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Happiness is an Activity in Accordance with Virtue

In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, his position on the relation of happiness and virtue cannot be debated. Aristotle says happiness is not a virtue, but it is activity in accordance with virtue. (1097b, 22-23) Yet, if the Athenian's position cannot be debated, the validity of said believe most certainly can. Throughout this paper I intend to respond to the allegation (with evidence from the *Nicomachean Ethics*,) that "happiness is not an activity in accordance with virtue." Three specific areas of concern for disbelief of Aristotle's idea are in the conventional sense of "virtue," that the pursuit of happiness often involves vice, and that the life of virtue is hard. The most effective way to confront these common disbeliefs to make solid connections between virtue and happiness, that will hold up to question and scrutiny.

In order to accept the possibility of happiness being an activity in accordance with virtue, there must be some intelligible link. If it can be accepted that happiness is, in itself, a state, then a link can be drawn from happiness to virtue. For Aristotle three conditions arise in the soul, "feelings, capacities and states," (1105b, 19) and he says virtue must be one of these. Virtue, as well as vice, cannot be feelings because we do not blame or praise a person who is afraid, or angry, but we do blame or praise a person "insofar as we have virtues or vices." (1106a, 2-3) Also, feelings are not decisions, but in a way our virtue, and conceding to vice, is. So on these grounds virtue is not a feeling. For the same reasons virtues are not capacities. A person is not considered good or bad because of their feelings but because of their virtues. Thus, virtue is a state. If virtue is a

state, and happiness is a state then they are inherently compatible. In this context “state” can also be interpreted as a “disposition.”

Although the pursuit of happiness can include vice, a good example that will help ease this concern is one of a pruned tree. Humans, in some sense, are like a tree. As a tree grows, it sometimes gets pruned, for phone lines or a new road, etc. Vices for people are like being pruned for a tree, they change you. If humans develop into our natural shape we will seek virtue, and avoid these vices that change us (again somewhat dependant on rearing.) The origin of vices is important in this situation. Vice is the result of some external good, but these goods are needed, “since we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources.” It is the way in which we deal with these resources that will decide and lead us to a virtuous path.

For Aristotle, the happiness, or good, which people seek is something that people can aim for through choices; in contrast to Plato who claims that one cannot know the “good” for which one is to aim. This happiness that can be sought through choice is another link to virtue because virtue for Aristotle is reflective of the choices one makes. If the choices that are made shape your virtue, and aim towards the ultimate happiness via choices, then there is additional link between happiness and virtue. But, this is virtue in Aristotle’s sense, not the conventional usage.

By using the conventional sense of “virtue,” a claim can be constructed to devaluate Aristotle’s bond of happiness and virtue. To this claim book II chapter six notes that there is an objective standard per each person. The virtues, through the doctrine of the mean, though constant in idea, are relative. For example, the mean diet for the conventional person is about 2000 calories a day, but for an athlete the mean may be

3000 calories a day. Since a virtuous person is one that is disposed towards the mean, if the mean can fluctuate, then virtue can as well. Virtue has to be able to fluctuate for Aristotle's work to be as lasting as has been and thus incorporates the conventional sense of "virtue," (whatever the conventional sense may be at any given time or place.)

To work backwards from happiness may also help to show that it is an activity in accordance with the mean. Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtue employs four cases, material, form, efficient, and final. Beginning with the Final case, or the "end;" the end that we seek is one and the same as "happiness." The Efficient case is what leads us into the Final state of happiness. Aristotle says that we all seek the final state of happiness and that is just accepted; this Efficient state is practice or habit. Working one step back again is Form, which is a definition. Aristotle's first step Material/Matter falls back, once again to actions. Our actions are dependant on our choices, choices that due to effect, happiness and virtue have in common. Even with the commonalities between happiness and virtue, some people would still hold that the life of virtue is too hard.

"That the life of virtue is hard" is the easy to refute. Aristotle says that you cannot reach the end without activity and luck. Of course, basing your activities on virtue will lead you towards happiness, but the element of luck is also crucial. If a person leads the good life and for example, that person's child commits suicide, Aristotle says that, that person who was leading the good life cannot achieve happiness, due to something that was out of their control; in other words, luck (in this example it happened to be bad luck.) Virtue, he says, though not able to compensate for all misfortunes can compensate for some. That virtue can compensate for some misfortunes is awry from Plato's position

that with virtue no one can harm you. On a more practical note applicable to today's world, the saying "life is tough, deal with it," applies. If living life in general is hard, then living the good life to reach an ultimate happiness is going to be even more difficult. For Aristotle, rearing in one's youth contributes toward a person's capability to reach the "end." Poor choices early in life are difficult to overcome, as well as the values that are taught to people when they are children, but with the right direction and motive can be overcome. Though, both virtue and vice are not taught, the way a person views the elements of virtue and vice can be taught.

To reach the best end, or happiness, with virtues as a guide to that end, then Aristotle must be right. If, as he says, one cannot achieve the end without activity and luck, happiness must be and activity in accordance with virtue. Luck can only cover part of the path to happiness, so something else must pave the way. Virtue, as a state of character with respect to feelings has to be that guide. What else could be the guide? Aristotle, though not stating explicitly, implies that virtue is its own reward. Since, happiness is "that which you do for the sake of which you do everything else you do," happiness must also be its own reward, in accordance with virtue. Happiness must be in accordance with virtue, just as "virtue of the eyes makes the eyes and their functioning excellent," or "virtue of a human being... will be the state that makes a human being good and perform his function well." For if happiness is in accordance with virtue, then it must result in the ultimate good.