

## ARISTOTLE ON HAPPINESS, VIRTUE, AND WISDOM

Aristotle thinks that happiness is an activity – it consists in doing something – rather than a feeling. It is the best activity of which humans are capable and is spread out over the course of a life. But what kind of activity is it? Some of his remarks indicate that it is a single best kind of activity, intellectual contemplation. Other evidence suggests that it is an overarching activity that has various virtuous activities, ethical and intellectual, as parts. Numerous interpreters have sharply disagreed about Aristotle's answers to such questions. In this book, Bryan C. Reece offers a fundamentally new approach to determining what kind of activity Aristotle thinks happiness is, one that challenges widespread assumptions that have until now prevented a dialectically satisfactory interpretation. His approach displays the boldness and systematicity of Aristotle's practical philosophy.

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Bryan C. Reece  
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*For my parents and grandparents*

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## *Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiv
1 From the Dilemmatic Problem to the Conjunctive Problem of Happiness	I
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The Dilemmatic Problem of Happiness	2
1.3 The Conjunctive Problem of Happiness	10
1.4 Conclusion	30
2 Theoretical and Practical Wisdom	31
2.1 The Divergence Thesis	31
2.2 Aristotle's Intellectual Virtues	33
2.3 Apparent Evidence for Divergence	35
2.4 The Connection between Theoretical and Practical Wisdom	41
2.5 The Availability of Wisdom and the Nature of Practical Science	57
2.6 Conclusion	60
3 Are There Two Kinds of Happiness?	62
3.1 The Duality Thesis	62
3.2 The Proposal in Context	66
3.3 A Reconstruction of Aristotle's Argument	75
3.4 Conclusion	79
4 Is Contemplation Proper to Humans?	80
4.1 The Divinity Thesis	80
4.2 The Views of Other Commentators	82
4.3 Divine Contemplation	86
4.4 The Type-Distinctness of Divine and Human Contemplation	91
4.5 An Aristotelian Parallel: The Argument from Animal Activities	105
4.6 Conclusion	107

5	Solving the Conjunctive Problem of Happiness	109
5.1	Results of Previous Chapters	109
5.2	Solving the Conjunctive Problem	112
5.3	A Reconstruction of Aristotle's Reasons	116
5.4	Conclusion	133
	<i>Bibliography</i>	135
	<i>Glossary</i>	147
	<i>Index of Passages</i>	148
	<i>Index of Authors</i>	154
	<i>Index of Terms</i>	157



## *Preface*

There are various kinds of starting-point (*archê*), as Aristotle tells us in *Metaphysics* 5.1. One starting-point of this book was my first exposure to the problem of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in an engaging and formative Oxford tutorial with David Charles. My systematic dissatisfaction with existing answers motivated a sustained inquiry, which continues even now to be inspired by David's merits as a teacher and scholar. Another starting-point was the realization, which occurred during breakfast in my cousin's kitchen, that a key idea that I had developed in my PhD thesis on Aristotle's theory of actions and causes offered a solution to the problem of happiness. A third starting-point was Hilary Gaskin from Cambridge University Press, who reached out to me proactively before I knew that I had a book in mind to tell me that she predicted that I had. We talked at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 2018 and my thoughts about happiness then began taking shape as a book. I am grateful to her. A fourth starting-point was the observation that those who see and appreciate the most fundamental truths about reality are the very same people as those who act best toward others. Those who do these things have long seemed to me to be closest to wisdom, something that I want very much to have. Perhaps I should say that they are the starting-points, or at least, echoing Aristotle, that they have the correct starting-points (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.4, 1095<sup>b</sup> 4–13).

The previous paragraph began with Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and ended with his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Other paragraphs in this book do so, too. There are questions about the extent to which it is appropriate to clarify Aristotle's practical science by referencing his theoretical science. Polansky (2017) and Roche (1988b), for example, give sustained and spirited arguments that the former is an autonomous science and should not rely on theoretical principles. Irwin (1980), Whiting (1988), and Henry and Nielsen (2015), as well as several contributors to their volume, especially

Shields (2015b), are among those who disagree. Scott (2015) thinks that while for Aristotle practical science borrows from various theoretical sciences, familiarity with the former does not require mastery of the latter. While I do sometimes appeal to works outside of Aristotle's treatises on practical philosophy, the way in which I do so does not require taking a firm position in this dispute. My most extended excursion beyond the precincts of his practical works occurs in Chapter 5, where I appeal to a distinction that Aristotle draws in the *Organon*, his set of treatises that lay out the logical toolkit for scientific inquiry in general. Even Polansky (2017, 280) agrees that Aristotle's practical science can make free use of this logical toolkit. Chapter 4 involves extensive discussion of *Metaphysics* 12, among other texts from Aristotle's theoretical philosophy. I address these theoretical texts in order to respond to a theoretical problem that is raised in the secondary literature on the *Nicomachean Ethics* about whether divine beings contemplate in the same way that we do, thus threatening Aristotle's claim in the *NE* that contemplation is peculiar to us. Aristotle does not raise divine contemplation as a problem for his view; recent interpreters have done that. To respond fully, we must investigate what Aristotle thinks that divine contemplation is. This is his subject in *Metaphysics* 12.7–9. So, in addressing that text, I do not commit to any particular view about the extent to which Aristotle's practical philosophy as he understands it depends on his theoretical philosophy. In Chapters 2 and 5, I appeal to some of Aristotle's psychological claims, such as that contemplation is voluntary, in order to explain why he might have been attracted to certain positions that he states in the *NE* but does not clearly defend. Those who, like Polansky (2017) and Roche (1988b), believe that what Aristotle tells his audience in the *NE* needs no further assistance from theoretical premises can consider my remarks about his psychological claims to be offered to someone who, however unreasonably in their estimation, feels a need for further explanation than Aristotle gives in his practical works.

There are also scholarly disputes about the extent to which it is appropriate to look for guidance from Aristotle's practical works other than the *NE* when interpreting that treatise. This book does not indiscriminately combine Aristotle's ideas from multiple practical works. Rather, I enlist claims from practical works other than the *NE* if those claims do not contradict his claims about relevantly similar subjects in the *NE* and they better illuminate Aristotle's view in the *NE* than other interpretations do. The reason that someone might cite for not drawing on other practical works is that Aristotle is taken to have developed in his thought over time. But the reason for taking him to have developed is the view that some of his

doctrines are incompatible with others. Since my project is that of vindicating Aristotle's coherence in the *NE*, I think that it is legitimate to draw on views of his that reveal coherence and do not produce incoherence. In addition to this blanket policy statement, I will also sometimes offer local reasons for thinking it legitimate to appeal to particular claims in other practical works in light of some special relevance that they have to the context.

At some points I had thought of comprehensively addressing Aristotle's remarks about happiness not only in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but also in the less-studied *Eudemian Ethics*. That became too complicated a task, though. I do sometimes discuss the *Eudemian Ethics*, but the systematic treatment of it that I have in mind must wait.

Unless otherwise noted, Greek texts cited and translated are from those listed in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae Canon of Greek Authors and Works* (*TLG*) (Berkowitz and Squitier, 1990). For Plato and Aristotle these are usually those from the *Oxford Classical Texts* series. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. For the books common to the *Eudemian Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, I use the *NE*'s book numbers for brevity's sake. I transliterate single Greek words, or occasionally a combination of two orthographically uncomplicated Greek words, if they do not occur in close proximity to untransliterated Greek. For passages for which comparison between the translation and original is especially likely to be helpful, I set the two in parallel columns with standard reference numbers (Immanuel Bekker's line numbers for Aristotle) in the margin.

I offer a new approach to a problem, or set of problems, that has long troubled scholars of Aristotle. I aim not only to present a new interpretation of Aristotle's theory of happiness, but also to focus attention in new ways. To this end, I devote less attention than is standard in discussions of happiness in the *NE* to topics like self-sufficiency and finality/perfection/completeness as properties of happiness and the question of whether Aristotle is an egoist. I touch on those issues, with the exception of egoism, though I focus more than usual on less familiar aspects of them. My main subject throughout is the nature of human happiness.

The first chapter argues that Aristotle's theory of happiness faces an even more difficult problem than the one that has produced mountains of literature on the subject. I call this more difficult problem "the Conjunctive Problem of Happiness." No existing interpretation solves it. There are three commonly accepted theses that thwart solving the Conjunctive Problem. Most interpreters accept at least two of them. Many accept all three. I address one each in Chapters 2–4. Chapter 5 synthesizes the insights gained

in arguing against these theses, offering a solution to the Conjunctive Problem of Happiness.

I have many thanks to render. David Charles, Gabriel Richardson Lear, and Anthony Price provided valuable comments on the manuscript as a whole. The following people gave helpful feedback on at least one chapter or an ancestor of it: Joachim Aufderheide, Neera Badhwar, Rachel Barney, Eric Brown, Jean Clifford, Caleb Cohoe, Brian Embry, Lloyd Gerson, Mary Louise Gill, Marta Heckel, Brad Inwood, Jakub Jirsa, Rusty Jones, Richard Martin, Jozef Müller, Konstantine Panegyres, Wayne Riggs, Mark Schiefsky, Mor Segev, Ravi Sharma, Christopher Shields, Harald Thorsrud, and Stephen White. Rusty Jones, my cousin aforementioned, has read numerous drafts of mine on this and other topics and has given comments at various stages of this project, including at one of its starting-points.

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Chapters 3 and 4 substantially overlap with two articles that I have previously published (Reece, 2020a,<sup>1</sup> 2020b). I wish to thank the anonymous referees and the editorial staff for *Classical Philology* and *Ergo*.

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*Preface*

xiii

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Thanks are due to my wife, Sharon, who has been with me throughout the writing process. I also wish to thank all of those who in their words and deeds have pointed me toward happiness, virtue, and wisdom. These include my parents and grandparents, to whom this book is dedicated.

## *Abbreviations*

<i>APo</i>	<i>Analytica Posteriora (Posterior Analytics)</i>
<i>Cat.</i>	<i>Categoriae (Categories)</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>De anima (On the Soul)</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>De caelo (On the Heavens)</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Ethica Eudemia (Eudemean Ethics)</i>
<i>GA</i>	<i>De generatione animalium (On the Generation of Animals)</i>
<i>GC</i>	<i>De generatione et corruptione (On Generation and Corruption)</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>Historia animalium (On the History of Animals)</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>De motu animalium (On the Movement of Animals)</i>
<i>Metaph.</i>	<i>Metaphysica (Metaphysics)</i>
<i>Meteor.</i>	<i>Meteorologica (Meteorology)</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Magna Moralia (Great Ethics)</i>
<i>NE</i>	<i>Ethica Nicomachea (Nicomachean Ethics)</i>
<i>PA</i>	<i>De partibus animalium (On the Parts of Animals)</i>
<i>Phys.</i>	<i>Physica (Physics)</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politica (Politics)</i>
<i>Protr.</i>	<i>Protrepticus (Exhortation to Philosophy)</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	<i>Rhetorica (Rhetoric)</i>
<i>Top.</i>	<i>Topica (Topics)</i>