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ARISTOTLE AND ELITISM

It is often said that Aristotle, since he locates human happiness preeminently in the exercise of speculative intellect – and not when it is in quest of truth about the divine, but when it can exercise that activity on truths already known in contemplation – effectively rules out the mass of mankind from human happiness. That this is a misunderstanding of what is going on when Aristotle identifies happiness preeminently with the exercise of our highest faculty is easily shown. But since the showing brings into play other aspects of Aristotle's alleged elitism, it is not without interest.

WHAT DOES ARISTOTLE MEAN BY 'MAN'

A preliminary question that must be raised is what the range of 'man' or 'human' is when Aristotle says things like „All men by nature desire to know" or that „Man is by nature a political animal" or speaks of 'human happiness'. Aristotle restricts what he has to say about politics to citizens. Not all members of a community are citizens. Slaves are notably excluded, and so too are women. Thus, quite apart from the alleged elitism within Aristotle's moral and political discussions, there seems to be an elitism of exclusion before the discussion even begins.

There are several ways in which this difficulty can be discussed. First, historically, and then there is unquestionably a restricted range to Aristotle's teaching. Second, theoretically, where the undeniable restraints of Aristotle's historic setting may be overcome by suggesting that there is no intrinsic reason in what he teaches for such restrictions. For centuries, at least, women have read – and interpreted – Aristotle's moral and political writings without fear that they do not fall within the range of what he has to say. This could only be the case if they are convinced, rightly, that the *de facto* restrictions are not *de iure*.

One could raise similar questions about the Declaration of Independence and other constitutive documents of our republic. Many of the founders approved of slavery, and women were not initially accorded the franchise and thus full admission to the body politic. If we reject these views, this is not because we wish to impose latter day opinions on earlier opinions, but rather because we think that the founders wrote better than they knew. When, over time, former slaves and women were admitted to full citizenship, it was not necessary to amend the statements of the founders so much as to set aside contingent and mistaken restrictions that were attached to their recognition of the truths they set down. When Jefferson wrote that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, it is doubtless historically true that he was not thinking of all men *tout court*. Nonetheless, what he said is true of all persons and it was only the range of his remark that had to be corrected.

So too, I suggest, it is the case with Aristotle. That he personally did not acknowledge the full range of the moral and political doctrine he proposed is unfortunately true; but it is equally true that what he had to say, when true, is true of all human persons[1].

[1] It will be said that Aristotle himself from time to time recognizes the expandability of what he is saying. „And any chance person – even a slave – can enjoy the bodily pleasures no less than the best man; but no one assigns to a slave a share in happiness – *unless he assigns to him also a share in human life*" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177 a 6–10). Perhaps as well the remark in *E. nic.*, after noting that happiness is the result of virtue, Aristotle goes on, „It will also on this view be very generally shared; for all who are not maimed as regards their potentiality for virtue, may win it by a certain kind of study and care" (1099 b 18–20). Such maiming would seem to be incidental to our shared nature which as such is perfected by actions appropriate to it. Aristotle is here arguing against the view that happiness is a result of chance, of good luck; but the maiming that might prevent a given person from acquiring the

CAN ALL HUMANS BE HAPPY?

But even when such liminal restraints on the possible range of Aristotle's moral doctrine are lifted, there remains the issue of how applicable his final identification of happiness is to all those he would have considered to be his addressees. If only the philosophical life, the life of contemplation of the divine, counts as happiness, this seems restrictive indeed. We may know of even professional philosophers who seem incapable of human happiness in this sense. We might in moments of candor wonder about ourselves. In quest of a proper understanding of contemplative happiness, let us put before us, in its broad outlines, the order of the discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

THAT THERE IS AN ULTIMATE END

Beginning with a list of human activities – and this list perceptive commentators have seen as covering the range of possible human pursuits – Aristotle observes that all activities aim at some good. This suggests the primary sense of 'good', viz. that at which all things aim, the end. If the activities with which the chapter begins, exhaust the kinds of human activity, and if they all aim at the good, it follows that every human act is undertaken with an eye to some end. All this can mean to this point is that „aiming at the end or good" is predicably common to all human activities, not that there is some one end of every activity. But that there is such an end Aristotle intends to show.

First, he makes a distinction among ends. Some lie beyond the activities that aim at them, as the work lies beyond artistic activity, while others are to be found in activities themselves. Then, indicating that he is as aware of this as those who have presumed to inform him of it, Aristotle notes that there are many kinds of activity having ends appropriate to them, and so there are many different ends. But it is because the end of an activity can be ordered to the end of another activity, that there can be a linking of ends. Indeed, in the case of the orchestration of the arts and skills that go into the construction of a building, the master-builder directs their ends to the overall end of a new building. Something similar is seen in the cluster of subordinated and subordinating arts that make up the military whose ultimate

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virtue that will make him happy, provided this is not due to previous bad actions of his own, would seem to be a matter of bad luck.

end is victory. Wouldn't it be a marvelous thing if there were some end which related to all we do as victory relates to all military activities and the construction of a new building gathers together the ends of all the building trades at the site? Aristotle next goes on to show that it would be incoherent to deny that there is such an ultimate end.

The purpose of the opening of Ch. L2 is not often seen. But the force of the passage lies in the parenthetical remarks which support the premisses. And they support the premisses by reducing to absurdity their denial. Anyone who denies that there is an ultimate end of all that we do, specific ends terminating finally in it, renders human action empty and vain. So, human action not being otiose and absurd, there must be an ultimate end of human life. Such a reductive argument is used when the truth in question is not in need of proof, being clear in itself. The reduction to absurdity of counterclaims is the appropriate defense of such first principles.

Knowledge of this end must be assigned to an authoritative and master art. „And politics appears to be of this nature". We are then reminded that all overt human acts can fall under law and the law is meant to order them, not simply to their proper effects – for example, operating a motor vehicle – but to do so in a way that contributes to the overall good of the community. Thus, Aristotle, having defended the fact that there must be an ultimate end of all we do, goes on to show that such an end is presupposed by legislation. Moreover, there is a word for the good at which all our activities ultimately aim, and it is happiness.

To be happy is to live well, but as to what this consists of there is wide disagreement, some saying pleasure, others wealth, honor, health, money or a Separate Good. A methodological aside indicates that Aristotle does not regard all views on the matter to be equal. „[...] anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science, must have been brought up in good habits" (1095 b 4–6)[2]. But the distinction here between the word "happiness" and its applicants, opens the way to the crucial task of Book I, to get clear on what the ultimate end or human happiness consists of. What are the conditions of happiness? How do we know which of the rival views is the right one? Only after Aristotle has established the conditions of happiness, can he ask what

[2] What might be called Aristotle's „methodological elitism" is summed up in the repeated maxim that in moral matters the good man is the measure.

candidate or candidates fulfills these conditions[3]. But initially he notes that three kinds of life have been recognized, each bearing on something taken to be ultimate and good, the life of pleasure, the political life and the contemplative life. And, beginning with the suggestion that honor might be the end of the political life, Aristotle ends with linking it with virtue (*E. nic.*, Book I, Ch. 5).

THE CONDITIONS OF HAPPINESS

In Chapter 7 of Book I Aristotle sets down five conditions that an end will have to meet in order to be ultimate and worthy to be called happiness. Of happiness it can be said that:

1. It is always sought for itself and not for the sake of something else.
2. It is self sufficient.
3. It is virtuous activity.
4. It is an activity of that which is best in us.
5. It is pleasant.

It is in establishing the third condition that Aristotle introduces the justly famous function- or ergon-argument.

'RATIONAL ACTIVITY' AS EQUIVOCAL *PROS HEN*

The distinctive activity or ergon that sets man off from everything else is rational activity. But such a characteristic activity provides a basis for talking about 'well' and 'good'. Once we know what a carpenter's function is we can assess his performance and dub it well or poorly done. This is true of golfers, tanners, bankers, etc. Thus, the isolation of man's function qua man enables us to say that to perform this function well makes for a good man. The 'well' of the function is its perfection or virtue. For a thing to do well the characteristic work of its kind is to make it a good instance of that kind.

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[3] Similarly, Thomas Aquinas at the beginning of the moral part of his *Summa* first establishes the *ratio felicitatis* and then goes on to ask what best fulfills or instantiates that formally (I–II, q. 1, a. 6.) Thus, Aristotle can be said to be establishing the formal notion of happiness first, preparing the way for the eventual judgment as to what human activity best saves or embodies this formal notion.

But at the very point where he identifies the peculiarly human work, Aristotle makes clear that man's ergon has a range of meanings. „There remains, then, an active life of the element which has a rational principle; of this one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing or exercising thought. And, as 'life of the rational element' also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is meant, for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term" (1098 a 2–7) We are not surprised, then, when he states this condition of happiness: „human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete" (ibidem, 1098 a 17–18).

If 'activity of soul in accordance with virtue' is a phrase that is applied unequally, the same is true of 'virtue', something that is spelled out at the end of the book, thus setting the stage for the development of the subsequent books. In Chapter 13 of Book I, Aristotle introduces a rough account of the soul on which he can ground various virtues. There is an irrational part of the soul as well as a rational part; the former is divisible into vegetative activity, which is not amenable to rational direction, and a part that shares in the rational principle, when it responds to the guidance of reason. But this latter part also wars against reason and it is no easy matter to bring it under the sway of reason. This is the primary moral task[4].

But the rational principle is also twofold and thus its perfection or virtue cannot be spoken of univocally. The final words of Book I are of enormous importance for this issue.

„Virtue too is distinguished into kinds in accordance with this difference; for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual and others moral, philosophic wisdom being intellectual, liberality and temperance moral. For in speaking about a man's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state of mind; and of states of mind we call those which merit praise virtues" (1103 a 4–10).

The array of virtues is based on the complexity of the human agent who sometimes uses his mind theoretically and sometimes practically;

[4] „Now even this seems to have a share in a rational principle, as we said; at any rate in the continent man it obeys the rational principle – and presumably in the temperate and brave man it is still more obedient; for in him it speaks on all matters, with the same voice as the rational principle" (1102 b 26–28).

the latter use is capable of swaying the irrational part that consists in desires consequent on perception. Of themselves, these appetitive activities of the irrational part seem at war with reason, but this need not be so – in the virtuous person they 'speak with the same voice as the rational principle'. The final sentence in the quotation above makes it clear that moral virtues have a greater claim on the term 'virtue' than do the term intellectual virtues. Just as the secondary senses of „healthy" point to the primary meaning and have only that claim on the common term, so it is with 'virtue'. The primary sense of 'virtue' is shortly explained in Book II and it becomes clear that given that definition intellectual virtues are virtues only in a secondary and derivative sense. Thus when we speak of a life lived according to virtue we doubtlessly have in mind moral virtues. If not, we, like Aristotle in the final lines of Book I, would have to make a case for calling intellectual habits virtues. To say that intellectual virtues are virtues only in a derivative and secondary sense does not mean that they are not really virtues – in a sense they are virtues. But, of course, they are not virtues in the same way as moral virtues.

Many of the difficulties raised with regard to the *Nicomachean Ethics* would perhaps not be raised if we recognized more carefully in this work, as indeed throughout Aristotle, the way in which non-univocal names behave. It is one of his key contributions, as G. E. L. Owen has said, and if Aristotle does not quite bring it into play in his discussion of Plato's separate good in Chapter 6, it can be seen to define the very order of the work. These suggestions about the controlled equivocity of the term 'virtue' must be kept in mind when we follow Aristotle's search for the virtuous activity which best saves the conditions of happiness laid out in Book I.

HAPPINESS AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

WHAT FULFILS THE CONDITIONS OF HAPPINESS?

When he has enumerated the conditions of happiness in Book I, Aristotle, true to the methodological remarks he has made earlier, tests what he has said by reference to common opinion. This respect for opinions of human beings occupies chapters 8 through 11, and is anything but perfunctory. And it foreshadows the task that is undertaken in chapter 7 of Book X: the identification of happiness by identifying the activity that best exemplifies the conditions of happiness:

This culminating task of the work reposes on everything that has intervened between it and Book I.

„If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thoughts of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said" (1177 a 12–18).

Aristotle makes now clear that contemplation is the activity that best saves the conditions of happiness. First, it is the best of the best, since reason bears on the best objects. Secondly, it is continuous. Third, it is most pleasant. Fourth, it is self sufficient and, fifth loved for its own sake. For good measure, he adds a sixth feature, since happiness is thought to depend on leisure. A good commentary should note that the conditions are ordered differently here than in Book I and seek the reason why. But it suffices for our purposes to see the basis for the identification of contemplation and happiness.

Now this seems an odd upshot in a work that was billed at the outset as a political one. The political life has its own characteristic end and we might have expected the work to point to the aims and virtues and activities of the practical life. The introduction of the sixth condition, leisure, leads to a comparison and contrast of the contemplative and practical lives. But the activity of the virtues appropriate to the political life are not leisurely, and „the action of the statesman is also unleisurely, and – apart from the political action itself – aims at despotic power and honours, or at all events happiness, for him and his fellow citizens – a happiness different from political action, and evidently sought as being different" (1177 b 12–16). This important passage indicates two things. First, it makes clear that political action does not save the conditions of happiness in the way that contemplation does. Second, political action is ordered to the happiness that is contemplation.

This is Thomas's understanding of the passage in the middle of Chapter 7 of Book I just after Aristotle has shown that the *ratio ultimi finis*, as Thomas calls it in the *Summa theologiae*, the conditions of happiness, are best saved in contemplative activity, and has gone on to add that, over and above the five conditions or constituents of the notion of happiness, there is another, leisure. We are busy that we might have leisure. That is the crux. Earlier in speaking of games he had said that rest is a restorative and is ordered to work, but the lei-

sure he has in mind now is that which rests in the possession of the end. That which aims at no end beyond itself can rest in that end, enjoy leisure, whereas the pursuit of an end ordered to another does not afford leisure or at least not in the same degree. As the passage quoted above indicates political life is ordered to an end beyond itself. The power and honor that seem to be its commensurate ends have already been dismissed as constituting happiness in Book I, so the happiness to which political life is ordered cannot be reduced to those. The peace and tranquility afforded by the attainment of the end of the political life as such provide men with the opportunity of contemplating truth[5].

The fact that contemplative activity best fulfils the conditions of happiness does not mean that political life does not do so in a secondary way. Furthermore, as just seen, political life is ordered to the activity that does best fulfil those conditions. Like 'virtue', 'happiness' is equivocal *pros hen* and there is no more reason for saying that political life does not provide real happiness, though in a secondary sense, than there would be to say that a diet is not really healthy because it is not healthy in the primary sense of the term.

THAT CONTEMPLATION IS NOT EXCLUSIVE

Once it is appreciated that Aristotle's characteristic use of controlled equivocation does not allow the interpretation that only contemplation can be called happiness, and that political life, which provides happiness in a secondary sense, is ordered to that which is happiness in the fullest sense, it should be noted that Aristotle is speaking of the way in which men can be happy. „If so, we shall call happy those among living men in whom these conditions are, and are to be, fulfilled – but happy men" (1101 a 19–20). Even contemplation is, taking the condi-

[5] Secundo etiam hoc manifestum est in actionibus politicis, quod non est in eis vacatio; sed praeter ipsam conversationem civilem vult homo acquirere aliquid aliud, puta potentatus et honores; vel, quia in his non est ultimus finis ut in primo ostensum est, magis est decens, quod per civilem conversationem aliquis velit acquirere felicitatem sibi ipsi et civibus, ita quod huiusmodi felicitas, quam intendit aliquis acquirere per politicam vitam, sit altem ab ipsa politica vita; sic enim per vitam politicam, quaerimus eam quasi alteram existentem ab ipsa. Haec est enim felicitas speculativa, ad quam tota vita politica videtur ordinata; dum per pacem, quae per ordinationem vitae politicae statuitur et conservatur, datur hominibus facultas contemplandi veritatem (L. 10, n. 4, Bk X).

tions of happiness seriously, an imperfect happiness. Still, it is the happiness that men can achieve by action[6]. Indeed, in his discussion of contemplation as preeminently happiness, Aristotle draws attention to those imperfections.

When Aristotle makes clear that the human *ergon*, life according to a rational principle, is equivocal *pros hen*, with the activity of theoretical reason exemplifying the *ergon* most perfectly, practical reason less so, and the passions as they come under the sway of reason even less, we do not say that he is confining the term to that which saves its meaning best. So too with the concept of virtue developed modally from the analysis of the ergon. It is the 'well' or excellence of the characteristic activity, its virtue, that makes both the activity and the agent good. But virtue too is a pros hen equivocal. Is virtue in the primary sense the perfection of rational activity in the primary sense? No. Moral virtue, the bringing of the passions under rational control, is the primary sense of virtue. Does this fact lead to the denial that intellectual virtues are virtue? Of course not. Similarly, the fact that contemplation best saves the conditions of happiness and thus it is happiness should not lead us to think that the political life is not real happiness. That it fulfills the conditions of happiness less perfectly than contemplation is of course true, but as in the two cases just recalled, this ought not lead to the rejection of the practical life as not really productive of happiness. This is to impose a narrow and univocal outlook which is far from Aristotle's own ordered but expansive conception of human life.

Nor should it be overlooked that Aristotle has difficulty with the notion that contemplation is a *human* life. In order to satisfy himself on this point he makes the startling remark, „for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man" (1178 a 6–7). More than anything else. Not, to the exclusion of everything else. He goes on immediately to say that „in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate" (Ibidem, 8–10). It is practical wisdom, not theoretical, *phronesis* rather than *sophia*, which is typically human. Thomas Aquinas called prudence *sapientia viro* – the wisdom befitting a man. „The ex-

[6] It is well known that it is this passage that leads Thomas Aquinas to say that Aristotle himself realized that we can only imperfectly realize the ideal of happiness. Given that, it can be said to relate as imperfect to the perfect happiness to which the Christian aspires.

cellence of the reason is a thing apart [...]" (Ibidem, 21). Contemplation is the activity that is most divine – it is the activity that can be appropriately assigned to God, and our contemplation has God as its object – but we can never forget the complex nature of the human who engages in it. He will need the necessities of life like anyone else; he will need the society of friends like anyone else; and he must be morally virtuous, though his exercise of the virtues will differ from that of the person whose life is characterized by happiness in the secondary degree. Contemplation is the distinguishing mark of the philosophical life, but no human life could consist of it alone. It is, in fact, episodic. Even Homer nods and philosophers need their sleep, and this need stands for all the other factors of daily life that they continue to share with those whose happiness does not consist in contemplation.

But to show that the philosopher continues to share in activities more human than contemplation, that his life encompasses as well the virtues that define a lesser life, still leaves open the question whether the political life does not share in some way in contemplation. An analysis of the *Poetics* from this point of view is suggestive.

TRAGEDY AND CONTEMPLATION

The most important thing about the *Poetics*, for our purposes, is that it was written by a philosopher[7]. For Plato there is an ancient quarrel between the philosopher and poet, but the *Poetics* reveals a philosopher who spent a good deal of time at the theater where he rubbed elbows with fellow citizens who would have been, most of them, engaged in the practical life. But while watching the play, the practical man is not engaged in those activities thanks to which we dub him practical. Is he engaged in an activity similar to games, which had to be justified as refreshing us for future action? (*E. nic.*, 1176 b 8–10). That aim would explain the presence neither of the philosopher nor the statesmen – or indeed the other citizens – at the theater. Aristotle gives several reasons why we delight in the imitation that characterizes poetry, the second of which is this: „to be learning something

[7] One could make a similar point about the author of the Nicomachean Ethics. If he is engaged in the philosophical life, what is he doing when teaching and writing, which are clearly practical activities? Remembering that we are reading a book by a presumed contemplative is perhaps the quickest corrective against understanding Aristotle's happiest man as a kind of Anthony in the desert.

is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it" (*Poetics*, 1448 b 12–16) If that is generally true of poetry, we may ask what the philosopher and the rest of mankind learn from the tragedy. Whatever it is, they will learn it primarily through the plot.

„Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is by our actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse [...] So that it is the action in it i. e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing" (Ibidem, 1450 a 15).

Nor is the famous comparison of historian poet and philosopher unimportant for our purposes. Poetry is said to be more philosophical and of graver import that history, „since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do – which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters" (ibidem, 1451 a 6–10).

It is human moral activity that provides the subject matter of tragedy, but the tragedy is not a moral treatise. What is its proper effect on the audience?

„Tragedy, however, is an imitation not only of a complete action but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another; there is more of the marvelous in them then than if they happened of themselves or by pure chance. Even matters of chance seem most marvelous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them" (1452 a 1–8).

The pity and fear have to do with the degree of involvement the spectator can feel with the actions depicted, but the wonderful or marvelous is the meaning which the plot conveys, not about moral action, but through it, of the ultimate ambience in which we act. The spectator is induced to ask 'What does it all mean? What sense does life have if the tragic hero or heroine can be so cruelly visited with the effects of their actions? ' It could be me. The tragic hero moves from happiness to misery, not because he is depraved, but because of a great error of judgment (1453 a 15).

In feeling pity and fear, the spectator understands how prone the human agent is to effect what he does not intend. Yet, the outcome of such things on the stage is meaningful, it makes a kind of sense. The

audience, the philosopher and the rest of mankind, gets an intimation of the context within which human actions take place, the hint of an explanation. Call it a contemplative moment. There are many ways to get an intimation of the divine, and poetry, tragedy, is a way open to both philosopher and other citizens – and necessary to both.

The political man has been described as one who orders practical life beyond its own practical ends. The presence of a theater in a polity can, if I am right, be understood as providing a species of contemplation to the masses. Nor is this condescending when we realize that huddled with those masses is the contemplative as well. It is important to think of the contemplative as an habitue of the theater.