aristotle takes theoretical wisdom to be the best and the most perfect virtue. Contemplation is the highest good because it is the only activity according to the best or the most perfect virtue, namely, theoretical wisdom. As indicated already, there is a distinction between happiness proper and secondary happiness in Book X. Although the life of ethical activity is also a happy life since it consists in the exercise of practical wisdom, perfect happiness can only be found in contemplation.

The indecision concerning which of these two kinds of life is superior to the other in Book I is finally resolved in the tenth book where Aristotle says that the contemplative, intellectual or philosophical life is the best, happiest or most perfect life. However, the moral life is also the happiest life in a *secondary or a derivative way*.

But perfect happiness, in the real sense, consists only in the contemplative activity of the philosopher. The theoretical wisdom of the philosopher is the good or the ultimate end since it consists in contemplation as the activity according to the most perfect virtue.

In Book I, the good is only described as a rational activity of the soul according to virtue, leaving open the question as to what that activity is. However, in Book X it is identified as contemplation, moral activity is depicted as the penultimate end while intellectual activity is portrayed as the ultimate end of humans.

Nevertheless, the inclusive thesis of Ackrill and Cooper claims that Aristotle is convinced "that to be happy to a secondary degree, one must lead a life in which all other ends are pursued for the sake of activity in accordance with ethical virtue.

It is perfectly correct then, to say that the function argument does not commit Aristotle to the thesis that happiness consists in contemplation alone. Contemplation is the only activity being referred to when he speaks of 'the best and most perfect' virtue, but we should not infer from this that, in his opinion, no other kind of good should be identified with happiness." (pp. 240-241)

We disagree with Ackrill who regards Aristotle's conception of the good as a composite of all virtues. Aristotle's reference to the good as an activity in accordance with the best and most perfect virtue implies that he identifies it with one virtue. "This of course does not commit him to the view that someone leading the best life needs only one virtue. Rather, his claim is only that the activity at the pinnacle of human goods is the exercise of some one virtue; many other virtues are needed, but they occupy lower positions in the hierarchy" (pp. 242-243).

Although Aristotle identifies the good with only one virtue, he also suggests that it is possible to be happy by acting according to the less perfect virtues. It is for this reason that Aristotle points out in Book I.8 that happiness consists in the best activity or the best activities. And in Book X.7-8 he made a distinction between perfect happiness and secondary happiness. The latter is identified as the second-best activity while the former is identified as the best activity.

Perfect happiness consists in activity according to theoretical wisdom while secondary happiness consists in activity in accordance with practical (or moral) wisdom.

Aristotle make it clear that the political life of practical wisdom and the philosophical theoretical life are both happy though the latter is happier than the former. Indeed, he regards the latter life as the happiest life.

Akrill and other opponents of the dominant interpretation claim that happiness should not be identified with any single good such as ethical activity, or contemplation, or honour, or pleasure. For any such good is one among many other goods, and no matter how desirable it may be, it is always less desirable than the combination of that good and some other good no matter how little it might turn out to be.

For example, they would insist that contemplation is less desirable than the composite that consists in contemplation plus physical pleasure - assuming that both of them are good in themselves. Happiness is seen as an inclusive composite of all goods that are desirable in themselves. Obviously, everyone who has everything that he requires does not lack anything that he/she requires. That is, what makes him/her happy is the fact that he/she is self-sufficient. In this case, happiness is especially desirable because it is complete and it does not require additional goods to supplement it and to make it a better whole. According to this interpretation, happiness is a comprehensive self-sufficient whole that cannot be improved upon since it already contains every necessary thing.

Once you have the greatest amount of happiness that settles the matter: there are no other goods that can make one's life better or happier. Ackrill and others infer from this way of reading Aristotle's argument that he was identifying happiness not with any one good such as contemplation but with the composite of all intrinsic goods. They seem to project their own conception of happiness into Aristotle's conception of happiness. Since happiness consists in virtuous activity alone, the addition of something other than virtuous activity to virtuous activity does not produce more happiness; only more virtuous activity leads to more happiness. There cannot be an increment in happiness on account of an increment of goods other than itself. We take it that this is the correct interpretation of Aristotle's conception of happiness.

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