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Bryan C. Reece, *Aristotle on Happiness, Virtue, and Wisdom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 240 pp. ISBN: 978-1108486736

In *NE* I.4 Aristotle presents the goal of this work, saying that it addresses two related questions: What is the aim of political science, and what is the highest of all goods achievable by action? He replies that whereas there is a general agreement that this good is happiness, there is a disagreement about what happiness is (1095a14–22), and proceeds to discuss this question. In *NE* I.7 he outlines the answer through the *ergon* (function) argument, which shows that the highest human good is: ‘an activity of the soul according to virtue, and if there are several virtues, according to the best and most perfect’ (1098a16–18).¹ The answer to the question of what activity of the soul constitutes happiness, appears in *NE* X.7, where Aristotle identifies it with contemplation:

If happiness is an activity according to virtue, it is reasonable that it is according to the highest [virtue]; and it would be [the activity] of the best. Whether it is intellect or something else, which seems by nature as ruling, guiding, and having a notion about noble and divine things, whether it is itself divine or the most divine [element] in us, the activity of this [element] according to proper virtue would be complete happiness. This activity, as it is said, is contemplative (1177a12–18).

This unambiguous answer notwithstanding, it is debated whether in this passage Aristotle presents his full account of happiness. The major consideration that gave rise to this doubt is that most of the *NE*, where ethical virtues are discussed, implies that ethically virtuous activities are also the highest human good and hence lead to happiness. The question of whether Aristotle holds that happiness consists in contemplation alone, or in ethically virtuous activities as well dominated the secondary literature since the second half of the previous century, and has led to three main views: (1) Happiness is contemplation, while virtuous activities are means to this end; (2) contemplation and virtuous activities are parts of happiness, but the former activity should be favored when reasonable; and (3) perfect happiness is contemplation, whereas virtuous activities are parts of an inferior kind of happiness.

In his *Aristotle on Happiness, Virtue, and Wisdom* [Aristotle on Happiness] Bryne C. Reece (= R.) approaches this debate from a fresh perspective. He argues that the third view does not satisfactorily accommodate the first and second views, primarily because there is no clear evidence that Aristotle distinguishes between two types of happiness. However, instead of addressing the ‘dilemmatic problem of happiness’ i.e., whether happiness consists in contemplation alone or in contemplation as well as in ethically virtuous activities, he infers that Aristotle holds both that happiness consists in contemplation alone and that it consists in contemplation as well as in ethically virtuous activity. He thus raises the ‘conjunctive problem of happiness’: How can Aristotle consistently hold these apparently incompatible views? His answer is that ‘ethically virtuous activities are proper to happiness as parts, whereas contemplation is proper to happiness in a different, primary way, a way that is compatible with saying that happiness is contemplative activity’ (113). This answer resembles the third answer above, but it differs from it by regarding contemplation and virtuous activities as parts of the same kind of happiness.

Having this aim, *Aristotle on Happiness* primarily addresses the proponents of the above three views, by attempting to offer a satisfying account that will convince them to relinquish the assumptions underlying the dilemmatic problem and accept the assumptions underlying the

¹ The translations are mine.

conjunctive problem. Consequently, this book is about Aristotle's conception of happiness insofar as it is reflected in this debate. This is not a mean task. It requires a comprehensive knowledge of the vast literature on the subject and a profound understanding of the assumptions underlying each view. R. competently accomplishes this task. He identifies three theses that prevent a solution to the conjunctive problem and challenges them. They are: (1) The divergence thesis, according to which it is possible to have theoretical wisdom without having practical wisdom. (2) The duality thesis, according to which there are two kinds of happiness, a superior kind that corresponds to theoretical contemplation and an inferior kind that corresponds to ethically virtuous activities. (3) The divinity thesis, according to which contemplation is not proper to human beings, since divine beings too engage in contemplation. Regarding the first thesis, he argues that contemplation implies practical wisdom because it implies regulation of passions and requires excellent application of practical intellect. Regarding the third thesis, he argues that human and divine contemplation are distinct in type, notably because human contemplation is discursive, whereas divine contemplation is simple and purely reflexive. The arguments for these theses are complex and of varying strength. Here I focus on R.'s discussion of the duality thesis since, being pivotal for his solution to the conjunctive problem of happiness, it facilitates an examination of the main line of argument of this book.

The duality thesis is based on the last paragraph of *NE X.7* and the first sentence of *NE X.8*, where the intellect is described as follows:

But this [scil. intellect] would seem also to be each man himself, since this is the principal and better [part]. Therefore, it would be strange if he were to choose not the life of himself but something else. And what we said before accords with what we say now too: What is proper (*οικεῖον*) by nature to each thing is the best and most pleasant to each thing. And a life according to reason is proper to man, since this is above all man. Therefore, this life is also the happiest (*εὐδαιμονέστατος*). But secondarily, life according to the other virtue; for human activities are according with this (1178a2–1178a10).

The last sentence of this passage (*Δευτέρως δ' ὁ κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετὴν*) lacks an explicit predicate, and therefore leaves the respect in which life according to virtue is secondary unclear. Translators supply the elided predicate from the previous sentence. They translate the above sentence as, 'but secondarily, life according to the other virtue is the happiest (or happy)', thereby reading the duality thesis into this passage. In his meticulous analysis of this thesis, R. persuasively argues that the elided predicate should be 'proper', and that Aristotle distinguishes two modes of life that are proper to human beings: a life of contemplation, which is proper in a primary way, and a life of ethically virtuous activities, which is proper in a secondary way.

The distinction between these two ways of being proper underlies R.'s solution to the conjunctive problem which, as we saw, accommodates the view that happiness consists in happiness alone with the view that it consists also in ethically virtuous activities through the claim that both contemplation and ethically virtuous activities are proper to happiness, while the former is proper in a primary way. In propounding this solution, R. does not explain how the distinction between two ways of being proper to happiness follows from the distinction between the two modes of life that are proper to human beings. The former distinction appears for the first time in Chapter 5 as an explanation of the claim that only those who are happy contemplate and engage in ethically virtuous activities, with a back reference to Chapters 3–4 (113). However, since in these chapters R. focuses on the distinction between two proper modes of life, what calls for explanation in Chapter 5 is the claim that contemplation and ethically virtuous activities are proper to happiness, not that people who contemplate and act according to ethical virtues are happy. Considering the centrality of the

former distinction to R.'s solution to the conjunctive problem, an explicit argument that derives it from the distinction between the two modes of life is required.

Furthermore, in reconstructing Aristotle's reasons for understanding happiness as primarily contemplative, R. appeals to the distinction, found in *Topics* I.4, between two types of predicates, called ἰδία, that belong to a given subject alone and are coextensive with it: (1) Definitions that express the essence of the subject, and (2) other co-extensive predicates that do not express the essence of the subject (101b17–22) in the way, for instance, that the predicate 'being capable of becoming literate' belongs to 'man'.² Applying this distinction to happiness, R. argues that contemplation is proper to it in the former sense, and therefore it is primary, whereas ethically virtuous activities are proper to it in the latter sense. However, the relevance of the distinction between two types of properties to happiness is not as immediately clear as R. assumes. In the above passage from *NE* X.7 Aristotle does not use the adjective ἴδιος when he argues that life according to reason is proper to man, but the adjective οἰκεῖος. While 'proper' is a correct English translation of these adjectives, in this passage οἰκεῖος does not have the logical sense that ἴδιος has in the *Topics*. It appears with dative ἐκάστῳ, and therefore means 'belonging to' as the antonym of 'foreign' (ἀλλότριος), whereas ἴδιος in the logical sense means 'unique' as the antonym of 'common'.

Accordingly, to ground Aristotle's conception of happiness in his theory of predication, R. has to tackle two issues. First, he has to show that in the *NE* X.7, or elsewhere in the corpus, Aristotle uses the adjective οἰκεῖος in the logical sense defined in the *Topics*. Second, he has to counter the objection that by understanding οἰκεῖος this way, he offers a weaker account of the relation between ethically virtuous activities and happiness than Aristotle's account implies. R. regards these activities as non-essential unique attributes (i.e., *per se* accidents), but in *NE* X.8 Aristotle says that they belong to human beings as composite of body and soul and *are* human (1178a19–21), thereby contrasting them with the activity of the intellect, of which he says in *NE* X.7 that it is superior to our composite nature (1177b28–29). Thus, rather than implying that the latter activity is essential whereas the former is a property, Aristotle's account implies that these activities are predicated of different subjects in the same way. The former is the characteristic activity of human beings as composites, whereas the latter is the characteristic activity of human beings as having a divine and separable faculty: the intellect. The shift from the dilemmatic problem to the conjunctive problem and the solution to the latter depend on a persuasive answer to this objection, since not all parties to the debate are likely to accept the weaker link of ethically virtuous activities to human beings and their happiness that R. proposes.

All in all, however, *Aristotle on Happiness* is a welcome contribution to the literature on Aristotle's conception of happiness. By raising and addressing the conjunctive problem of happiness, it opens new paths for studying this central subject in Aristotle's philosophy.

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² For this example, see *Topics* I.5, 102a19–20. Notice that in *Topics* I.8 Aristotle does not regard definitions as properties but classifies definitions and properties under predicates that convert with their subject (103b9–10).