

The Necessity of Virtue in the Search for the Ultimate Goal of Human Life: Aristotle in Dialogue with the Contemporary World

Inameti Lawrence Udo, PhD

Department of Philosophy
Akwa Ibom State University
Email: inametiudo@aksu.edu.ng
Inamsifon2004@yahoo.com
Phone: 08069007369

Solomon Essiet

Hochschule fur Philosophie,
Munchen, Germany
Email: essiet4u@yahoo.com
Phone: ±4915217022175

<https://doi.org/10.61090/aksujacog.2024.020>

Abstract

This study analysed Aristotle's dialogue on virtue as a necessity for the ultimate goal of human existence. Aristotle (384-322 BC) argued that virtue is indispensable for the attainment of the ultimate goal of human life resulting from contemplation. He identified it as eudaimonia, translated to mean happiness (living well or faring well). He contended that living according to the virtues translates to living in tune with human nature which guarantees true happiness. However, a cursory look at our contemporary society reveals that the necessity of virtue has been greatly undermined while what guarantees true happiness has also been misconstrued. In such a situation, there is a growing concern within the moral community as to how the knowledge of good impacts our emotions and sense of reason; hence, reemphasizing the place of virtue in attaining the goal of a good human society is indisputable. Through effective application of the method of analysis, this work attempted to outline Aristotle's arguments which speak in favour of the necessity of virtue. The objective was to defend the practice of virtue as an indispensable component of the happy life notwithstanding different objections to the necessity thesis. In conclusion, the argument was sustained that the thesis of the necessity of virtue which Aristotle defended in antiquity still has something to tell us today. Therefore, contemporary accounts of the good or happy life should prioritize virtue.

Keywords: Necessity, happiness, virtue, ultimate goal, human life

Introduction

We generally admire and find ourselves attracted to people who display virtues. Corporate organizations and public institutions prefer to engage the services of people who embody the virtues that will help promote their vision. People of proven integrity and moral probity are entrusted with key responsibilities in the public sector. The same thinking prevails in the private domain. People look out for certain values when getting into relationships or partnerships. We associate with individuals when they are sympathetic, honest, considerate, and generally humane. This shows that humans cannot ignore the value of virtues because they are necessary for life to go well. There is a correlation between virtue and the good life.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) defended the sort of view sketched above, arguing that virtue is indispensable for the attainment of the ultimate goal of human life, which he identified as *eudaimonia*, translated to mean happiness (living well or faring well). At the bottom of this assertion lies an

anthropology according to which humans by their very nature have a flair for the virtues. The human peculiar condition is such that virtues are indispensable if only to live a worthwhile life.

Aristotle investigated human nature to uncover how the virtues are fundamental to human well-being. The contention is that living according to the virtues translates to living in tune with human nature. Humans have a composite nature in the sense that they are not only rational beings but also emotional creatures. The virtues being both cognitive and emotional acts conduce to the realization of this dual dimension of human nature. Besides, life is so vulnerable to misfortunes that someone struck by tragedies may be said to be anything but happy. Aristotle debunks such an argument, insisting that the virtuous are not unhappy, since virtues shine through the upheavals of life. Again, Aristotle sees the happy life as the function of contemplation. However, some contemporary Aristotelians defend the thesis that, since the virtues are intelligent acts, they are human being's unique way of practising contemplation.

In this work, we shall attempt to outline the arguments which speak in favour of the necessity of virtue. The enterprise is to defend the practice of virtue as an indispensable component of a happy life. In the concluding section, the argument is sustained that the thesis of the necessity of virtue which Aristotle defended in antiquity still has something to tell us today. Therefore, contemporary accounts of the good or happy life should prioritize virtue.

Arguments for the Necessity of Virtue

1.0 Argument from Human Nature

In the tenth book of *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1980), where Aristotle underlines the primacy of the contemplative life, he, however, notes that the life of the ethical virtues is what properly fits the human condition: "But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue (ethical virtue) is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate" (par.1178a10). Aristotle corroborates this position by highlighting the distinguishing features of human nature. Humans are properly so-called for their active mode of life. Humans, he argues, exist by virtue of activity- by living and acting (par.1168a5).

The active mode of life that human beings lead brings them constantly in contact with others. Such interpersonal dealings rest on the virtues. Aristotle notes: "Just and brave acts, and other virtuous acts, we do in relation to each other, observing what's appropriate to each person with regard to contracts and services and all manner of actions with regard to passion; and all of these seem to be typically human" (par.1178a10-14). Here virtuous practices are shown to be indispensable as far as human social and commercial activities are concerned.

Aristotle also indicates that the virtues are best suited to human composite nature. Human beings are both emotional and rational creatures. The virtues of character proceed from our emotional and rational capacities. Hence, being connected with our composite nature, ethical virtues can be said to be authentic human virtues (par.1178a 15-20). The account of how the ethical virtues work brings to light the emotional and the rational dimensions.

1.1 Virtue and Emotions

Aristotle defines the ethical virtues as states of character. The virtues of character involve a disposition to choose the intermediate: "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (Aristotle, 2009, par.1107a5). The mean is to be sought about passions and actions. The right feeling of the passions has a substantial effect on our actions (par.1105a5).

Passions, varied as they are, include: "appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain" (2009, par.1105b20). Aristotle underlines one problem associated with passions, namely, the fact that humans are always moved by them, which suggests we are "victims" of passions. This

consideration raises the question of human culpability regarding the passions. If virtues involve feeling well, how is that compatible with the fact that the passions we feel do not depend on us?

Kosman (1999) dwells extensively on this issue, noting that passions suggest what is experienced or “a mode of a subject being acted upon” (p.262). The fact that one experiences emotion (*pathos*) is an indication that one is not an active initiator. In the case of passions, one is rather a patient instead of being an agent (Kosman, 1999, p.263). Drawing on his reading of the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics*, Kosman observes that in Aristotle, an entity reserves the power to discriminate among affections, determining the extent to which it is susceptible to their pull (Kosman, 1999).

What is striking about the Aristotelian account of virtue is the fact that even the passions are given due consideration. Aristotle assigns them ethical values. He notes that the passions do not just hold human beings to ransom. The reason is that human passions are capable of responding to reason. In his taxonomy of the constituent elements of the human soul, Aristotle distinguishes between the rational and the irrational parts. The irrational part is twofold, namely, the *vegetative* part which does not share in reason and the appetitive (and the desiring element in general) which shares in reason. Following this distinction, Aristotle insists that “the appetitive element should live according to reason” (1986, par.1119b15).

The necessity of virtue concerning the composite nature of human beings stems from the fact that a typical virtuous act forges harmony between human emotional (affective) and rational (cognitive) capacities. Rather than undermine the emotions, Aristotle makes virtuous practice the locus where they are fruitfully explored, where the human composite nature can be unfolded and meaningfully expressed.

In his reading of Aristotle in the modern context, Henry Veatch argues that without emotions, human beings would be anything but human. They would lack the dynamic quality necessary for the achievement of human perfection (Veatch, 2003). On the correlation between emotions and virtue, he maintains that “the virtuous man is the man who knows how to utilize and control his own emotions and desires” (p.59). A common thread runs through Aristotle’s and Veatch’s lines of thought. They both insist that an account of living well must accommodate the emotional assets and virtue is the function of the emotions’ response to reason.

According to Martha Nussbaum’s reading of Aristotle, the search for value is the search for what is good for a human being. This search for value in general she points out, “is indeed part of the emotional life” (2001, p.49). Hence, we cannot afford to be suspicious of our emotional wealth. Michael Stocker also offers a compelling defence of the relevance of emotions, arguing that emotions reveal value. On this view, modern ethical theories risk lapsing into schizophrenia if they fail to attach due weight to the salience of our emotional wealth (Stocker, 1996). As Stocker notes, people who have correct emotions can make correct evaluations which eventually translate into living well. This act of living well is what Udo (2020) expresses as the role of conscience in every moral being. For Udo, however, conscience is often suppressed for selfish interest “when a moral agent is corrupt” (p.204). The corruption of conscience is a misappropriation of virtue. It is in this regard that Aristotle, in his theory of the mean, maintains that in every moral discourse, virtue must always stand in the middle.

In sum, emotions are central to human life and could be a double-edged sword. They could be disastrous if left unbridled, but they play a crucial role when directed by reason. A typical virtue in the Aristotelian conception entails harmony between emotions and reason. This argument speaks in favour of the indispensability of the virtue. The point is that the good life, to which humans aspire, cannot be attributed to someone who is constantly overwhelmed by emotions. The good life involves balanced emotions through reason, which is what the virtues are all about. The following section discourses the place of reason in virtue.

1.2 Virtue and Reason

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) plays a significant role in the exercise of the virtues of character. Aristotle (2009) describes it as “a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods” (par.1140b20). It is a virtue, meaning that it is an intellectual virtue that should be distinguished from the virtues of character. It is concerned with both universals and particulars, but more specifically with the latter. To buttress this point, Aristotle says, “A man has practical wisdom not by knowing only, but by being able to act” (2009, par.1152a10).

There is a robust correlation between practical wisdom and moral virtue, given that it is not possible to be good without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue (Aristotle, 2009). It would be recalled that emotions, which rightly belong to the sphere of character virtues, indicate values. To adduce an example, emotions may signal the need to show benevolence. But to practice the virtue of benevolence, one needs the illuminating guidance of practical wisdom. According to Russell (2012), practical wisdom specifies what benevolence entails in concrete circumstances. This takes place through the deliberative role of practical wisdom, about which Aristotle (1986) writes: “If, then, it is characteristic of men of practical wisdom to have deliberated well, excellence in deliberation will be correctness with regard to what conduces to the end which practical wisdom apprehends truly” (par.1142b30).

What emerges from the work of practical wisdom is the fact that it makes every virtuous act carry the imprint of rationality. This point is consistent with the earlier argument that human beings have a *function* which Aristotle identifies with “an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle” (1986, par.1098a). The contention is that virtue instantiates human rationality or is a way of acting rationally. Thomas Hurka shares this view in his reading of Aristotle, according to which virtues are instances of rationality. According to Hurka (2013), human flourishing consists in exhibiting rationality, a fundamental cum distinctive feature of human nature. And as he notes “the virtues exercise practical reason in different domains of action and are therefore essential to a flourishing life” (p.236).

McDowell (1999) argues that virtues are instances of manifesting rationality in the diverse spheres of life. He employs the term *sensitivity* to expound on how virtue works in various domains. He construes every single virtuous act as “an ability to recognize the requirements which situations impose on one’s behaviour” (p.124). The concept of sensitivity to the demands of a situation implies rationally responding to such situations. This thinking is prominent in the views of Nancy Snow who calls virtue an instance of *social intelligence* (Snow, 2010, p.89). A socially intelligent person, in this view, is someone who uses interpretations and reactions to further specific goals. The virtues are forms of social intelligence because they help us display sensitivities in social interaction thereby realizing the goal of living well (Snow, 2010). This means that virtues enable us to live rationally.

In his *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Russell (2009) calls virtue “a characteristic responsiveness to certain sorts of reasons, on different occasions and in different circumstances” (p.194). Russell agrees with Aristotle that the virtues enable us to realize human function. Since we are creatures that act for reason, the virtues enhance the realization of our rational nature. Russell then defends the view that, since virtues involve the human cognitive and affective capacities, they are traits with which “one fulfils one’s nature as a rational and emotional creature that chooses and acts” (Russell, 2012, p.339).

One could say that being virtuous is not the only way to be rational. A possible objection could be that even the vicious have reasons for their actions. Nussbaum (1995), however, responds to this objection by arguing that vicious people live “with” reason, but not “according to reason” (p.117).

The view defended here is that humans are not only rational but also emotional beings and the ethical virtues (since they involve emotions and practical reason) enable us to meaningfully express our composite nature. Having explored how Aristotle invokes human nature to defend the indispensability of virtue, the following section sustains the argument within the broad context of the misfortunes of life.

2.0 Virtue and the Misfortunes of Life

Aristotle (2009) amply acknowledges the fact that human life is prone to misfortunes. The human condition is an unending ups and downs, given that even “the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age” (par.1100a). Since misfortune is a constant feature of the human condition, Aristotle includes good luck as one of the elements of the happy life itemized in the Rhetoric (2015). He devotes attention to the treatment of luck and adduces examples as follows:

Luck is also the cause of good things that happen contrary to reasonable expectation: as when, for instance, all your brothers are ugly, but you are handsome yourself; or when you find a treasure that everybody else has overlooked; or when a missile hits the next man and misses you; or when you are the only man not to go to a place you have gone to regularly, while others go there for the first time and are killed (2015, Bk I,5)

The instances listed above go a long way to show that misfortunes are widespread. Human beings are hemmed in on all fronts by dangers, so much so that they need some modicum of luck to survive. One can easily fall sick or lose a dear one. At other times, one may be involved in an auto crash which renders one’s body damaged or a certain body part amputated. There are widespread cases where one’s business fortunes suddenly nosedive. Instances abound where previously privileged and economically well-placed business moguls go bankrupt, sometimes ending up in rags. Aristotle sees these upheavals as part and parcel of the human reality. Changes of this sort are not confined to any point in one’s life. Everyone is vulnerable: the infant, the adolescent, the middle-aged and the aged (Litzinger, 1993).

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle addresses a concern raised by Solon, one of the seven wise men who formulated the Athenian Laws (Litzinger, 1993). Against the backdrop of the numerous misfortunes human beings confront in life, Solon asked if it would not be plausible to reserve judgment about people’s happiness until after their demise. The contention is that so long as people are alive, they are vulnerable to misfortunes. A reliable assessment of how people have fared in life can only be given posthumously, given that death renders people immune to the mishaps associated with life (Litzinger, 1993). This thinking suggests that a happy life would be one in which instances of luck outweigh those of mishaps when an inventory is drawn up.

The foregoing argument shows how misfortunes were seriously dreaded during the time of Aristotle as factors inimical to human happiness. However, Aristotle does not believe that the misfortunes of life completely scuttle happiness. They seem not to be the end of the story, given that despite such vicissitudes there is still light at the end of the tunnel for the virtuous person. Success or failure in one’s life, Aristotle maintains, does not depend on the fortunes, even though they also play a role. The reason is that “virtuous activities or their opposites are what determine happiness or the reverse” (Aristotle, 2009, par.1100b10).

The foregoing response was given in the context of the debate on the fate of the dead. Aristotle addressed a received and prevailing view at his time, according to which the happiness of the dead was yoked to the attitude or life pattern of their progeny. In this view, even after their demise, the dead may still not be happy if their descendants suffer terrible mishaps or fail to follow the legacy they left behind (Aristotle, 2009). Responding to this concern, Aristotle considers such thinking overtly preposterous, the reason being that it makes happiness unnecessarily volatile. He notes: “For clearly if we were to follow his fortunes, we should often call the same man happy and again wretched, making the happy man out to be ‘a chameleon, and insecurely based’” (2009, par.1100b5). Aristotle wants to show that virtuous activities, rather than misfortunes, determine how happy we are. The point is that someone who practices virtues cannot be devastated by misfortunes.

To further illuminate this consideration, Aristotle takes up the case of Priam, whose story was no longer news during his time. The episode of Priam is found in the Trojan Cycle (2009, par.1100a). He is portrayed as “an old, noble yet frail, king of a besieged city, and father of many children”. (www.researchgate.net). His case evokes sympathy as one who, though a nobleman, fell prey to serious misfortunes by not only being defeated in war but also losing his son Hector, around whom his world revolved (Ibid). Aristotle invoked his story to illustrate how misfortunes can change one’s narrative for the worse.

However, Aristotle would not call Priam “unhappy”. As Brown (2009) notes, “his point is that misfortune may remove happiness from a happy or blessed person (so he is no longer happy), but- if his life is one of virtuous activities cannot make him miserable (that is, unhappy)” (209). Aristotle highlights the fact that virtuous practices shield one’s life from the damaging impact of misfortunes. The core issue is that, although misfortunes could have a telling impact on one’s life, they do not render the virtuous miserable. This argumentation drives home the necessity of virtue. The logic is that, since one cannot completely avert the misfortunes of life, virtuous practices are necessary in the sense that they make life meaningful even in the face of such adversities.

To articulate this point differently, someone who practices virtues is not completely robbed of a happy life or well-being. Underlining the necessity of virtues, Irwin (1996) concludes: “They (virtues) equip us both to use the good fortune well and to face ill fortune without disintegrating” (p.23). The consideration raised here is that one who exercises the virtues can gallantly bear the sting of misfortunes. The example of a courageous person could further throw light on this assertion. There would surely be a marked difference between the approach of a courageous person and that of the lily-livered to the challenges of life.

In his translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas points out the gains of virtuous practice in the face of upheavals: “The happy man will have what we had inquired about, for he will be happy all his life. He will always or nearly always perform virtuous actions and be contemplating the life of virtue” (Litzinger, 1993, p.62). Aquinas construes Aristotle in this context to hold that happiness can last a lifetime. Since happiness is principally identified with virtuous actions, it follows that someone who exercises virtues as a matter of habit will always be happy (Litzinger, 1993).

Aristotle notes that the exercise of virtues is one context where humans can make sense of the reality of misfortunes. As he notes, *nobility shines through* the adversities of life (2015, par.1100b30). One would wonder how else misfortunes lend themselves to plausible justification. The contention is that for one who practices virtues, the mishaps of life offer ample occasions, not just to practice the already-cultivated virtues, but also to develop new ones. That way, misfortune does not just constitute a setback or dark page in one’s life, but a cradle towards something edifying for one who bears the brunt. Virtue does not allow one to completely fall prey to misfortunes. The logic is that since misfortunes have the potential to undermine happiness, virtuous practices shield one from such damaging impact.

In his recent book, *Suffering and Virtue*, Brady (2018) defends the view that the practice of virtue is one context where humans can make sense of the reality of suffering. Brady’s arguments support Aristotle’s position that nobility shines through misfortunes. Brady argues that suffering should be conceived “as an aspect of our experience” (p.11). On this account, virtues which are themselves necessary for well-being could be developed in the face of suffering (Brady, 2018). He distinguishes between virtues of strength and virtues of character which emerge from adversities. Writing on the virtues of strength he contends:

This is because suffering can enable us to develop character traits that will serve us well in the long run. For without the virtues that constitute strength of character-without courage, fortitude, resilience, and patience-it is very doubtful that creatures like us could be successful in accomplishing much of significance. (Brady, 2018, p.88).

Brady describes the virtues of vulnerability as those that illness elicits or enables humans to develop, such as an enhanced understanding of oneself, one's abilities, and fellow human beings (Brady, 2018). Even wisdom, which is central to the development of moral virtues, could be in some sense an offshoot of adversity. As regards the correlation between suffering and moral virtues, Brady writes: "Without the experience of suffering, I propose, we would fail to have the traits and attitudes that constitute the best kind of moral character" (2018, p.112).

By establishing a nexus between suffering and virtues, Brady believes that we can make sense of suffering when we consider the virtues that result from such experience. On this count, Brady shares several convictions with Aristotle. He believes that humans pursue well-being, but that misfortunes characterize the human condition. Both see the virtues as instances where humans make sense of the reality of misfortunes. It would be plausible to conjecture that both Aristotle and Brady wonder how else humans could extract meaning from the reality of misfortune if not within the context of virtue.

3 Virtue and Contemplation

A more detailed argument on contemplation is outlined in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009), where Aristotle describes the perfect life as contemplative. Given that the best thing in us is reason, happiness must be an activity according to its proper virtue. Aristotle identifies *Sophia* as the proper virtue of reason, adding that its activity is contemplation (2009, par.1177a15-19). Leaning on this argument, it follows that happiness must be the function of contemplative activity. The notion of contemplation as employed here does not suggest some meditative activity motivated by one's religious convictions. Contemplation in the Aristotelian context, as Sherman (1989) explains, entails "speculative pursuits "which is perfectly exemplified by the philosophical enterprise. (p.103). The contemplation of truth by a philosopher instantiates the use of the proper virtue of reason. Perfect happiness, the thinking goes, results from such intellectual enterprise.

However, Aristotle seems to be at pains advancing an account of *eudaimonia* that completely dispenses with the moral virtues. Acknowledging the place of virtuous activities even while emphasizing the primacy of contemplation, he observes: "But in so far as he is a man and lives with a number of people, he chooses to do virtuous acts (2011, par.1178b1-9). This clause inserted by Aristotle in the context of the discussion of contemplation underscores the indispensability of virtue. It implies that someone who engages in contemplative activities is not exempted from the practice of virtues. But the question is, what role should we assign the ethical virtues concerning contemplation? Do they play a mere instrumental role or could be placed on par with contemplative activities? This question remains a vexing issue, about which there is no consensus.

Salem (2010) argues that for Aristotle, ethical actions are not ends in themselves but means to the end of contemplation. In this reading, it means that one practices virtue to enhance the activity of contemplation. As Salem argues, "it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that the city and the ethical virtues ultimately exist for the sake of contemplation" (p.134).

Lear (2004) equally offers a reading of Aristotle, according to which the virtues are instrumental to the activity of contemplation. He argues that since Aristotle believes that the philosophical life will be morally virtuous and since he also thinks that all choices ought to be made for the sake of contemplative activity, "it is likely he thinks that in the best life, morally virtuous activity is chosen for the sake of contemplation" (p.46).

Veatch (2003) acknowledges the argument in Aristotle, according to which the ethical virtues are subservient to contemplation. Veatch, however, differs from Aristotle on this score, insisting that human flourishing cannot result from a dominant activity that reduces every other activity to instrumental value.

It would be noticed that even the instrumental conception of the ethical virtues does not pose threats to the thesis that the virtues are indispensable for contemplation. The issue is that since Philosophy remains a human enterprise, the Philosopher will need the ethical virtues. He will not lead

a sort of life typical of Robinson Crusoe but will take part in social intercourse which imposes on him certain ethical norms.

However, an alternative way of appreciating the inevitability of ethical virtues concerning contemplation is proposed by Gabriel Richardson Lear. Writing in her *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, Lear proposes the concept of *approximation* as an alternative and realistic way of reading Aristotle. To illuminate the notion of approximation, she argues: “According to Aristotle, X may also be choice worthy for the sake of Y when it approximates or imitates Y” (Lear, 2004, p.3). The merit of the notion of approximation is that what approximates something other than itself does not lose its intrinsic value: “If morally virtuous activity is an approximation of excellent theoretical contemplation, then choosing virtuous action for the sake of philosophy is not inconsistent with recognizing and acting for the sake of intrinsic value of the moral virtues” (Lear, 2004, p.73). What Lear sets out to demonstrate is the possibility of defending a conception of happiness that is consistent with reality. On this view, we can say that happiness is the function of contemplation, and ethical virtues are ways of manifesting contemplation in concrete human activities.

The idea of approximation finds support in *De Anima* (1986), where Aristotle discusses the human quest for participation in eternal and divine immortality. According to him, creatures can only participate in divine immortality in a way suitable to their nature, namely, “through the reproduction of their kind” (1986, par.415a). Aristotle articulates this point thus:

Now living creature cannot have a share in the eternal and the divine by continuity since, none of the mortal things admits of persistence as numerically one and the same, but in the way that each creature can participate in this, in that way it does have a share in it, some more some less, and persists not as itself but as something like itself, not numerically one, but one in species” (par.415b).

Aristotle could be construed here to argue that creatures share in divine immortality in their unique way. Lear relies on the foregoing argument in *De Anima* to defend her concept of approximation. Thoroughgoing or pure contemplation in isolation of the virtues would be the sort of life typical of a god who does not need the virtues (2009, par.1145a25). Given that humans cannot shy away from the life of virtue, exercising the virtues becomes the human unique way of living the contemplative life. Lear expresses this point succinctly:

When we protect those we love courageously, dine with them temperately, give to them generously, and accept their honour with greatness of soul, we grasp the practical truth- we are embodied political animals who find our rational happiness only in common with others. Grasping this practical truth approximates contemplation and is worth choosing for its sake (2004, p.207).

Gauthier (1967) also argues for the appreciation of the nexus between ethical virtues and contemplation. A charitable reading of Aristotle, in the opinion of Gauthier, should not subordinate virtues to contemplation. Rejecting an exegesis of Aristotle, according to which the virtues are instrumental to the exercise of contemplation, Gauthier insists that an act of virtue should rather be seen as a *perfection* of the intellect (Gauthier, 1967). According to this reading of Aristotle, the same intellect is at work both in contemplative and virtuous activities. Hence, virtuous activity is a way of living the contemplative life, not as a means to some further end, but as an end in itself. Gauthier argues that if the Philosopher wishes to pay his debts, this is not because paying his debts will make him contemplate better; it is because “to pay his debts is rational, and the end he proposes in paying his

debts is the very rationality of this act of paying his debts and nothing else” (1967, p.20). By advancing this line of argument, Gauthier shows how virtuous acts reflect rationality, the same that is at work in contemplation.

In their accounts of the relation of the ethical virtues to contemplation, Lear and Gauthier amplify the tenor of the necessity thesis defended in this work. Both are hospitable to the view that reason finds its maximum expression in the activity of contemplation. However, since humans cannot possibly break with the virtues, they (the virtues) enable human beings to live a life of contemplation. While Lear calls virtuous practice the *approximation* of contemplation, Gauthier calls it the *perfection* of intelligence (1967, p.20).

In any case, it must be stressed that a host of objections have been voiced against the benefits of the virtues defended in this work. In what follows, we shall expose the dissenting views.

Objections to the Necessity Thesis

Irwin (1996) takes Aristotle to task for painting a picture of the virtues that is anything but realistic. According to him “virtuous actions mostly benefit other people, even at the expense of the agent” (p.39). A striking feature of most recent accounts of well-being is the relegation of virtue to the background. Most philosophers concerned with the question of well-being insist that it is a matter for the private sphere. By this, they mean that there should not be any schema or general formula for the attainment of well-being. The individual, whose life it is, is the sole speaker in matters about well-being.

Sumner (1996) for instance, does not believe that the practice of virtue is fundamental to human well-being. Directing his criticism to Aristotle, he comments:

Indeed, the conclusion of Aristotle’s argument, the equation of welfare and virtue, has always seemed too good to be true. We simply have too many examples, from our day as from his, of villains and miscreants who seem (as Bernard Williams put it) ‘by any ethological standard of the bright eye and the gleaning coat’ to be faring very well indeed” (p.79).

For Sumner, Aristotle’s centrality of virtue to well-being smacks of exaggeration, since the well-being of the vicious refutes it. In his account of welfare, Sumner admits that his notion of welfare could be equated with *eudaimonia* or *well-being*, which Aristotle espoused (Sumner, 1996, p.69). He, however, condemns in strong terms any attempt to give an objective account of welfare: “Welfare assessments concern what we may call the prudential value of a life, namely how well it is going for the individual whose life it is” (1996, p.20). Sumner, therefore, rejects Aristotle’s approach for attempting what could be described as a foredoomed project. After examining the prevalent theories of welfare and their shortcomings, he proposes a subjective account of welfare which he calls the happiness theory.

Sumner elucidates his happiness theory of welfare by inviting his readers to construe happiness in this context as another word for life satisfaction. He summarizes his position as follows: “The theory I shall defend does not simply identify well-being with happiness; additionally, it requires that a subject’s endorsement of the conditions of her life, or her experience of them as satisfying or fulfilling, be authentic” (Sumner, 1996, p.139). Any account of satisfaction with one’s personal life must fulfil the condition of authenticity. The demand for authenticity imposes two further constraints: (1) one should be properly informed before endorsing the life in question and not as a result of some sort of delusion. (2) The *autonomy* of the subject must be established. The happiness theory is about the attitude of the subject, and how she experiences her life (Sumner, 1996). Sumner insists that welfare is about a personal account of satisfaction with one’s life, provided such an account is authentic. This position implies a break with Aristotle in a significant respect. In fact, on this score, Sumner sees himself as not sitting in the same boat as Aristotle.

Similarly, in his *The Quality of Life* (2018), Richard Kraut criticizes Aristotle for tying the good life to virtuous practices or ethical matters. He calls this aspect of the Aristotelian outlook on the human situation too rosy: “I have not adopted his (Aristotle’s) view that one’s good, properly understood, never conflicts with that of others, nor his thesis that people who care little or not at all about acting rightly in ethical matters cannot have good lives because they are ethical failures. These aspects of his outlook on the human situation are too rosy” (Kraut, 2018, p.237).

Kraut conceives one’s well-being over a lifetime as the aggregation of moments of quality experiences. Given that human life is full of ups and downs, the good, the bad and the ugly, one’s well-being is what remains of the quality experiences after the bad ones have been subtracted (Kraut, 2018). Well-being, the thinking goes, is more about the quality of life than the quantity. This means that the good life could be attributed to someone whose life is short-lived, but full of quality experiences.

One outstanding consideration in Kraut’s account of well-being is the emphasis on what one experiences. By not tying well-being to what one does, Kraut would not see how exercising virtues would conduce to the good life. He would be slow to attribute the good life to a virtuous person who suffers debilitating misfortunes over a long period. This is one salient area where Kraut differs from Aristotle. While Aristotle would not call the tragedy-struck *Priam* miserable on account of his virtues, Kraut does not see why he is not miserable, considering his ugly experiences.

Despite the foregoing countervailing arguments, it would be hasty to conclude that Aristotle’s ideas have been refuted as far as the benefits of virtues are concerned. To begin with, the contrary arguments do not seem to be more compelling. Sumner (1996), for instance, relies on the perceived flourishing of the villain and the vicious to dismiss what appears to him as an unnecessary emphasis on the benefits of virtues. His account of well-being circumvents the virtues and ties welfare to satisfaction with one’s personal life. Sumner himself admits that his account faces challenges, and one would dare to add that such challenges far outweigh the ones that plagued the Aristotelian account. If well-being is a matter of attitude, how one is satisfied with the trajectories one’s life has taken, it follows that a person who kills and indulges in sharp practices could be said to be better off, provided he is satisfied with his life (Sumner, 1996). In an attempt to avoid such weakness, Sumner proposed the constraint of *authenticity*, according to which a credible account of satisfaction with one’s life presupposes autonomy and being properly informed. But it is hard to see how this rescues Sumner’s account. The balance of experience seems to prove that well-informed people could perpetrate evil and feel satisfied with their lives. It does appear that Sumner’s account of well-being may not be in any significant way superior to Aristotle’s.

Kraut (2018) explicitly launches an attack on Aristotle for tying well-being to the practice of virtue. The tone of his polemics in the entire monograph, *The Quality of Life*, suggests that he sets out to propose an alternative to the Aristotelian account of the good life. Kraut equates well-being with the surplus of quality experiences over bad ones. This account attaches weight to what one experiences as against what one does. This conception of well-being seems vulnerable to the very challenges Aristotle avoided. What one experiences is not subject to human influence. Hence, well-being, the way Kraut construes it, would be fragile, vulnerable to chance and almost elusive. If well-being is fundamentally about what I experience, then I might constantly be a victim of ill luck, with no hope of ever attaining well-being. By stressing the centrality of virtue, Aristotle’s conception of well-being has the merit of accounting for feasibility and stability. Kraut’s notion of well-being may not be superior to Aristotle’s, at least on this score.

5 Looking Back and Forth

Aristotle found himself in a civilization where the virtues were deeply entrenched. As Gardiner (2005) observes even the predecessors of Aristotle such as Socrates and Plato constructed their ethical views around the practice of virtue. Post Aristotle, the discussion on the virtues continued, lingering into the time of Thomas Aquinas and his contemporaries.

To understand why the virtues dominated and inspired discussions, before, during, and after the time of Aristotle, it would be helpful to examine the then prevailing ethical climate in antiquity. The fundamental question posed in that era was far from the question of the right thing to do. As Russell (2013) notes, the ancients concerned themselves mainly with the issue of “how best to live” (p.7). The two questions impose different demands. While the question of the right thing to do enjoins ethical reasoning, the issue of how best to live calls for practical reasoning (Russell, 2013).

The attempt to answer the question of how best to live led the ancients to reflect on life broadly considered. It prompted considerations such as, what to do with one’s life and how to lead a happy life. In the course of investigating what sort of person one ought to be, the pattern of life one should adopt, and the sort of character one ought to develop, practical reasoning led the ancients to the practice of virtues as the best way to live (Russell, 2013).

The ethical framework that Aristotle inherited and popularized maintained its appeal and even outlived him in the sense that his contemporaries and immediate successors equally concerned themselves with the virtues, though sometimes with marked departures from Aristotle. As Frede (2013) observes, among his contemporaries and immediate successors, Aristotle’s dichotomy between the virtues of character and the intellectual virtues did not dominate the field. In fact, during the Hellenistic age, the central features of his ethics suffered neglect. This same string of steady decline in influence continued in the first century BCE as most commentaries that emerged paid scant attention to Aristotle’s ethical corpus.

However, there is a noticeable upsurge of concern for virtues in recent ethical discussions. For instance, in his *The Virtues We Need Again*, Kalpakgian (2012) chronicles the virtues that are still inevitable in our times for human life to go well. They include moderation, humility, generosity, simplicity, obedience, gratitude, courage, justice, etc. Kalpakgian insists that virtues were highly valued among the ancients. He, however, warns against the tendency to break with the past which has come to be typical of the modern generation. Such a decision could be self-defeating. For Kalpakgian, therefore, the ancients were led by wisdom to discover that the virtues play important role in the good life. This wisdom, he contends, still holds weight, and we can only confirm that practising virtues is what differentiates merely living from living well (Kalpakgian, 2012).

Recent scholarship has brought the virtues back to the front burner as values to be highly cherished. While most contemporary scholars who privilege the virtues may not explicitly make them necessary for living well, they would, however, grant that a plausible account of the good life must accommodate the virtues. This way, Aristotle’s position retains its relevance now, as it was then.

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