

Was Eudaimonism Ancient Greek Common Sense?

(Preprint Draft)

Abstract

I argue that Eudaimonism was not Ancient Greek common sense. After dividing Eudaimonism into Psychological and Normative varieties, I present evidence from Greek literature that the Ancient Greeks did not commonsensically accept Eudaimonism. I then review, and critique, evidence that has been offered for the opposite claim that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense. This claim is often called on to explain why Ancient Greek philosophers embraced Eudaimonism; the idea is that they did so because it was the ethical common sense of their day. But, according to the case I make in this paper, this explanation cannot stand. Those looking to explain the Eudaimonistic character of Ancient Greek ethical thought must turn to other explanations.

Keywords

Eudaimonism; Popular Greek Morality; Ancient Greek Ethics

Introduction

Many scholars believe that Ancient Greek ethical thought is fundamentally Eudaimonistic.¹ Supposing so, what explains this fact? A very common explanation—probably the dominant one—is that Eudaimonism was part of the fabric of Ancient Greek common sense; that is, Ancient Greek philosophers adopted Eudaimonism because they heeded the ethical common

¹ For examples, see the following note. A minority of scholars reject this view. Richard Kraut (*Aristotle on the Human Good*) is a well known example, but see also Nicholas White, *Individual and Conflict*, chapter 5; Donald Morrison, "Happiness, Rationality, and Egoism in Plato's Socrates;" Sara Ahbel-Rappe, "Cross-Examining Happiness: Reason and community in Plato's Socratic Dialogues"; "Is Socratic Ethics Egoistic?"; Daniel W. Graham, "Socrates as Deontologist."

sense of their time.² But is it true that the Ancient Greeks commonsensically accepted Eudaimonism? Scholars in fact disagree about this question.³ The existence of this disagreement may come as a surprise to some due to the current popularity of the “yes” answer. I will argue here that, nevertheless, “no” is the correct answer. There is extremely strong evidence, which has not received the recognition it deserves, that the Ancient Greeks did not commonsensically accept Eudaimonism. As a result, the explanation that Ancient Greek philosophers accepted Eudaimonism because it was Ancient Greek common sense cannot stand. Regardless of where we fall on whether Ancient Greek ethical thought is fundamentally Eudaimonistic, we should at

² For examples, see Sidgwick, *Outlines of The History of Ethics*, 56; *The Methods of Ethics*, xix; Arthur Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 249-253; Bernard Williams, “The Legacy of Greek Philosophy,” 40-1; “Plato against the Immoralist,” 102; Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory*, 263; *Plato’s Ethics* 32-3; *The Development of Ethics*, Vol. 1, 22; Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 11-12, 43-4, 329, 440; “From Nature to Happiness,” 70; “Plato’s Defense of Justice,” 50, 52; C. C. W. Taylor, “Platonic Ethics,” 152; James Doyle, “Socratic Methods,” 55-6.

Interestingly, Irwin and Annas don’t always maintain this position. They sometimes deny (at least implicitly) that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense. See Irwin, “Aristotle’s Conception of Morality,” 128, 132-133, 135; *Development*, vol. 1, 117, 190, including note 85; Annas, *Morality*, 323-4, 371. This may also be true of Taylor. See “Review of *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics* by Nicholas White,” 316, second paragraph; compare *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics: Books II-IV*, 92, note 12. The review was published after his original paper, but before the paper’s republication in *Pleasure, Mind and Soul*. In a new “Afterword” to the paper, where he says he will indicate any subsequent changes in his view (10, bottom paragraph), he does not mention this point (see 180).

³ Scholars in the “no” camp include Edward Cope (*The Rhetoric of Aristotle with A Commentary*, vol. 2, 147, note 12); Leo Strauss (*What is Political Philosophy?*, 86, first paragraph); Kenneth Dover (*Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*, 114, 172, 296, 299, 301, bottom paragraph); David Konstan (“Altruism,” 2-5); Nicholas White (*Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics*, 168); Matthew R. Christ (*The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens*, 6, 175-6, 179-80); and Gregory Salmieri (“Aristotle on Selfishness?,” 103, first paragraph). Joseph Bryant (*Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece*) perhaps belongs in this group. He writes that with the rise of *poleis* in the Archaic era “a pervasive and deep-rooted sense of civic responsibility and Polis patriotism was born, one that duly came to demand the ultimate commitment: self-sacrifice for the community” (92), and he elaborates this duty as “a demand that one fight and possibly die for interests that transcend the immediate welfare of the individual.” (ibid.). However, he also writes that this self-sacrifice was commonly regarded as a means to the achievement of posthumous fame and immortality (ibid., 162, 190, 470). If, in the earlier quotation, “immediate welfare” means “those goods that depend on one *being alive*,” then the idea is that citizens were expected to “sacrifice” the *lesser* interest of mortal life in order to achieve the *greater* interest of posthumous fame and immortality. He would then probably belong in the opposite camp.

least agree that the character of Ancient Greek common sense could not explain why Ancient Greek ethical thought had a strong Eudaimonistic bent.⁴

Let me clarify what I mean by “Eudaimonism.” I mean a certain family of psychological and normative positions that give central importance to “one’s own *eudaimona*.” One could fairly describe these positions as versions of “Self-referential Eudaimonism” or, more controversially, “Egoistic Eudaimonism.”⁵ The psychological positions in this family are versions of the position that the ultimate end of one’s purposive, non-akratic action is one’s own *eudaimonia* (“Psychological Eudaimonism”), and the normative positions are versions of the position that one should do whatever will bring one closest to *eudaimonia* (“Normative Eudaimonism”).⁶ And since there was commonly thought to be a close connection between one’s own good and one’s own *eudaimonia*,⁷ I also include in Eudaimonism normative and

⁴ There have been alternative explanations. Salmieri (“Selfishness,” 115-6) argues that the adoption of Eudaimonism in the Socratic tradition was encouraged by the thesis that virtue is necessary for the sort of internal unity that makes having a well-defined “interest” possible in the first place. Irwin argues that Aristotle holds that all deliberation about what we should do requires that we measure the various options for action according to a single standard (see *Aristotle’s First Principles*, 335); he then argues that Aristotle introduces “what is good for oneself” or “what is conducive to one’s *eudaimonia*” as this standard (see Chapter 15 § 179). Perhaps someone will say that this explains why Aristotle, at least, adopts Eudaimonism (Irwin himself seems to allude to this possibility at 604, note 23). Another possible explanation is that philosophers in the Socratic tradition adopt Eudaimonism because they accept “choiceworthy (for oneself)” as a definition of “good (for oneself).” Thus, insofar as I should do whatever is the most choiceworthy thing for me to do, I should do whatever is best for myself. For the claim that Aristotle adopts this definition of the good, see Jessica Moss, *Aristotle on the Apparent Good*, 33-5; for evidence that this definition was part of the wider Socratic tradition, see *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter “NE”) 1096b8-14; *Definitions*, 413a3; note that these passages would have to be read as having a *normative* meaning—“what is worthy of being chosen”—as opposed to a *psychological* one—what we, as a matter of fact, actually do choose. I will not argue here that any given explanation is correct. My goal, rather, is to stir up interest in this question.

⁵ “More controversially” because Annas argues that a psychological or normative focus on one’s own *eudaimonia* is not sufficient for egoism. Rather, it requires pursuing (or that one “should” pursue) one’s own interest at the expense of others (“Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism,” 205). I am skeptical, but the issue is not essential to my contention in this paper.

⁶ I use the formulation “closest to” rather than “most conducive to” because, in cases when *eudaimonia* may be impossible, it would presumably function as a standard of approximation for what we should do. On this idea see Kraut, *Human Good*, 87-8.

⁷ Aristotle claims that *eudaimonia* is the end with respect to which things are called “good” or “bad” simply (see NE 1152b1-3). Strictly speaking, he says that the political philosopher is the architect of “the end” with a view to which we call something “good” or “bad” simply, but he no doubt means *eudaimonia*. He also tells us that “both

psychological positions that make no explicit mention of “one’s own *eudaimonia*” but instead of “what is best for oneself.” I mean, specifically, versions of the position that the ultimate aim of one’s purposive, non-akratic action is what is best for oneself and of the position that one should do whatever is best for oneself. Finally, I include weaker and stronger forms of all of these positions. The weaker psychological positions are:

(A) The ultimate aim of each person’s purposive, non-akratic action is something that satisfies the description “one’s own *eudaimonia*” even if it is not aimed at *under that description*.

(B) The ultimate aim of each person’s purposive, non-akratic action is something that satisfies the description “what is best for oneself” even if it is not aimed at *under that description*.

The stronger psychological positions are the same except that, in the stronger equivalent to (A), “one’s own *eudaimonia*” is aimed at under that description and, in the stronger equivalent to (B), “what is best for oneself.” For an illustration of the difference between the weaker and stronger forms, suppose that doing what is right does not by itself cause me to live a good life. Suppose, also, that God unfailingly bestows a good life on those who do what is right. Doing what is right is consequently best for myself. Therefore, insofar as I aim at what is right, I aim at something that satisfies the description “what is best for myself.” Nevertheless, I may not aim at it under that description. I may aim at it, rather, under the description “what is right” or *as what is right*.

The weaker normative positions are:

(C) What one should do is *identical* to what brings one closest to *eudaimonia*.

the low-class majority (*hoi polloi*) and the gentlemanly class (*hoi charientes*) believe that living well and doing well is the same thing as being *eudaimōn*” (1095a18-20). We can find additional support for this popular identification in the fact that, in his protreptic discussion in the *Euthydemus*, Socrates substitutes *eudaimonia* for “doing well” without any objection from his interlocutor (see 278e3-279a1 with 282a1-2). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. I use I. Bywater’s text of the NE.

(D) What one should do is *identical* to what is best for oneself.

The stronger normative positions are the same except that, in the stronger equivalent to (C), one should do what brings one closest to *eudaimonia primarily because* it brings one closest to *eudaimonia* and, in the stronger equivalent to (D), what is best for oneself *primarily because* it is best for oneself.⁸ For an illustration, take the same setup as before. What I should do, “what is right,” happens to be identical to “what is best for myself.” Nevertheless, that doing what is right is best for myself may not primarily explain why I should do it. Perhaps what primarily explains that is just the fact that it is right.

My contention is that the Ancient Greeks commonsensically accepted *none* of the positions outlined above. To clarify, I do not mean that there was no element of popular opinion that accepted some of them; it is reasonable that there was such an element. I mean, rather, that there were elements of popular opinion that rejected each of the above positions, even if these elements were never championed by any Ancient Greek philosopher. Consider popular views about the moral permissibility of abortion in America. There are popular views both in favor of and against. Both of these positions are therefore popular; neither is commonsensical. Such is what I claim about the acceptance and rejection of Eudaimonism among the Ancient Greeks.⁹

My case will fall into two parts. The first part presents positive evidence that there were popular views that denied Eudaimonism; the second presents, and then critiques, evidence that

⁸ This classification pretty much follows Salmieri (“Selfishness,” 102, bottom paragraph).

⁹ Compare Dover’s observation that “the determinants of the moral values of...a society are remarkably heterogeneous” and that Greek popular morality is “inconsistent, incoherent, and unsystematic.” (“Moral Evaluation in Greek Poetry,” 47-8). An anonymous referee worries that my view implies that popular opinion in Ancient Greece was self-consciously demarcated into Eudaimonistic and anti-Eudaimonistic factions. My comparison with popular views about abortion could be read to suggest this, but I don’t intend any such thing. I only intend that there were Eudaimonistic and anti-Eudaimonistic strains of popular opinion “out there.” It’s perfectly possible that both sorts of views were (inconsistently) held by the same group of people. That in no way prevents either view from being “popular.”

has been offered in favor of the contrary position that the Ancient Greeks commonsensically accepted Eudaimonism.

Part 1: Evidence Against the Commonsense Acceptance of Eudaimonism

I will restrict my evidence against the commonsense acceptance of Eudaimonism to just one subject that was popularly understood in ways that imply that Eudaimonism is false: virtue.¹⁰ I will rely largely on evidence from Ancient Greek philosophers, though I will corroborate this evidence with non-philosophical sources. Some may be suspicious of my reliance on philosophical sources, but there is good reason for it.¹¹ Philosophers feel the need to present ideas with a degree of explicitness and precision that is often not necessary in non-theoretical contexts. This explicitness and precision can make evidence from philosophers less ambiguous and contestable than evidence from other sources. Consider, for example, Demosthenes' claim about Chabrias:

He seems to me to be such a firm patriot that although he was thought to be the most cautious general—and he was—he acted that way for your sake (*huper men humōn*) when

¹⁰ Additional subjects that were popularly understood in ways that imply that at least Psychological Eudaimonism is false include love and friendship (see *Rhetoric* 1380b36-1381a2 and note *ekeinou heneka alla mē hautou*, “for the sake of that person, **not** for the sake of oneself,” my bold), favors and gratitude (see *Rhetoric* 1385a17-19 with 1385a33-b2), and kindness or generous-mindedness (*philanthropia*; see the discussion of Dover in note 15). For a helpful discussion of Greek views of the first two subjects, see the chapters “Love” and “Gratitude” in Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*. I use W. D. Ross' text of the *Rhetoric*.

¹¹ Dover, for example, writes that “If we imagined that either Plato's work or Aristotle's represented an intellectual systematization of the principles which were manifest in the moral choices and judgments of the ordinary unphilosophical Greek, it is possible that we may go badly astray.” (*Popular Morality*, 1-2). This is absolutely correct when applied to the ethical doctrines of Ancient Greek philosophers themselves. However, besides elaborating their own doctrines, Ancient philosophers also depict and describe popular ethical views. They thereby provide us with valuable testimonial evidence. Dover acknowledges this point (7, bottom paragraph), but his (in my view, excessive) suspicion of philosophers' testimony causes him to largely neglect it; to give an indication, he quotes from Plato and Aristotle in the main body of his text a combined total of four times. For further criticism of Dover on this point, see C. C. W. Taylor, “Popular Morality and Unpopular Philosophy.”

he led. But he acted for his own sake (*huper hautou de*) when, ordered somewhere, he disregarded his own life and preferred not living to sully the honors you gave him. (*Against Leptines*, 82).¹²

The passage requires a contrast between (*men*) being cautious for the sake of one's city and (*de*) giving up one's own life for the sake of oneself. It is certainly tempting to understand this contrast in terms of acting for the sake of one's city (and not for the sake of oneself) and acting for the sake of oneself (and not for the sake of one's city). So understood, the passage is evidence against the commonsense acceptance of Psychological Eudaimonism. But the passage is inexplicit enough to allow an alternative reading. The contrast could be between acting for the sake of one's city (and also for the sake of oneself) and acting only for the sake of oneself; that is, that one is acting for the sake of one's city does not logically imply that one is not *also* acting for the sake of oneself.¹³ No doubt, this will seem like a forced reading to some, but the proponent of the commonsense acceptance of Eudaimonism can respond that we have very good evidence that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense.¹⁴ The passage should then be interpreted in light of the universally shared background assumption that everyone acts ultimately for the sake of her own *eudaimonia*. Suggestive but inexplicit passages like this one are therefore unlikely to settle the matter.¹⁵ This is why I limit myself to the most explicit and unambiguous

¹² I use S. H. Butcher's text.

¹³ For example, if the *eudaimonia* of others is an integral part of one's own *eudaimonia* (compare NE 1097b8-11, 1100a18-21). For a helpful discussion of this point, see Kelly Rogers, "Aristotle on Loving Another for His Own Sake," 293, 300-302.

¹⁴ For this evidence (and a critique), see the second part.

¹⁵ In my view, every passage from Greek literature that Nicholas White offers as evidence of the rejection of Eudaimonism up to the time of Plato and Aristotle in *Individual and Conflict* (see, especially, chapter five) belongs to this class, though, in all fairness, his primary concern is to show that the Ancient Greeks were not commonsensical 'ethical harmonizers; that is, they did not commonsensically believe that all worthwhile aims could be consistently unified (xiii, third paragraph), even in *eudaimonia* (341, third paragraph). For a discussion of the one of his passages that in my view comes the closest to offering unambiguous evidence for the rejection of Eudaimonism, see note 24. Also among suggestive but inexplicit passages is virtually every passage that Dover cites

passages I can find, and this, in turn, is why I rely largely, but not exclusively, on evidence from Ancient Greek philosophers.

A certain complication is introduced by the fact that there are two corresponding sets of positions within the family of views that I have dubbed “Eudaimonism”—one set in terms of “what is best for oneself” another in terms of “one’s own *eudaimonia*.” But it is reasonable to treat evidence that there were popular views that rejected one of these sets of positions as evidence that there were popular views that rejected the other. I noted earlier (see note 7) that it was common to identify *eudaimonia* with “doing well” or “living well.” I also take it to be intuitive that something is good for us to the degree that it makes us do better or live a better life. I therefore conclude that it widely seemed intuitive that something is good for us to the degree that it brings us closer to *eudaimonia*. And this conclusion provides us a reason to treat evidence for or against the commonsense acceptance of one of these sets of positions as evidence for or against the commonsense acceptance of the other. I will not belabor this equivalence in what follows, but it should be kept in mind.

Virtue and Selflessness

The first aspect of popular views about virtue that I will discuss is its connection to selflessness.¹⁶ Someone is selfless (acts selflessly) if she (a) acts in a non-akratic, purposive way while failing to aim ultimately at what is best for herself or her own *eudaimonia* *under that*

in *Popular Morality* as evidence for popular belief in selflessness or self-sacrifice (see the relevant passages on 60-1, 81-3, 95, 114-5, 165-166, 172, 188-9, 192, 195, 202, 218, 228, 230-2, 296, 301-2). The one exception I have found is a passage he cites from Menander’s *Aspis* that contrasts doing something *philanthrōpōs* with doing it “in a way that benefits myself” (395-6; Dover, *ibid.*, 202). To be clear, I am not criticizing Dover’s reading of these passages, though he does at times overstate the evidence they offer. I am pointing out that virtually all of the evidence he offers is not explicit enough to compel agreement from a member of the opposite camp. It is therefore ill-suited for settling the scholarly disagreement in question.

¹⁶ Contrast Charles H. Kahn’s claim that “[T]he various oppositions between egoism and altruism or benevolence have no direct parallel in the ancient discussions. Since the Greeks have no counterpart to the Biblical injunction, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, the question of altruism or benevolence is not a central moral issue.” (“Pre-Platonic Ethics,” 27).

description or (b) acts in a non-akratic, purposive way while aiming ultimately at what is best for herself or her own *eudaimonia* under that description *but* would perform the same action even if she didn't believe it would be best for herself or bring her closest to *eudaimonia*. The second condition is intended to capture the intuition that I could act selflessly while aiming ultimately at my own *eudaimonia* or what is best for myself as a merely incidental but, in the circumstances, teleologically ultimate, goal. To give an example, if I think that God rewards right action with eternal bliss, which I take to be best for myself, I may do what is right for the sake of a goal, eternal bliss, that I aim at under the description "what is best for myself." And since my right action is a means to eternal bliss, but eternal bliss is not a means to my right action, eternal bliss becomes the more "ultimate" goal. Nevertheless, it may not be the more important goal. I may be acting in such a way that I would still choose to do what is right even if I thought it would condemn me to an eternity of pain.

As understood above, selfless action is incompatible with the strongest versions of Psychological Eudaimonism (those that specify that we aim ultimately at our own good or our own *eudaimonia under those descriptions*). My aim in this section will be to show that virtuous people were popularly understood to act selflessly and, by implication, that the Ancient Greeks did not commonsensically accept the strongest versions of Psychological Eudaimonism.¹⁷ I will then expand my case to include the weaker versions of Psychological Eudaimonism and all versions of Normative Eudaimonism in the following section.

¹⁷ Someone might raise two issues here. First is the issue of closure; that is, if I believe (a) and that (if a, then Eudaimonism is false), will I necessarily believe that Eudaimonism is false? I won't assume closure about beliefs. But I will take it that if (a) and (if a, then Eudaimonism is false) are popular views, then it's likely that the rejection of Eudaimonism was also popular. The second issue is whether it was actually a popular view that the fact that virtuous people act in *such and such a way* implies that they act selflessly or, more broadly, that Eudaimonism is false. But I take all of the views about virtuous action that I will discuss to obviously imply that virtuous people act selflessly as well as that Eudaimonism is false, and I attribute to popular opinion the view that these various ways of acting imply that virtuous people act selflessly and that Eudaimonism is false on account of this fact.

Aristotle provides the clearest testimony of a popular connection between virtue and selflessness. In the NE, he tells us:

People think (*dokei*) that, on the one hand, the vicious person does all things for the sake of himself, and by as much as he is more vicious, the more he does this, and people reproach him for being the sort of person who does nothing apart from himself (*aph' heautou*, i.e., apart from his own good);¹⁸ but the virtuous person, on the other hand, acts because of the noble (*to kalon*), and by as much as he should be more virtuous, the more he acts because of the noble, and for the sake of a friend, and he disregards what concerns himself (*to d' hautou pariēsin*, i.e., disregards his own good, NE 1168a30-35).

According to what Aristotle here tells us is a popular view, virtuous people are distinguished from vicious ones by the fact that they “disregard” or “overlook” their own good.¹⁹ This is clearly an example of selfless action. If I am aiming ultimately at what is best for myself, under that description, and in such a way that I would not act the same way if I didn't think my action would be best for myself, then I am clearly not “disregarding my own good.” That virtuous people act in disregard of their own good is thus our first example of a popular view that virtuous people act selflessly.

The *Rhetoric* provides additional testimony about a popular connection between virtue and selflessness. Consider the following list of premises about noble actions, intended for use in composing popular speeches (see 1355a24-29, 1358a36-b8; compare *Gorgias* 458e5-459a3):

¹⁸ There's some dispute about the reading of this phrase (see Gauthier and Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, vol. 2, 745-6 for a helpful summary). Some, for example John Burnet (*The Ethics of Aristotle*, 421) propose reading *apo* in a causative sense: 'the vicious person does nothing on his own initiative.' Note that “nothing” would have to be elliptical here for “nothing noble” since the vicious person clearly does things in her self-interest on her own initiative, but this elliptical reading is awkward because the idea of doing what is noble for its own sake isn't introduced until after this phrase. For this reason, and also because of the context, I prefer the more traditional reading of *apo* in a locative sense: either the vicious person is blamed for doing nothing that “proceeds away from himself” or the vicious person is blamed for not doing anything that is “located away from himself.”

¹⁹ Interestingly, this view also shows up in the *Magna Moralia*, where it is endorsed by the author (see 2.13-14).

And as many things are noble (*kalon*) as, being among the things chosen (i.e., being intentional, purposive actions), someone does them not for the sake of himself (*mē heneka hautou*); and the things that are good simply (*haplōs*, i.e., not necessarily good for oneself), and also as many things as someone does on behalf of his country while disregarding what concerns himself (i.e., his own good); and the things that are good by nature (i.e., again, not necessarily good for oneself); and the things which are not good for oneself, for one does the things that are of this sort (i.e., good for oneself) for the sake of oneself; and as many things as are capable of belonging (*endechetai huparchein*) to someone who is dead rather than to someone who lives, for the things that belong to the one who lives have more of the “for the sake of oneself”; and as many actions as are for the sake of others, for they are less for the sake of oneself; and as many things as are good deeds concerning others but not concerning oneself, and concerning those who have done a benefit, for it is just; and benefactions conferred (*ta euergetēmata*), for they are not towards oneself. (1366b36-1367a6).

Aristotle here classifies actions that are “not for the sake of oneself,” even “not good for oneself,” as noble.²⁰ And since the *Rhetoric* provides instruction in popular oratory, it is extremely likely that, in Aristotle’s judgment at least, this classification was popularly credible. But, like “disregarding one’s own good” above, acting “not for the sake of oneself” is a clear example of selfless action. The *Rhetoric* thus provides good evidence that at least some noble actions were popularly thought to be selfless. This view about noble actions then relates to virtue insofar as virtuous people were popularly thought to do what is noble (see the above passage from the NE; *Meno* 77b2-5); that is, insofar as virtuous people were popularly thought to do

²⁰ I’ll leave it open whether Aristotle intends the above description to exhaust all noble *actions*—i.e., chosen, purposive actions. Clearly, he doesn’t intend it to exhaust all noble *things* (see, for example, 1367a28-33).

what is noble, they were popularly thought to, at least sometimes, perform actions that are “not for the sake of themselves.”²¹ We thus have a second example of a popular view that virtuous people act selflessly.

Plato also provides testimony of a popular connection between virtue and selflessness. However, since this testimony is filtered through the voices of *dramatis personae*, it is less direct than that provided by Aristotle. In the *Apology*, Socrates claims to the jury that “I am far from defending myself on my own behalf (*huper emautou*), as someone might think; I’m doing it on your behalf (*huper humōn*)—out of concern that by voting against me you will go wrong concerning the gift the god has given you.” (30d6-e1).²² The way that Socrates here claims to act—“not on my own behalf”—is yet another example of selfless action; one cannot be acting “not on one’s own behalf” while aiming ultimately at what is best for oneself, under that description, and in such a way that one would not perform the same action if one didn’t believe it would be best for oneself.

Perhaps someone will object that *huper* doesn’t here mean “on behalf of” but rather “in protection of;”²³ that is, since Socrates doesn’t believe death will harm him, while he does think his death will harm the Athenians, he makes his defense speech “in protection of the Athenians” and not himself. Moreover, Socrates acting in protection of the Athenians is compatible with him aiming ultimately at what is best for himself, under that description, and in such a way that he would not act the same way if he didn’t think it would be best for himself; for example, if he considers his own action of protecting the Athenians from harm a great personal good. This

²¹ Perhaps someone will object that this conclusion is overhasty since it might be the case that almost everyone who thought that virtuous people do what is noble failed to also think that selfless actions were noble. Since I find this pretty implausible, I’m happy to here accept the (merely plausible) conclusion that virtuous people were popularly thought to act selflessly.

²² I use Burnet’s texts for Plato’s dialogues. I take this example from Ahbel-Rappe’s “Is Socratic Ethics Egoistic?”.

²³ *LSJ* lists both as meanings of *huper* with a genitive.

reading of *huper* strikes me as less natural, but, even granting it, a good case can be made that Socrates is claiming to act selflessly. This is because he follows his claim to act *huper* the Athenians with a *mē* clause that expresses his concern in so acting (see Smyth 222). He is acting *out of concern* that the Athenians would otherwise come to harm. This suggests that he sees the well-being of the Athenians—and not his own good action of protecting them—as the more important goal. Furthermore, if he saw the well-being of the Athenians as something that was also good for himself, then, by protecting them from harm, he would also be protecting himself—at least in the sense of preventing himself from being deprived of a good. But he denies this. Thus, even if we read *uper* as “in protection of,” Socrates indicates that his more important goal is something that he sees as divorced from his own good.

It’s true, however, that Socrates doesn’t explicitly claim that his acting on behalf of the Athenians but not himself is virtuous or noble. We may for this reason want to deny that his claim is evidence of a popular connection between virtue and selflessness. Even so, his claim is worthy of our attention because it implies that people are at least capable of acting selflessly.²⁴ Furthermore, given the context of his claim, it’s plausible that he views this implication as popularly credible. Not only does he make his claim in a popular defense speech, but he gives no

²⁴ I am tempted to offer *Apology* 28b3-9 as a fuller example of a view associating virtue and selflessness (for this interpretation, see White, *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics*, 175-7), but the passage is not quite explicit enough. It therefore invites counter-interpretations. Though Socrates claims that “a man who is going to be of even a little benefit” should “only consider” whether he will be acting rightly or virtuously, one could claim that he means (in ethical contexts) one should only consider whether one acts rightly or not (since acting rightly is preeminently good for oneself)—I thank Russell E. Jones for pointing out this response. In reply, one could point out that Socrates claims that conversing with others about virtue and the other subjects he discusses is “the greatest good” or perhaps “a very great good” (38a2) and, carried on for eternity in the afterlife, “an inconceivable *eudaimonia*” (41c2-6). Therefore, acting rightly is not preeminently good for oneself. But one could counter that conversing with others and helping them learn is an example of right action. That’s why it’s preeminently good (though compare *Gorgias* 458a3-7). Because the interpretation of this passage is likely to get bogged down in this controversy, I skip over it.

indication that the clear implication that human beings are capable of acting “not on behalf of themselves” was unheard of or unbelievable to his audience.²⁵

The *Hipparchus* provides a fuller example of the popular view linking virtue and selflessness. In the dialogue, Socrates and an unnamed companion discuss the nature and identity of gain-lovers (*philokerdeis*). In one of his definitions, the companion defines gain-lovers in contradistinction to virtuous people. He states that a gain-lover is someone “who is serious about those things, and thinks it worthwhile (*axioi*) to make a gain from them, which the virtuous (*chrēstoi*) would not dare to gain from (i.e., “vicious” or “immoral” gains, compare 230c4-10).” (227c10-d3). In other words, he thinks that virtuous people, unlike gain-lovers, willingly abstain from certain gains that virtuous people recognize as such, but that they find to be immoral and for this reason “not worthwhile” (see 225a3-b3, note that the companion here speaks from the perspective of the decent or virtuous person). And he later agrees that by “gain” he means “overall benefit” rather than “monetary profit” (see 231a6-c4).²⁶ His view is thus that virtuous people are distinguished from gain-lovers by their willingness to allow moral considerations to limit their pursuit of overall benefits.²⁷

Perhaps someone will object that Plato did not write the *Hipparchus*, but whether or not he wrote it is irrelevant. If not Plato, then some unknown philosopher presents us with a portrait of a person who claims that virtuous people limit their pursuit of overall benefits in light of moral considerations, which clearly requires that they are not aiming ultimately at what is best for

²⁵ By way of contrast, compare 30a7-b4, 37c5-38a6 as well as 25c5-26a7, 28b3-d5, 40b7-41c7, where Socrates provides justification for controversial positions. Also note that Socrates’ “as someone might think” in the passage I quoted does not refer to the expectation that everyone is ultimately concerned with her own good, but to the more pedestrian expectation that defendants consider the penalties they are at risk of suffering to be bad and are, for this reason, trying to avoid them.

²⁶ “Gain” (*kerdos*) can have either sense.

²⁷ This dichotomy is visible in all of the companion’s attempted definitions of the gain-lover, see 225a1-b3, 225a8-b3, 225b8-9. For an insightful discussion of this and related points in the dialogue, see the first chapter of Christopher Bruell, *On the Socratic Education*.

themselves, under that description. And the fact that this character is unnamed makes it all the more plausible that he is a stand-in for a common and recognizable type.

The *Alcibiades I* also presents us with an example of the popular view linking virtue and selflessness. Or rather, Alcibiades himself expresses the sort of selfless concern for what is noble that Aristotle told us was popularly associated with virtue. In part of the dialogue, Alcibiades claims that some noble things are bad for oneself (115a11-14).²⁸ And he agrees that courage, since it can lead to wounds and death, is an example of something that is noble but personally harmful (115b1-10). But this does not mean that he would never choose to be courageous. On the contrary, he asserts that he would rather die than be a coward (115d5-7); that is, he claims that he would choose to act nobly even given the greater harm he is likely to suffer as a result of it. And this would clearly require that he not aim ultimately at what is best for himself, under that description.

It's true that Socrates also gets Alcibiades to agree that, if he would choose to do what's noble even if it led to his death, he must hold noble action to be a preeminent good that outweighs the harm of death (see 115c9-d4, 115d12-e8, 116a6-9). But this does not take back his first view. Rather, it shows that he wavers between understanding noble action as preeminently good and understanding it as potentially harmful but more important than his own well-being. As Socrates puts it to him, "When it comes to answering questions about what's right and wrong, noble or shameful, good or bad, in our interest or not—wouldn't you say that you're wandering all over the place? And isn't it obvious that it's because you lack knowledge about them—surely that's why you get confused?" (117a8-11; compare *Sophist* 230a5-d4).²⁹

We thus have clear and explicit testimonial evidence from Aristotle and Plato that virtue

²⁸ I take it that he means "bad for oneself overall." It would be odd for him to claim that some noble things are bad for oneself if he thought they were overall beneficial.

²⁹ I'd like to thank Adam Beresford and David Konstan for suggestions about the translation of this passage.

was popularly associated with selflessness. I will now turn to corroborating evidence from non-philosophical sources. I will begin, as does Greek literature, with Homer. In an well known passage in the *Iliad*, Odysseus, isolated on the battlefield, deliberates about whether to stay and fight or run:

What will happen to me? It would be a great evil (*kakon*) if, fearing the multitude of Trojans, I ran way. But it would be more terrible (*rigion*) to fall into their hands alone. The son of Cronos frightened away the other Danaans. But why does my dear heart debate these things with me? I know that cowards (*kakoi*) flee battle while it's necessary for whoever is best at fighting to hold his ground fiercely whether he is slain or he slays another. (11.404-10).³⁰

Odysseus perceives two courses of action. One of which, retreat, is *kakon* (cowardly? harmful?), the other of which, holding his ground, may lead to lead to a consequence, being seized and killed by the Trojans, that is more terrible (i.e., worse) *for himself*. But then he reminds himself that the courageous warrior must hold his ground even if it results in his own death. This final consideration wins out, and he decides to remain. The passage strongly implies that Odysseus' consideration about being a courageous warrior *overrules* his consideration about his own good. This is how the passage is read by some scholars,³¹ but, given that the *Iliad* is a work of poetry, Homer is not at pains to make this explicit. It's therefore possible to read into Odysseus' final consideration an unvoiced assumption that being courageous is (always) better for oneself; that is, he comes to notice an ethical feature of holding his ground that he did not notice before (therefore reading the *kakon* at 404 as "harmful?") and that tacitly reverses his earlier conclusion

³⁰ I use T. W. Allen's text.

³¹ For example, Bernard Fenik, "Stylization and Variety: Four Monologues in the *Iliad*," 72; Stuart Lawrence, *Moral Awareness in Greek Tragedy*, 76, bottom paragraph.

that it would be worse for himself to be caught and killed by the Trojans.³² As with almost every other example I will mention from non-philosophical Greek literature—the one exception being a passage from Isocrates—we will have to be satisfied with a very plausible, but not wholly explicit, example of selflessness. With this qualification in mind, we have an example of a Homeric character acting contrary to her own perceived interest in order to live up to the demands of virtue.³³ And given Homer’s immense influence over later Greek culture, it’s plausible that the mode of action he here describes was popularly credible in Classical Greece.

Greek tragedy also provides a plausible example of an association of selflessness with virtue.³⁴ In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus stands out on account of his great concern for his subjects, which both he and others connect to virtue (see 35-48, 69-77).³⁵ Moreover, at several points, he specifically claims that this concern eclipses his concern for his own well-being.³⁶ When Cleon asks him whether he should announce in public what the Delphic oracle instructs about the plague ravaging Thebes, Oedipus responds: “Announce it in front of everyone since I’m more troubled about these people here than I am even about my own life (*psuchē*).” (93-4).³⁷ Now, this is not quite an explicit claim to selflessness. One could hold some things to be

³² Lawrence observes this point in “Moral Decisions in Homer,” 28, bottom paragraph.

³³ As further examples of selflessness in Homer’s poems, some scholars point to Achilles’ claim to be fighting in the interests of Agamemnon and Menalaus and his connected criticism of Agamemnon as “gain-obsessed” (*kerdaleophron*; see 1.148-160; Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 138-9), his offering of a truce to Priam so that he may bury Hector (ibid., 196), and the Phaeacians’ ferrying of Odysseus to Ithaca, despite a prophecy that giving safe passage to foreigners will be punished by Poseiden (for the prophecy, see *Odyssey*, 8.564-9; for the claim that this is an example of selflessness, see Michael Gagarin, “Morality in Homer,” 288, first paragraph, 303). However, these examples are even less explicit than the still not fully explicit example I discuss here.

³⁴ I’d like to thank Adam Beresford for the suggestion of looking for examples of selflessness in Greek tragedy.

³⁵ Lawrence observes that, among heroic protagonists, Oedipus is distinguished for his embrace of “other-regarding” virtues (*Moral Awareness*, 139, second paragraph).

³⁶ This point is observed by Ahrens Dorf (*Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy*, 25-6).

³⁷ I use A. Dain and P. Mazon’s text of Sophocles’ plays. *Psuchē* probably means “life” here rather than “soul” (compare Jebb’s translation in his edition). The point is that Oedipus is more worried about the effect of the plague on his subjects—their *death*—than he is about its effect on himself.

more important to one's own well-being than one's own survival. One could therefore be more concerned for those things *out of self-interest*—that one receives posthumous honor in one's city, say—than one is for one's own survival. But there is another passage where Oedipus comes much closer to explicitly claiming that he is selflessly concerned for the well-being of his subjects. During his heated exchange with Tyreus, Tyreus tells him that his luck at guessing riddles—viz. the riddle of the Sphinx—“ruined you.” (442). Oedipus responds, “if it saved this city, I don't care.” (443). Tyreus uses the verb *diollumi*, which can mean “ruin” or “kill.” Perhaps Tyreus tells Oedipus that solving the Sphinx' riddle will, after a long interval, result in his death. But that's not what actually happens at the end of the play. Oedipus doesn't die; he becomes a pitiable blind exile. More plausibly, then, Tyreus uses the verb in the sense of “wreck” or “ruin;” that is, solving the Sphinx's riddle “ruined” Oedipus in the sense of setting his life on the path of misfortune and despair. But, in the face of Tyreus' grim pronouncement, Oedipus claims that he doesn't care if guessing the Sphinx's riddle ruined his life so long as it saved Thebes. Assuming that he understands Tyreus' pronouncement as I have glossed it, he claims that he cares more about the safety of Thebes than he does about his own well-being.³⁸ He therefore implicitly claims that, even if it wasn't good for himself, he would still have chosen to save the city.

³⁸ As further examples of selflessness in tragedy, some scholars point to Antigone (Jebb, *The Antigone*, xxx, xxxiv-v; Ahrens Dorf, *Greek Tragedy*, 107) and Neoptolemus in the *Philoctetes*—specifically, his acquiescing to take Philoctetes home at the cost of his own hopes for glory at Troy (Christopher Gill, “Bow, Oracle, and Epiphany in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*,” 142; Lawrence, *Moral Awareness*, 190-1, 193). But these cases are not so clear. Antigone never explicitly claims to be acting selflessly and at times emphasizes the reward she expects to receive in Hades (on this point, see William Tyrrell and Larry Bennett, *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone*, 71). In all fairness, Ahrens Dorf observes her emphasis on her reward (see 108); he thinks rather that Antigone makes a *false claim* to selflessness (see 130-4). Similarly, though Neoptolemus thinks it would be better for both he and Philoctetes to go to Troy together and win their destined glory (1373-81), it's not clear that he hasn't come to see his friendship with Philoctetes as a greater good than friendless glory. As Lawrence observes, “[T]hat glory is in danger of being meaningless except in partnership with his new friend, since the rest of the army is, we have been encouraged to think, morally worthless.” (191).

Does Oedepus' expression of selfless concern for his community reflect a popular view that this sort of concern is both possible and connected to virtue? We have seen that other characters besides Oedepus see his concern for his community as a sign of virtue. Moreover, none of the characters in the play express surprise or skepticism at his claim that this concern eclipses his concern for his own well-being. Nor does Oedepus feel the need to justify the existence of this sort of selfless concern, as if those he is speaking to were skeptical of its possibility.³⁹ Given both the absence of these dramatic indications and the fact that drama had a popular audience, it's plausible that the existence of selfless concern for one's community and its connection to virtue were popularly credible.⁴⁰

We can find another example of a popular connection between selflessness and virtue in comedy. In Menander's *Dyskolos*, the cynical and misanthropic Knemon falls into a well and is saved by Gorgias, who jumps in after him. Gorgias' action causes him to have a change of heart. He expresses this as follows:

What put me in such a bad state was observing each person's life and their calculations—how they were disposed towards gaining. I didn't think that anyone would come to have goodwill for another person. That's what got in my way. But just now, with great difficulty, one person, Gorgias, has given me proof [of his goodwill]. He acted like a most noble man. (718-23).⁴¹

Technically, Knemon doesn't say that Gorgias acted virtuously; he says that he performed the action of a "most noble" or "most well-born" man (*eugenestatos*). But it's not difficult to see that

³⁹ By way of contrast, compare Oedepus' arguments in *Oedepus at Colonus* that he is not worthy of blame for killing his father (270-3, 992-6).

⁴⁰ Lawrence, citing Gill (*Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy*, 15-16), notes that tragic characters rarely express "idiosyncratic moralities" (*Moral Awareness*, 3).

⁴¹ I use F. H. Sandbach's text. I'd again like to thank Adam Beresford and David Konstan for suggestions about the translation of this passage.

being “noble” or “well-born” is associated with virtue. It’s true that the term *eugenos* has aristocratic overtones—coming from a “good” or “respectable” family. But the aristocratic class claimed it was worthy of respect not just because of its superior wealth, but also, and more importantly, because of its *superior virtue*.⁴² Knemon thus associates virtue with “goodwill,” which he believes requires looking past one’s own good and towards the good of others. That’s why he was so cynical. He didn’t think that people were actually capable of this. But Gorgias proves him wrong. He demonstrates that the rare individual can look past her own good and act like a noble or virtuous person. Regardless of whether Menander himself agrees with this point, the fact that he puts it in the mouth of Knemon, a lower-class Athenian farmer, shows that he thinks it has popular currency.

Many passages that seem to show an association of selflessness with virtue can be found in oratory; however, most of them, like the passage from Demosthenes I pointed to at the start, are not fully explicit.⁴³ I am aware of one exception. Isocrates, in the *Panegyricus*, claims that the Athenians of the past, out of a (virtuous) concern for what’s right, knowingly acted contrary to their own good. He says that the Athenians helped weaker cities who were being wronged—and avoided joining with stronger cities who were wronging others—in full knowledge that this policy was worse for themselves. As he puts it: “we chose to aid weaker cities *even against our own interest (kai para to sumpheron)* instead of choosing to join stronger cities in wronging others so that we may profit.” (53.8-10, my emphasis).⁴⁴ And since oratory aims at persuading a

⁴² See the Old Oligarch, *Constitution of the Athenians*, 1.5; *Antigone*, 34-8 and note that *eugenēs* is contrasted with *esthlōn kakē*: “a vicious daughter of virtuous parents.”

⁴³ For further examples, see Demosthenes, *Second Philippic*, 8-10; Hyperides, *Funeral Oration*, 26; Isocrates, *Against Callimachus*, 59-62. A great many such less than fully explicit passages can be found in Dover, *Popular Morality* (see references in note 15).

⁴⁴ I use É. Brémond and G. Mathieu’s text. I take this example from Christ’s *Limits of Altruism* (133-4). He points to Thucydides (2.40.5) and Lysias (2.14) as making similar claims about the Athenians. But these passages are not quite explicit about the absence of self-interested motivation. The Thucydides passage involves a claim that the

popular audience, we can be sure that the idea that virtuous people or cities act contrary to their own interest out of a dedication to what's right was popularly credible.

Isocrates' claim that some (virtuous) people sacrifice their own interest in pursuit of what's right pretty much matches a claim made by the Athenian envoys in Thucydides' "Melian Dialogue." They claim, about the Spartans, that "when it comes to acting towards themselves and doing what is lawful and accepted in their own country, they exercise virtue more than anyone. But when it comes to how they behave towards others...the Spartans are most conspicuous in considering what is pleasant for themselves to be noble and what is in their interest to be right." (5.105.4) The implication is that by "considering what is in their interest to be right," the Spartans are not acting virtuously. Virtue requires distinguishing between what is right and what is in one's own interest. Now, the Athenian envoys' claim does not logically imply that virtue requires choosing what is right in preference to one's interest. If virtue required that one recognize that what is right is one *part*—even the greatest part—of one's own interest, it would still require recognizing a distinction between one's own interest and what is right. In this sense, the passage is a weaker form of evidence. But I don't think this is a very plausible reading of the envoys' claim. A far more plausible reading is that virtue requires doing what is right *in those cases when it's contrary to your own interest.*⁴⁵ And this is why it requires distinguishing

Athenians help other cities by an "unfearing confidence in our freedom rather than by the calculation of self-interest." (H. S. Jones and J.E. Powell's text). As Adam Beresford has pointed out to me, Pericles seems to mean that the Athenians are so confident in their ability to maintain their freedom against other cities that they can help whoever they want without having to worry about the consequences. Other cities, by contrast, have to actively calculate about whether helping another city would put them at a disadvantage. So understood, the passage is plausibly read to imply that the Athenians don't help other cities with an eye on their own interest. Though it's possible to dispute this. One could claim that they assume that helping other cities will benefit them in some way. It's just that, since they don't have to worry about any circumstantially bad consequences, they don't have to calculate about whether helping others is worth it. The Lysias passage claims that the Athenians acted in defense of the Corinthians, who were being wronged, "with no gain lying before them other than good reputation." (C. Carey's text). It therefore leaves open the possibility that the Athenians were motivated by this good.

⁴⁵ Compare the Demosthenes reference in note 43. This is also Dover's analysis (*Popular Morality*, 21). I owe the example to him.

between what is right and what is in one's own interest. In the international arena, the Spartans either pretend not to recognize this distinction—even though they actually do—or they deceive themselves about its reality. Either way, they cannot be counted on to do what is right in those cases when it's contrary to their own interest. And this is why, unlike Isocrates' Athenians, the Spartans cannot be counted on to act virtuously.⁴⁶

In sum, there is evidence from a wide range of Greek literature—philosophy, epic, tragedy, comedy, oratory, history—that virtue was popularly associated with selflessness. However, as I remarked at the start of this section, that virtue involves selflessness does not imply the rejection of the weakest versions of Psychological Eudaimonism (those that specify that the ultimate end of our action is something that satisfies the description “what is best for oneself” or “our own *eudaimonia*,” regardless of whether it is aimed at under that description). Neither does the view that virtue is selfless touch on the various forms of Normative Eudaimonism. To address these shortcomings, we will have to look to a further aspect of popular views about virtue.

Virtue and Self-Sacrifice

In addition to being selfless, virtue was popularly understood to be *self-sacrificial*; that is, it wasn't just thought that virtuous people act in disregard of their own good. It was also thought that they knowingly choose what is worse for themselves in order to accomplish a virtuous

⁴⁶ In isolation, it would be difficult to definitively connect the Athenian envoys' view of virtue to popular opinion. The Melian elite prevent them from speaking in front of the people for fear that they would use rhetoric to manipulate them (5.84.3-85.1), and the envoys, for their part, forswear the use of demagogic rhetoric in their discussion (5.85.1, 5.89.1). Moreover, the Athenian envoys show Sophistic influence (see 5.105.1-2, 5.111.3). On the other hand, the Melian elite seem to hold more conventional views (compare *ibid.* with 5.104.1), and the envoys may appeal to these views in order to persuade them. At any rate, given that the envoys' view of virtue matches the view we find in Isocrates, it's clear that, in this part of their speech at least, they are appealing to a popular understanding of virtue.

end.⁴⁷ This view of virtue is already on display in several of the examples from the previous section. We saw that in the NE Aristotle describes a popular view in which virtuous people disregard their own good in order to do what is noble. This implies that they would be willing, whenever they believe there is a conflict between what is noble and their own good, to sacrifice their own good for the sake of doing something noble.⁴⁸ We saw in the *Rhetoric* that he identifies actions that are good for others but not oneself as noble. We saw in the *Hipparchus* that Socrates' unnamed companion believes that virtuous people refrain from certain benefits not because they aren't genuine benefits but because they are vicious and, for this reason, not worthwhile. We saw in the *Alcibiades I* that Alcibiades believes that noble action is sometimes personally harmful, but he claims that, nevertheless, he would choose to act nobly. We saw in the *Iliad* that Odysseus chooses to act courageously even if it leads to a result that is worse for himself. We saw in the *Oedipus Rex* that Oedipus claims he doesn't care if his (virtuous) action of saving Thebes ruined his own life. We saw in the *Panegyricus* that Isocrates claims that the Athenians of old, out of a (virtuous) concern for what's right, knowingly undertook courses of action that were worse for themselves. Finally, we saw that the Athenian envoys in Thucydides' "Melian Dialogue" imply that virtue requires doing what's right in cases when it's contrary to

⁴⁷ The popular connection between virtue and self-sacrifice is observed by Suzanne Stern-Gillet, who remarks, "[T]he conventional view holds that heroes can benefit others only by sacrificing themselves." ("Souls Great and Small," 66).

⁴⁸ Aristotle himself seems to endorse this implication of the popular view of virtue in his Nicomachean discussion of courage. He says there that the courageous person is "[in death] knowingly deprived of the greatest goods, but he is no less courageous for all that—perhaps even more so—because he chooses what is noble in war instead of those things [i.e., the greatest goods]." (1117b11-15). Though, as Roger Crisp points out ("Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value," 285, note 27), "the greatest goods" (*megistōn agathōn*) could be read more weakly as "very great goods." The point that courage here appears to be self-sacrificial has been made recently by Christine Korsgaard ("From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble," 222, bottom paragraph), but it goes back at least as far as Duns Scotus (*Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, 437) and possibly as far back as Aspasius (*In Ethica Nicomachea Commentaria*, 87, lines 17-21).

your own interest. We can also add to this evidence the following passage from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*:

Those who are praising and blaming do not consider if someone did something in one's interest (*sumpheron*) or harmful. Many times they even put it in the praise that someone made little of what is profitable to himself and did what is noble; for example, they praise Achilles because, it being possible for him to live, he came to the aid of his companion Patroklos while knowing he would have to die. This sort of death was more noble for him, but living was in his interest. (1358b38-1359a5).

Achilles is not simply praised as an example of someone who overlooks her own good while benefiting others. He is praised as an example of someone who knowingly *sacrifices* her own good—her own life—in order to do something noble.

It was thus a popular view that virtuous people knowingly act contrary to their own good. And this view implies the rejection of even the weakest versions of Psychological Eudaimonism. If virtuous people knowingly sacrifice their own good, not only are they failing to ultimately aim at what is best for themselves, *under that description*, they are also failing to ultimately aim at something that satisfies the description “what is best for themselves.” This popular view about virtue also has implications for the normative question of what we should do. If it was a popular view that virtuous people knowingly sacrifice their own good, then it must have been a popular view that virtuous people thought that we should sometimes do things that are worse for ourselves. In other words, this high-minded view about what we should do was popularly associated with being a virtuous person. But we can go further. The perceived self-sacrificial actions of virtuous people were popularly praised and accepted as praiseworthy. But implicit in the giving of this praise—and in the accepting of what is being praised as praiseworthy—is the

view that virtuous people are acting as they should when they act contrary to their own good.⁴⁹ And this view implies the rejection of even the weakest versions of Normative Eudaimonism (those that specify an identity between what one should do and “what brings one closest to *eudaimonia*” or “what is best for oneself”). In other words, we can draw a line from the popular understanding of virtue as self-sacrificial to the popular praise of self-sacrificial acts of virtue to the popular rejection of the position that what one should do is identical to what is best for oneself.

Implications for Popular Views about Value

The popular rejection of Normative Eudaimonism has important implications for popular views about “value” (i.e., in Greek, *to axion*, “what is worthwhile,” or *to haireton*, “what is choiceworthy”). Confirming the existence of these popular views will therefore provide confirmatory evidence for the popular rejection of Normative Eudaimonism. If we should sometimes act in ways that are contrary to our own good—or our own *eudaimonia*—then what is good for ourselves cannot be the only area of value. At the very least, there are two distinct (and sometimes competing) areas of value: what is good for oneself and what is noble. And this implies a further point. What is good for oneself cannot be the ultimate source of value.⁵⁰ Perhaps someone will object that these are modern, even Kantian, ideas about value that did not exist in the Ancient world. But we can find confirmation of the popular character of these ideas in a report from Aristotle. He refers to a popular view about value at the beginning of both the

⁴⁹ Compare Aristotle’s claim at *Rhetoric* 1367b37-1368a9 that praise of something is convertible with the recommendation that one should do it.

⁵⁰ I’ll leave it open whether “what is good for oneself” or “one’s own *eudaimonia*” and “what is noble” were thought to be two distinct, ultimate sources of value or whether it was thought that there is some further ultimate source of value (e.g., non-relative “goodness”) that explains the value of these two things. However, I incline towards the first option. Consider *Topics* 1118b27-30. If all choiceworthy ends are choiceworthy by possessing the same property, then it wouldn’t make sense to distinguish the different “ways” that “choiceworthy as an end” is said. I thank Marc Gasser-Wingate for pushing me on this point.

Eudemian Ethics (hereafter “EE”) and the NE. In both, he quotes the following inscription from Leto’s temple at Delphi: “Most noble is what is most just; most profitable is health; and most pleasant by nature is acquiring whatever one’s heart desires.” (NE 1099a27-8; compare EE 1214a5-6).⁵¹ The author of the inscription presumably does not mean that what’s most noble fails to be one of the most valuable things, since it’s not one of the things that are best for you, like health. She presumably means that what’s most noble (or most pleasurable) is one of the most valuable things even though it’s not one of the things that are best for you.⁵² Maybe someone will argue that the author is making a radical and unpopular point; she is a sort of Kantian innovator that most Greeks would have disagreed with. But there are three reasons to think that this is wrong. First, the inscription was written on a temple for the public to see (see NE 1099a25-6; EE 1214a1-2). Second, it is echoed in the work of several poets (see Theognis 255-6; Sophocles, *Kreousa*, fr. 356 [Pearson’s numbering]). And third, as we have seen, that what is noble and what is good for oneself are distinct and sometimes competing areas of value is directly implied by popular views about virtue and self-sacrifice. It is reasonable, then, to read the inscription as confirming the existence of a popular view that acknowledged areas of value distinct from and sometimes in competition with one’s own good and therefore denied that it was the ultimate source of value.

⁵¹ The Eudemian version is slightly different—it reads “most pleasant of all” instead of “most pleasant by nature”—but that does not change the overall meaning (J. M. Mingay and R. R. Walzer’s text).

⁵² This is the interpretation of John Cooper (“Reason, Virtue, and Moral Value,” 266), Sarah Broadie (comment on 1099a24-6), and Salmieri (“Selfishness,” 112). There is a competing interpretation that sees the inscription as a ranking of three prominent goods (see Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 211-12; Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, v. 1, 458, note 14), but this is clearly inadequate. What is good for oneself is only one of three dimensions of comparison; that is, the inscription is not a comparative ranking of three goods—x is best, y is second best, z is third best (compare *Gorgias* 451d9-e5)—but an observation that three of the most valuable things, only one of which is one’s own good, are sometimes separated from each other.

Part 2: Evidence for the Commonsense Acceptance of Eudaimonism

Now that I have laid out evidence against the commonsense acceptance of Eudaimonism, I will discuss evidence that is often offered in support of it. One of my aims in doing so is to highlight the weakness of this evidence, especially in comparison with the contrary evidence I have given. Before I begin, let me repeat a point I made at the beginning. It is reasonable that there were elements of popular opinion that accepted Psychological or Normative Eudaimonism; that is, it is reasonable that Ancient Greek popular opinion was divided over Eudaimonism, just as popular opinion is today. As a result, pointing to elements of Ancient Greek popular opinion that accept Eudaimonism does not establish that the Ancient Greeks *commonsensically* accepted it. To establish that, one has to do more. One has to provide evidence that speaks against the existence of popular views that denied it (though this evidence could always be the [alleged] absence of such popular views in the existing sources).

Evidence from Aristotle

Scholars who claim that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense often appeal to the NE. They often say that Aristotle tells us there that people commonly agree that their own *eudaimonia* is the ultimate end of their action—real disagreement being reserved for what *eudaimonia* actually consists in.⁵³ But this is a misreading of the text. What he tells us is commonly agreed to is that the “highest good” is *eudaimonia*—that is, that *eudaimonia* is the

⁵³ This claim goes back at least as far as Sidgwick; see *Outlines of The History of Ethics*, 56. For later examples, see Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 257, note 12; Annas, *Morality*, 44; Irwin, *Development*, vol. 1, 22. In addition to the NE, Irwin appeals to the following passage in the *Rhetoric*: “It’s nearly the case that (*schodon*) for each individual by themselves as well as for all together there is a certain target that they aim at when they choose and avoid things; and this is, in summary, *eudaimonia* and its parts” (1360b4-7; see Irwin, *Development*, vol. 1, 22, bottom paragraph, and note 23). But this passage has clear defects as evidence of a popular consensus. First of all, there is the “nearly.” Aristotle refrains from making a universal claim. Second, as we have seen, he shows elsewhere in the *Rhetoric* that there were popular views that contradicted the claim that everyone acts for the sake of her own *eudaimonia*. And third, the passage does not clearly express a popular view as opposed to his own analysis of human motivation. It’s true that in several places he offers lists of premises for use in popular speeches, but this isn’t one of them. This discussion is prefatory to his list of popularly acceptable premises (see 1160b14 and what follows, 1162a20-1 and what follows).

“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) *eudaimonia* is the ultimate end of our action (compare previous with 1097b2-6, 1102a2-4, 1176a30-3). Now, if *eudaimonia* being the best good obviously implied that it was the ultimate end of our action, then Aristotle’s claim to common agreement about *eudaimonia* being the best good would strongly suggest common agreement about it being our ultimate end. But it doesn’t obviously imply this. One can well agree that *eudaimonia* is the best good while also holding that people don’t act ultimately for the sake of their own *eudaimonia* (their own “best good”).⁵⁴ As a result, his claim that *eudaimonia* is commonly agreed to be the best good is neither evidence for nor against the commonsense acceptance of Eudaimonism. It is besides the point.⁵⁵

Perhaps what lies behind the above misreading is the view—also going back at least as far as Sidgwick (see note 2)—that Aristotle is a fundamentally “conservative” thinker. As Sidgwick puts it, “what he [Aristotle] gave us there [the NE, but esp. books 2-4] was the Common Sense Morality of Greece, reduced to consistency by careful comparison: given not as something external to him, but as what ‘we’—he and others—think, ascertained by reflection.”

⁵⁴ Consider Cooper, *Reason and the Human Good in Aristotle*, 91-2.

⁵⁵ Some commentators argue that Aristotle defines “being good” as “being an end” (for an example, see the Moss reference in note 4). Perhaps these commentators will argue that, granting Aristotle’s definition of the good, it is a consequence of the proposition that *eudaimonia* is the best good either that (a) it is the ultimate end of our action (i.e., Psychological Eudaimonism) or (b) it is the most choiceworthy thing, and, therefore, we should do whatever will bring us closest to it (i.e., Normative Eudaimonism). However, these consequences would only be relevant if there was also a popular consensus around Aristotle’s definition of the good. But we have seen that there were popular views that held that there are some ends that are choiceworthy but not good for oneself or at least that there are some ends whose degree of choiceworthiness outstrips their degree of being good for oneself. These popular views therefore implicitly reject this definition, or at least, the normative interpretation of it. One could always abandon the normative interpretation—“worth choosing as an end”—and make it strictly psychological. To be good is to be the sort of thing we are psychologically capable of taking as an end. However, it’s unclear whether this definition actually implies that the “best good” is the ultimate end of our action. Indeed, this looks false for Aristotle. At any rate, it is false for him if he holds that “x is better than y” is identical to “x is more *teleion* (“complete,” “final,” “end-like”) than y” (this point is elaborated in the discussion of *eudaimonia* as simply *teleion* below). But even if the definition did imply that the best good is the ultimate end of our action, we have seen that there were popular views that implicitly reject that our own *eudaimonia* is the ultimate end of our action; they would then implicitly reject the definition.

(*The Methods of Ethics*, xix). Consequently, if Aristotle endorses Eudaimonism in the NE, it must have reflected a popular consensus. This view about Aristotle may be supported by a particular conception of the method he uses—namely, that he limits himself to resolving tensions between *endoxa* or “reputable views” (see 1145b2-7; *Topics* 101a34-b2). This was, for example, Burnet’s view,⁵⁶ though this conception of Aristotle’s method has (correctly, it seems to me) come under criticism.⁵⁷ But whatever method he uses in the work, it’s clear that he is willing to argue for radical and unpopular views. Let me give an example. He makes a concerted case that the contemplative life is the most *eudaimōn*. As he tells us at any rate, this was not a popular view. The “low class majority” identify *eudaimonia* with “something visible and obvious,” such as honor, pleasure, or wealth (1095a21-3) while the “gentlemanly” minority (*hoi charientes*) identify it with honor, or rather, moral virtue (1095b22-30). It is only (some of?) the “wise,” such as Anaxagoras, who identify *eudaimonia* with contemplation (see 1095a20-3, 1179a13-16; EE 1215b6-14, 1216a11-14). But if both the “low-class” majority and the gentlemanly minority fail to accept a view, it is presumably not popular. The view that the contemplative life is the most *eudaimōn* may not even count as an *endoxon* seeing as Aristotle seems to say that the views of the wise are “reputable” only if they don’t contradict popular views,⁵⁸ and this “wise” view does. This shows that he is willing to go out on a limb and argue *against* popular belief.⁵⁹ I therefore

⁵⁶ See *Ethics*, xxxix-xli. For contemporary examples, see Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles*, 40-9; Richard Kraut, “How to Justify Ethical Propositions.”

⁵⁷ For examples, see Carlo Natali, “Rhetorical and Scientific Aspects of the Nicomachean Ethics”; Salmieri, “Aristotle’s Non-‘Dialectical’ Methodology in the Nicomachean Ethics”.

⁵⁸ See *Topics* 104a8-12 with C. D. C. Reeve, “Aristotle’s Philosophical Method,” 158, bottom paragraph.

⁵⁹ Salmieri points to Aristotle’s disagreement with the inscription in Leto’s temple that I discussed earlier (“Selfishness,” 112) as an additional example of Aristotle’s willingness to argue for unpopular positions. I am less sure, however. Rather, this is clearly an example of him arguing against a popular view, but it is less clear that he is making an unpopular point. Perhaps the view that what is good for oneself is the sole area of value was also a part of Ancient Greek popular opinion. If so, then this would not be an example of him championing an unpopular view; it would be an example of him endorsing one popular view at the expense of another. The same could be said about another example that Salmieri points to—Aristotle’s rehabilitation of “selfishness” (*philautia*) in NE 9.8 (101-2). It’s true that Aristotle is here doing something radical; “selfishness” was commonly used as a term of reproach,

see no reason to say that he limits himself to systematizing popular views. It is true that, in certain places, he appeals to popular views; for example, when it comes to certain “starting points,” such as what sorts of things are noble, he appeals to the habitual views of his well-brought up audience (see 1095b2-7; Aspasius, *In Ethica Nicomachea Commentaria*, 10, lines 2-8). But we should not over-generalize. As we have seen, he is perfectly willing to argue against popular belief. We therefore cannot infer from the fact that he accepts Eudaimonism that it reflects a popular consensus. Moreover, even if he did limit himself to systematizing popular ethical views, it still does not follow that there was always a popular consensus he could rely on. If popular opinion was fragmented over a certain issue, as I have suggested it was over Eudaimonism, then he cannot rely on a popular consensus. He must make a judgment that *this part* of popular opinion is right and *that part* is wrong.

I will discuss two further points in the NE that might be offered as evidence of a popular consensus about Eudaimonism. Both points concern what are called in the literature the “formal” features of *eudaimonia*. These are certain (necessary) features of *eudaimonia* that help guide Aristotle’s search for its definition. The first feature is being “simply complete” (*haplōs teleion*)—that is, being chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of any further end (1097a33-4). It might be argued that (a) there was a popular consensus that *eudaimonia* is simply complete; (b) the fact that *eudaimonia* is simply complete implies that it is the ultimate end of human action (i.e., at least the weakest form of Psychological Eudaimonism); therefore, (c) there was a popular consensus about a feature of *eudaimonia* that implies Psychological Eudaimonism. There is a passage that one could use to motivate (a). When Aristotle attributes simple

and, as Annas points out (*Morality*, 261-2), other philosophers did not follow his example. But if, as I have claimed, it is reasonable that there were elements of popular opinion that accepted Psychological Eudaimonism, his rehabilitation of selfishness could be an example of him following out the consequences of those elements, albeit to an uncommon degree.

completeness to *eudaimonia*, he says, “*eudaimonia* most especially *dokei* to be like this” (1097a34). One could read *dokei* as “people think.”: “people most especially think that *eudaimonia* is simply complete.” But it’s difficult to know what exactly *dokei* means here. It could mean “people think;” it could also mean “seems” (i.e., “it seems to us right now in the inquiry that...”). But even if *dokei* here means “people think,” as I mentioned before, this is not enough to show that there was a popular consensus. The fact that there was an element of popular opinion that held “x” does not at all preclude that there was another element that held “not x”. There is, however, a graver difficulty with the argument. (b) is false. Even if *eudaimonia* is chosen for its own sake and never for the sake of a further end, there still may be another end that is not always chosen for the sake of *eudaimonia*. We saw an example of this in the previous section. It was a popular view that virtuous people sometimes act self-sacrificially; that is, they sometimes choose to do what is noble even though it’s contrary to their own good. So even if we assume that people choose *eudaimonia* for its own sake and never for the sake of any further end, it’s still logically possible that they do some things, like self-sacrificial actions of virtue, that are not for the sake of their own *eudaimonia*. There is thus a logical gap between *eudaimonia* being simply complete and it being the ultimate end of human action.⁶⁰

The second formal feature is *autarkeia*, commonly translated as “self-sufficiency,” but, more accurately, “sufficing by itself” or “being by itself enough.”⁶¹ As Aristotle defines it, it is the feature of by itself alone making life “choiceworthy and in need of nothing” (1097b14-15). Now, there is a debate about how strongly to understand this feature. Is he claiming that *eudaimonia* makes life “choiceworthy and in need of nothing” in the sense that it includes

⁶⁰ Irwin observes this point in “Conceptions of Happiness in the Nicomachean Ethics” (see 500, bottom paragraph).

⁶¹ I thank Marc Gasser-Wingate for pointing out the need to address Aristotle’s discussion of *autarkeia*.

everything that is choiceworthy?⁶² Is he claiming, more weakly, that it makes life unimprovably choiceworthy; that is, there is no choiceworthy thing outside of *eudaimonia* that, practically speaking, could be added to a *eudaimōn* life to make it more choiceworthy?⁶³ Is he claiming that it makes life “choiceworthy and in need of nothing” in the even weaker sense that it makes life choiceworthy “to a reasonable degree of expectation”—that is, choiceworthy “enough” and not “unreasonably” needy?⁶⁴ Or is he claiming, weakest of all, that *eudaimonia* is “by itself enough” to make life (minimally) choiceworthy; that is, it suffices by itself to make living (as opposed to not living) choiceworthy?⁶⁵ The last two readings are obviously too weak to imply Eudaimonism, so a case that appeals to *autarkeia* must rely on the first or second reading. Note, however, that neither of the first two readings implies Psychological Eudaimonism. It does not follow from either of them that our own *eudaimonia* is the ultimate end of our action; that is, there’s nothing in either reading to rule out that we sometimes aim at goals without subordinating them to our own *eudaimonia* (or to something that satisfies the description “our own *eudaimonia*”). One way to understand this is as follows. *Autarkeia* is a “normative” feature; it’s about making life “choiceworthy” or “worthwhile” in a certain way. It therefore fails to tell us about our actual psychological condition—about what goals we actually aim at. However, one could still argue that (a) there was a popular consensus that *eudaimonia* is by itself enough; (b) its having this feature (logically) implies that we should do whatever brings us closest to it (i.e., one of the weakest versions of Normative Eudaimonism); therefore, (c) there was a popular consensus about a feature of *eudaimonia* that implies Normative Eudaimonism.

⁶² For example, J. L. Akrill, “Aristotle on Eudaimonia,” 21.

⁶³ For example, Kraut, *Human Good*, 296-7.

⁶⁴ For example, Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, 28; Irwin, “Conceptions,” 515-16.

⁶⁵ For example, Irwin, “Conceptions,” 501-2; compare EE 1215b15-1216a16.

There is a passage in the NE that might be offered as evidence for (a). Aristotle claims that “we believe” (*oiometha*) that *eudaimonia* is by itself enough (1097b15-16). If “we” means “we human beings,” then there is good evidence that this was at least a popular view. But he sometimes uses “we” in a narrower sense, as in, “we in this school,” or even, “we in the Academic tradition” (see EE 1214a7; *Metaphysics* 990b8-11). Therefore, the fact that he makes the above claim in the first person plural does not make it clear that what he says is a popular view (as opposed to the doctrine of his school or the wider philosophical tradition to which he belongs). One has to provide some justification that, in this context, “we” means “we human beings.” But even if one did this, it’s not clear that it would be sufficient evidence for the premise. As before, that “x” was a popular view does not preclude that “not x” was also a popular view. In other words, “we human beings” could be inconsistent and divided (compare *Sophist* 230b4-8). Besides the point that (a) is under-motivated, there is reason to think that, on the first of the readings I mentioned above, it is false; that is, there is reason to think that there was at least an element of popular opinion that denied that *eudaimonia* was by itself enough in the sense of the first reading (so that there’s no popular consensus). Recall that on the first reading *eudaimonia* includes all choiceworthy things. But *eudaimonia* and its parts must be things that are good for oneself (see 1095a15-20, 1097b22-3, 1152b1-3 with 1094a26-8; *Euthydemus* 280b5-8; *Definitions* 412d10-e1), and I take it that this was an uncontroversial point. But if *eudaimonia* and its parts must both be things that are good for oneself and also exhaust all choiceworthy things, then all choiceworthy things must be things that are good for oneself. However, as we saw in the previous section, it was a popular view that there were distinct and sometimes competing areas of value; in particular, it was thought that there were things that are choiceworthy, such as noble actions, that are not good for oneself. So if we read “*eudaimonia* is

by itself enough” in the first way—as including all choiceworthy things—and if it was a popular point that *eudaimonia* and its parts must be things that are good for oneself, then there was a popular view that denied that *eudaimonia* was by itself enough. In other words, the claim that it is by itself enough in this sense was a controversial claim that did not reflect a popular consensus.

Perhaps someone will object that it does not follow from the fact that there are distinct and sometimes competing areas of value that there is something that is choiceworthy that isn't good for oneself. Perhaps all choiceworthy things are good for oneself *to some degree*. It's just that some good things have a value that outstrips their degree of being good for oneself. And if it isn't a logical consequence of the popular view that value is divided into distinct and sometimes competing areas that there are things that are choiceworthy but aren't good for oneself, then we don't have good reason to claim that there was a popular view that denied that *eudaimonia* was by itself enough in the sense of the first reading. This response may save (a) for the first reading, but it won't save the argument. Even if there was a popular consensus that *eudaimonia* is by itself enough in the sense of the first or second reading, it does not (logically) follow that we should do whatever brings us closest to *eudaimonia*; that is, on both readings, (b) is false. It will help to consider an example. Suppose that *eudaimonia* is the mere collection of all intrinsically choiceworthy things (say, d,e,f). It follows that *eudaimonia* is by itself enough in the senses of both the first and second readings (it both comprises all choiceworthy things, and there is nothing outside of it that, practically speaking, could be added to it to make it more choiceworthy). But it does not follow that we should do whatever brings us closest to it. Since *eudaimonia* is (in this example) the mere collection of all intrinsically choiceworthy things, achieving more intrinsically choiceworthy things instead of fewer will bring us closer to it (closer to having all intrinsically choiceworthy things). But nothing prevents one intrinsically choiceworthy thing

from being more choiceworthy overall than two other intrinsically choiceworthy things collected together (say, d is more choiceworthy overall than e and f), especially if, as was popularly thought, there are distinct and sometimes competing areas of value. Now imagine that we are acting in non-ideal circumstances where we must choose between one intrinsically choiceworthy thing (d) or the collection of two others (e and f). Achieving the two intrinsically choiceworthy things (e and f) will take us closer to *eudaimonia* (the collection d, e, f) than will achieving just the one (d). We can even grant that the two collected together (e and f) are better for us than just the one (d). But suppose that the one (d) is overall more choiceworthy. Therefore, we should, in this case, choose the one (d); that is, we should not do what brings us closest to *eudaimonia*. Consequently, neither the first nor the second reading logically implies that we should do whatever brings us closest to *eudaimonia*.⁶⁶

Evidence From Plato

Outside of Aristotle, passages from Plato are sometimes offered as evidence for the commonsense acceptance of Eudaimonism. The passages from the *Euthydemus* that I referred to earlier (278e3-279a1 with 282a1-2) are especially held up as evidence of a popular consensus about Psychological Eudaimonism. It is often said that Socrates and Cleinias take it to be “obvious” that we do everything for the sake of our own *eudaimonia*.⁶⁷ This would indeed serve as strong evidence. Characters merely agreeing to Eudaimonism wouldn’t be enough to show that there weren’t (other) elements of popular opinion that denied it. This is a shortcoming of perhaps all of the other passages from Plato that are cited to support the commonsense

⁶⁶ I thank Tanner Hammond for valuable discussion about this argument.

⁶⁷ For this claim, see Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 252; Irwin, *Development*, vol. 1, 22; Annas, “Plato’s Defense,” note 12.

acceptance of Eudaimonism.⁶⁸ But if Socrates and Cleinias agree that Psychological Eudaimonism is obvious and non-controversial, then the passages would be free of this shortcoming. However, they do no such thing. They do not agree that, in Annas' words, "we seek *eudaimonia* in everything we do" (Annas, *ibid.*). Rather, they agree that it is obvious that "all human beings want to do well" (278e3), which they later treat as equivalent to wanting to be *eudaimōn* (see 282a1-2). But this agreement in no way precludes that, while everyone wants to be *eudaimōn*, some want other things more. And if some people want other things more, they may be willing, in certain circumstances, to forgo their own *eudaimonia* for the sake of those things. As White puts it, "This is certainly not to say, however, that there are no independent considerations that could rival happiness in a person's deliberations" (*Individual and Conflict*, 182, bottom paragraph). Socrates and Cleinias' agreement thus fails to establish that our own *eudaimonia* is the ultimate aim of our action. It is therefore weak evidence for a popular consensus about Psychological Eudaimonism.

Even if the evidence from the *Euthydemus* is given up, it might still be argued that the fact that Plato doesn't present us with clear examples of anti-Eudaimonistic views shows that he doesn't think there were such popular views; otherwise, he would have had characters express them. As Annas puts it:

If Plato is ignoring an alternative plainly available to his audience, then eudaemonism is not so obviously the ancient default way to think about ethics. And this would be a particularly striking result where Plato is concerned, since it is passages in Plato which

⁶⁸ See, for example, the other passages Annas cites in "Plato's Defense," note 12.

provide our best examples of eudaemonism as an everyday way of thinking, before philosophy gets going. (“Plato’s Defense,” 52).⁶⁹

Now, I have argued that anti-Eudaimonistic views are expressed in the *Apology*, *Alcibiades I*, and the *Hipparchus*. It might be objected that the *Alcibiades I* and the *Hipparchus* are not genuinely Platonic works. This still leaves the *Apology*. But even bracketing the example from the *Apology*, I don’t think the absence of anti-Eudaimonistic views in Plato’s dialogues would be very strong evidence for the commonsense acceptance of Eudaimonism. Plato was one of the first philosophers to formulate Eudaimonism in a precise way and (assuming that the traditional reading of Plato as a eudaimonist is correct) argue for its acceptance. This is compatible with the existence of popular views that imply the rejection of Eudaimonism but that he did not get around to explicitly addressing. Indeed, if we deny that he wrote the *Hipparchus* and the *Alcibiades I*, then we can explain why the author(s) of these dialogues had Socrates explicitly address anti-Eudaimonistic views; they were filling in the gap that they found in Plato’s defense of Eudaimonism.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ An anonymous referee worries that since Annas writes “examples of eudaemonism as *an* everyday way of thinking...” (my emphasis) she only intends the weak claim that Eudaimonism was one among potentially other popular approaches to ethics in Ancient Greece. But she is pretty clearly using understatement. Note that just before this passage she writes “eudaimonism develops, in a variety of theoretically enriched ways, an approach to ethics which is, in everyday life, *the obvious default*.” (52, my emphasis). And, at the start of the passage, she states the consequence that “...then Eudaimonism is not so *obviously the ancient default way* to think about ethics.”(my emphasis). But if there were popular non-Eudaimonistic approaches to ethics, then Eudaimonism could not be “*the obvious default*.” At most, the *disjunction* of all of these popular alternatives would be “the obvious Ancient default way to think about ethics.” Note, also, that in a footnote to this passage she offers purported evidence from Plato that people take Psychological Eudaimonism to be “completely obvious.” (52, note 12). But if there were popular alternatives, how could people take Psychological Eudaimonism to be “completely obvious”?

⁷⁰ I’d like to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this response. Of course, we might also think that Plato *implicitly* addresses popular anti-Eudaimonistic views. Since these views were popular, he could reasonably expect his readers to be aware of them, even if he doesn’t have characters voice them. To give an example, Socrates often makes a point of getting his interlocutors to agree that all noble things are good (see, for example, *Laches* 192d, *Meno* 77b, *Gorgias* 474c-475a, *Protagoras* 358b, 359e, *Hippias Major* 297c-d). Perhaps this is Plato’s way of addressing the popular view that virtuous people selflessly pursue what is noble (see the NE passage in “Virtue and Selflessness” above). In other words, he may think that in the face of Socratic examination people will agree that noble actions are good for us and are pursued as such. I’d like to thank Marta Jimenez for suggesting this point.

Conclusion

I have argued that Eudaimonism was not Ancient Greek common sense. Popular views about virtue testified to in philosophy, epic, tragedy, comedy, oratory, and history offer especially strong evidence for this conclusion, but additional subjects of popular opinion that imply the rejection of Eudaimonism include friendship, favors and gratitude, and kindness or generous-mindedness (*philanthropia*). There are presumably others as well. Moreover, the evidence offered for the contrary position that the Ancient Greeks commonsensically accepted Eudaimonism rests largely on misreadings or on incorrect or questionable assumptions about Plato and Aristotle's methodology. Nevertheless, the view that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense plays a special role in the interpretation of Ancient Greek ethical thought. It provides a common, probably the dominant, explanation for why Ancient Greek philosophers adopted Eudaimonism. If we deny that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense, then we are deprived of an easy explanation for this fact. This may seem like a difficulty with denying that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense, but I would disagree. It is an opportunity. Rejecting the view shows us that the question of why Ancient Greek philosophers adopted Eudaimonism is very much an open one. If we agree with the premise of the question, then we are presented with the imperative of re-examining the answers that have so far been given, and if we find those answers wanting, of coming up with better ones ourselves. And even if we disagree with the premise of the question, recognizing that there were popular alternatives to Eudaimonism shows that it's not *prima facie* unreasonable to claim that some Ancient Greek philosophers rejected Eudaimonism. Since both Eudaimonistic and anti-Eudaimonistic views were popularly available, it comes down to which way the preponderance of evidence points for a given thinker.

There is also the following consequence of rejecting the view that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense. This view tends to encourage a cultural-relativist approach to Ancient Greek and contemporary ethics. If it's true that Ancient Greek ethical thought is fundamentally Eudaimonistic, then it contrasts sharply with contemporary ethical thought. If we accept this contrast, then we cannot help but wonder how Ancient Greek philosophers justified such a different line of thought; did they have considerations for their point of view that are worthy of our attention? In reply, the view that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense tells us that they had no justification to offer us. The disagreement between Ancient Greek and contemporary ethical thought is simply a matter of cultural perspective. This view therefore encourages us to justify our contemporary modes of thought against Ancient Greek alternatives by naked appeal to cultural acceptance. The Greeks thought one way; *we* think another. Thomas Hurka embodies this consequence in a recent criticism of Aristotle's ethical thought: "Like more specific features of his account of virtue, the underlying structure of Aristotle's view [i.e., its underlying emphasis on one's own good life] reflects an agonistic Greek ethos that's some distance from our moral thought today." ("Aristotle on Virtue" 23). And we should not fail to notice that Sidgwick, who I have pointed to as an early proponent of the view that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense, reacted to this view in the following way: "What he [Aristotle] gave us there was the Common Sense Morality of Greece, reduced to consistency by careful comparison: given not as something external to him but as what 'we'—he and others—think, ascertained by reflection... Might I not imitate this: do the same for *our* morality here and now, in the same manner of impartial reflection on current opinion?" (*Methods*, xix-xx). Rejecting the view that Eudaimonism was Ancient Greek common sense thus allows us to put this cultural-relativist approach to the difference between Ancient Greek and contemporary

ethical thought to rest. If we find that the two traditions disagree over Eudaimonism, then we can treat the disagreement as it should be treated, as a rational disagreement amenable to argument and debate.⁷¹

⁷¹ For helpful discussion and comments, I would like to thank Adam Beresford, Vincent Dumas, Marc Gasser-Wingate, Tanner Hammond, Justin Humphreys, Russell E. Jones, David Konstan, and several anonymous referees.

Works Cited

- Adkins, Arthur. *Merit and Responsibility*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.
- Ackrill, J. L. "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*." In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, edited by Amélie Rorty, 15-34. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Ahbel-Rappe, Sara. "Cross-Examining Happiness: Reason and community in Plato's Socratic Dialogues." In *Ancient models of Mind: Studies in Human and Divine Rationality*, edited by Andrea Nightingale and David Sedley, 27-40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- _____. "Is Socratic Ethics Egoistic?." *Classical Philology* 107, no. 4 (2012): 319-40.
- Ahrensdorf, Peter. *Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy: Rationalism and Religion in Sophocles' Theban Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- _____. *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue: Creating the Foundations of Classical Civilization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Allen, T. W., ed. *Homeri Ilias*, Vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931.
- Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- _____. "From Nature to Happiness." *Apeiron* 31, no. 1 (1998): 59-74.
- _____. "Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism." In *Morality and Self-Interest*, edited by Paul Bloomfield, 205-221. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- _____. "Plato's Defense of Justice: The Wrong Kind of Reason?." In *The Quest for the Good life: Ancient Philosophers on Happiness*, edited by Øyvind Rabbås, Eyjólfur K. Emilsson, Hallvard Fossheim, and Miira Tuominen, 49-65. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Aspasius. *Aspasi in Ethica Nicomachea Commentaria*. In vol. 19 of *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, edited by Gustavus Heylbut. Berlin: Reimer, 1889.

- Brémond, É. and G. Mathieu, eds. *Isocrate. Discours*. Vol. 2. Reprint. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1967.
- Broadie, Sarah. Philosophical introduction and commentary to *Nicomachean Ethics*, by Aristotle, 9-91, 261-452. Translated by Christopher Rowe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Bruell, Christopher. *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999.
- Bryant, Joseph. *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Burnet, John, ed. *The Ethics of Aristotle*. London: Methuen and Company, 1900.
- _____, ed. *Platonis Opera*. Vols. 1-4. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900—1903.
- Butcher, S. H., ed. *Demosthenis Orationes*. Vol. 2.1. Reprint. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- Bywater, I., ed. *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894.
- Carey, C., ed. *Lysiae Orationes cum Fragmentis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Christ, Matthew R. *The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Cooper, John. *Reason and the Human Good in Aristotle*. Reprint. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986.
- _____. “Reason, Moral Virtue, and Moral Value.” In *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory*, 253-280. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Cope, Edward Meredith, ed. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle with a Commentary*. 3 vols. Reprint. New York: Arno Press, 1973.
- Crisp, Roger. “Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value.” In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited

- by Justin Broackes, 275-294. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Dain, A. and P. Mazon, eds. *Sophocle*. Vol. 1-2. Reprint. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1967—1968.
- Dover, Kenneth. *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*. Reprint. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1994.
- Doyle, James. “Socratic Methods.” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 42 (2012): 39-75.
- Fenik, Bernard. “Stylization and Variety: Four Monologues in the *Illiad*.” In *Homer, Tradition and Invention*, edited by Bernard Fink, 68-90. Leiden: Brill, 1978.
- Gagarin, Michael. “Morality in Homer.” *Classical Philology* 82 (1987): 287-306.
- Gauthier, René Antoine, and Jean Yves Jolif. *L’Ethique à Nicomaque*. 2 vols. With an introduction, translation, and commentary. Louvain and Paris: Publications Universitaires and Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1958—1970.
- Gill, Christopher. “Bow Oracle and Epiphany in Sophocles’ ‘Philoctetes’”. *Greece & Rome* 27, no. 2 (1980): 137-146.
- _____. *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Graham, Daniel W. “Socrates as Deontologist.” *The Review of Metaphysics* 71, no. 1 (2017): 25-43.
- Grant, Alexander. *The Ethics of Aristotle*. 4th ed. 2 vols. Reprint. New York: Arno Press, 1973.
- Hurka, Thomas. “Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong.” In *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Julia Peters, 9-26, New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Irwin, Terence. *Plato’s Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- _____. “Aristotle’s Conception of Morality.” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in*

- Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1985): 115-143.
- _____. *Aristotle's First Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- _____. *Plato's Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- _____. *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study*. Vol. 1: *From Socrates to the Reformation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- _____. "Conceptions of Happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*." In *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, edited by Christopher Shields, 495-528. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Jebb, Richard Claverhouse, ed. *The Antigone*. Vol. 3 of *Sophocles: The plays and Fragments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1888.
- Jones, H. S. and J. E. Powell, eds. *Thucydides Historiae*. 2 Vols. Reprint. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967—1970.
- Kahn, Charles H. "Pre-Platonic Ethics." In *Ethics: Companions to Ancient Thought: 4*, edited by Stephen Everson, 27-48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kenny, Anthony. *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Konstan, David. "Altruism." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130 (2000): 1-17.
- _____. *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. "From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action." In *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, edited by Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting, 203-236. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Kraut, Richard. *Aristotle on the Human Good*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

- _____. "How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method." In *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Richard Kraut, 76-95. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Lawrence, Stuart. "Moral Decisions in Homer." *Scholias*, NS 12 (2003): 27-33.
- _____. *Moral Awareness in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Mingay, J. M. and R. R. Walzer, eds. *Aristotelis Ethica Eudemia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Morrison, Donald. "Happiness, Rationality, and Egoism in Plato's Socrates." In *Rationality and Happiness: From the Ancients to the Early Medievals*, edited by Jihan Yu and Jorge E. Garcia, 17-34. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003.
- Moss, Jessica. *Aristotle on the Apparent Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Natali, Carlo. "Rhetorical and Scientific Aspects of the Nicomachean Ethics." *Phronesis* 52, no. 4 (2007): 364-381.
- Reeve, C. D. C. "Aristotle's Philosophical Method." In *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, edited by Christopher Shields, 150-170. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Rogers, Kelly. "Aristotle on Loving Another for His Own Sake." *Phronesis* 39, no. 3 (1994): 291-302.
- Ross, W. D., ed. *Aristotelis Ars Rhetorica*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.
- Salmieri, Gregory. "Aristotle's Non-'Dialectical' Methodology in the Nicomachean Ethics." *Ancient Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2009): 311-335.
- _____. "Aristotle on Selfishness?: Understanding the Iconoclasm of Nicomachean Ethics ix 8." *Ancient Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2014): 101-120.
- Sandbach, F. H., ed. *Menandri reliquiae selectae*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- Scotus, Duns. *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*. Translated by Allan B. Wolter. Washington,

- D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986.
- Sidgwick. *The Methods of Ethics*. 7th edition. London: MacMillan and Company, 1907.
- _____. *Outlines of The History of Ethics*. 6th edition. Reprint, London: Macmillan and Company, 1967.
- Stern-Gillet, Suzanne. "Souls Great and Small: Aristotle on Self-Knowledge, Friendship, and Civic Engagement." In *Ancient and Medieval Concepts of Friendship*, edited by Suzanne Stern-Gillet and Gary Gurtler, 51-83. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014.
- Stewart, J. A. *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*. 2 vols. Reprint. New York: Arno Press, 1973.
- Strauss, Leo. *What is Political Philosophy?*. Reprint. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Taylor, C. C. W. "Review of *Individual and conflict in Greek Ethics* by Nicholas White." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54, no. 215 (2004): 315-319.
- _____, trans. *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics Books II–IV*. With a commentary. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.
- _____. "Platonic Ethics." In *Pleasure, Mind, and Soul: Selected Papers in Ancient Philosophy*, 150-180. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Tyrell, William and Larry Bennett, *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.
- Vermigli, Peter Martyr. *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Edited by Emidio Campi and Joseph C. McLelland. Translated by Kenneth Austin, Stephen Beall, and Leszek Wysocki. Vol. 9 of The Peter Martyr Library. Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2006.

White, Nicholas. *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.

Williams, Bernard. "The Legacy of Greek Philosophy." In *A Sense of the Past*, edited by Myles Burnyeat, 3-48. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

_____. "Plato Against the Immoralist." In *ibid.*, 97-107.