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ARISTOTLE ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ALTRUISM

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ABSTRACT

There has recently been a reengagement with Aristotle's ethical thought. One only needs to mention contemporary virtue ethics, which explicitly names him as its inspiration. However, not all aspects of his ethical thought have received the attention, and engagement, they deserve. This is especially true of his egoism. In order to facilitate this engagement, this dissertation will offer a thorough account of Aristotle's egoism. It will focus on his seminal work, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Chapter One serves as a methodological introduction. It argues that Aristotle often uses a certain investigative procedure. He often posits preliminary positions that he later revises or rejects. Therefore, to properly grasp his thought, we must take care to distinguish his merely preliminary from his final positions.

Chapter Two argues that Aristotle accepts a form of psychological egoism, namely that each person acts ultimately for the sake of his own happiness (εὐδαιμονία). This chapter both gives evidence for this interpretation and responds to two challenges that have been brought against it. The first challenge stems from Aristotle's claim that friends benefit their friends for their friends' own sake. The second challenge stems from Aristotle's claim that virtuous action is *kalon* ("noble" or "fine") and "for the sake of the

kalon.” However, *kala* actions were popularly identified with actions of selfless beneficence.

Chapter Three argues that Aristotle defends his view that we act ultimately for the sake of our own happiness. It is widely thought among those who agree that he holds this view that he never attempts to defend it. This chapter argues, to the contrary, that he does. It shows that he raises a challenge to his view that each person acts ultimately for the sake of his own happiness and then responds to it. This challenge is the popular view that virtuous people act in a selfless or self-disregarding way, especially in relation to their friends. This chapter then argues that Aristotle responds to this challenge through his discussion of friendship. He attempts to show, despite the popular view to the contrary, that virtuous people are not self-disregarding in relation to their friends.

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§ Introduction

There has recently been a reengagement with Aristotle's ethical thought. One only needs to mention contemporary virtue ethics, which explicitly names him as its inspiration. However, even those who are not members of this tradition tend to grant that engagement with Aristotle's ethical thought, even if this engagement ultimately results in disagreement, is a way to gain insight about ethical matters.¹ Nevertheless, not all aspects of his ethical thought have received the attention, and engagement, they deserve. And this is especially true of his egoism.

I will attempt to lay the foundations for a more adequate engagement with Aristotle's egoism. As I said, the ultimate purpose of this engagement is to learn something important for ourselves, namely, whether or not his egoism is correct, or, at least, philosophically attractive. And though a more adequate critical engagement with this aspect of his thought cannot occur here, this project was undertaken in order to help make this possible. It is common to divide egoism into "rational" and "psychological." The first is the normative claim that one "should" do whatever is best for oneself; the second is the psychological claim that each person actually does act ultimately for the sake of what is best for themselves. I will focus on Aristotle's psychological egoism.

There are two ways that, in my view, scholars and philosophers have failed to adequately engage with Aristotle's psychological egoism. The first way is to deny altogether that he accepted psychological egoism, or to grant that he did, but be inconsistent about this point in one's interpretation. The second way is to accept that

¹ See, for example, Roger Crisp, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, xxxiv, bottom paragraph.

Aristotle held psychological egoism, but to dismiss this aspect of his thought (or even personally accept it) without adequately investigating his reasons for holding this view. By far the greatest motivation for the second way of failing to adequately engage with Aristotle's psychological egoism is the mistaken view that he never attempts to defend or justify it.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle lays it down as an ἀρχή, or “explanatory starting point,” that human beings act ultimately for the sake of their own εὐδαιμονία (traditionally rendered as “happiness”). This principle serves as an explanatory starting point for human action insofar as it specifies one's own happiness as its ultimate “final cause.”² But since happiness is the “best good” that an individual can possess (1095a14-20, 1097b22-4), this principle amounts to a form of psychological egoism.³ To be sure, Aristotle's explanatory starting point is controversial. It implies that self-sacrificial or self-disregarding action is impossible for a human being. For the only substantial way in which our action could be self-sacrificial or self-disregarding is if we, in the first case, knowingly give up our happiness for the sake of something else or, in the second case, fail to aim at our own happiness when we act. But this starting point forbids both of these things.

Despite the controversial character of Aristotle's explanatory starting point, many scholars claim that he never attempts to defend it. David Bostock, for example, says that:

Aristotle simply takes it to be *obvious* both that each man ought to pursue what is good (for him) and that each man does in fact pursue what (he thinks) is good (for him). The truth is that both these claims are controversial (and, I would say,

² For final causes as explanations of action, see *Metaphysics* 1013a32-5.

³ As is observed by Terence Irwin (*From Socrates to the Reformation*, 125, bottom paragraph).

false), but since Aristotle *does not recognize this* he offers us *no arguments* in their favor. (*Aristotle's Ethics*, 228, my emphasis).

And Julia Annas says:

It is not made clear what is wrong with this claim, basic to ancient theories, which follow Aristotle in thinking it trivially true that we all seek happiness, so that disagreement sets in only at the level of the right specification of happiness. (“From Nature to Happiness,” 70, my emphasis).

If we ask in response why a philosopher of Aristotle’s rank would assume this controversial starting point without argument, we will be told that it simply reflects Ancient Greek common sense. Unlike us, the Ancient Greeks would not have considered Aristotle’s explanatory starting point to be controversial. They would have seen it, rather, as an expression of what everyone commonly accepted. Irwin puts this point as follows:

The assumption that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the ultimate end for action is not a paradoxical Socratic claim. According to Aristotle’s account of common ethical views, *we all agree* that our ultimate end is happiness.⁴ The *main* ethical question is *not* about whether we take happiness as the ultimate end, but about how to achieve happiness. (*Socrates to the Reformation*, 22, my emphasis).

And the view goes back at least as far as Henry Sidgwick, who paraphrases Aristotle as follows:

All men, in acting, aim at some result, either for its own sake or as a means to some further end; but obviously everything cannot be sought merely as a means; there must therefore be some ultimate end (or ends), and the science or study that inquires into this must be “architectonic” in relation to all arts that aim at some special end or utility. We find, in fact, that *men commonly recognize such an end*,

⁴ Irwin cites *Rhetoric* 1360b4-7 for this point: “for nearly each individual by himself as well as all in common there is a certain target, aiming at which, they choose and avoid; and this is, in summary, happiness and its parts” (Σχεδὸν δὲ καὶ ἰδίᾳ ἐκάστῳ καὶ κοινῇ πᾶσι σκοπὸς τις ἔστιν οὗ στοχαζόμενοι καὶ αἰροῦνται καὶ φεύγουσιν· καὶ τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐν κεφαλῶν εἰπεῖν ἢ τ' εὐδαιμονία καὶ τὰ μέρη αὐτῆς). However, there are three difficulties with his citation of this passage: (i) it does not clearly express a common view as opposed to Aristotle’s own analysis; (ii) Aristotle shows elsewhere in the *Rhetoric* that there are popular views that contradict the claim that everyone acts for the sake of their own happiness (for example, 1158b38-1359a5); (iii) Irwin ignores Aristotle’s “nearly” (σχεδὸν) qualification.

*and agree to call it wellbeing (εὐδαιμονία).*⁵ (*Outlines of The History of Ethics*, 56, my emphasis).

However, Aristotle himself did not accept this characterization of Ancient Greek popular opinion. In his reports of popular ethical views, he makes it clear that the Ancient Greeks did not uniformly accept that human beings always act for the sake of their own happiness. According to Aristotle, at least, his claim that they did was controversial in his day, just as it is in ours.⁶

But even more importantly, the interpretation of Aristotle's ethical thought that this contemporary characterization of Ancient Greek popular opinion is intended to support—that he fails to defend or justify his controversial explanatory starting point—is false. For he both recognizes popular challenges to his explanatory starting point and responds to them. Adequate engagement with Aristotle's psychological egoism consequently requires that we understand how he defends his explanatory starting point against these popular challenges. This dissertation will attempt to provide part of this understanding.

Besides failing to adequately investigate why Aristotle accepted psychological egoism, I have also claimed that some scholars and philosophers have failed to adequately engage with his psychological egoism by denying that it exists. Since my claim that he defends his psychological egoism presupposes that he actually holds this

⁵ This is a common, but inaccurate report of the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. What Aristotle claims is commonly agreed to is that the “highest good” (ἄκρότατον ἀγαθόν) is happiness (εὐδαιμονία), i.e., that happiness is the “best” good in the class of goods (1095a15-19, 1097b22-3). By contrast, he does not claim common agreement for the fact that (our own) happiness is the ultimate end of our action; compare previous with 1097b2-5.

⁶ See 1168a29-b1, *Rhetoric* 1358b38-1359a5, 1366b36-1367a6, 1389a32-5, 1389b35-1390a1; compare Suzanne Stern-Gillet, “Souls Great and Small,” 66, second paragraph; Edward Cope, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle with A Commentary*, vol. 2, 147, note 12.

view, it is first necessary to address this denial. I will therefore begin by presenting evidence that he accepts psychological egoism. I will then examine, and respond, to two challenges that scholars have brought against this interpretation. The first challenge draws from Aristotle's account of friendship; the second from his account of virtue. I do all of this in Chapter Two, as Chapter One stands as a methodological prelude to my interpretation as a whole.

In Chapter Three, I argue that Aristotle defends his explanatory starting point that human beings act ultimately for the sake of their own happiness. I do this by showing that he introduces a credible challenge to his explanatory starting point and then responds to it. This challenge is the popular view that virtuous people are self-disregarding, and most especially in relation to their friends. In response, Aristotle declares that this popular view "does not agree with the facts." I then argue that at least some of the "facts" he is referring to are the actions of virtuous people towards their friends as he brings them to light in his examination of friendship. Virtuous people were thought to be most capable of overlooking their own good in acting for their friends. Aristotle can therefore attack the view that virtuous people are self-disregarding by giving evidence that they fail to be so even when acting toward their friends.