

Moral Luck, Poor Upbringing, and the Virtue of Indomitability in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

I.

The roles of chance and good upbringing remain important but easily overlooked aspects of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*¹ which threaten to trivialize human agency in achieving moral excellence. Despite Aristotle's meticulous methodology, the *NE* includes some troubling caveats. Specifically, as Aristotle points out early on, ethics can never be a perfectly precise and objective science, and to be a student of ethics therefore requires an understanding of the relevant first principles acquired through good upbringing.² In addition, the practical value of an ethical education relies significantly on moral luck, namely being supplied with the external goods necessary for morally virtuous action.³ Taken together, these conditions for achieving true happiness seem to undermine Aristotle's entire schema, implying that moral agency is vulnerable to chance, and that our potential for a truly happy life can be precluded by a poor upbringing. It is possible that Aristotle saves himself with yet another caveat, by making a distinction between happiness and blessedness, the former being more accessible and the latter being reserved for the good *and* fortunate,⁴ but it is not clear that this redeems the practical utility of the *NE*. This paper argues for a deeper reading of Aristotle's *NE*. On this reading, an alternative end emerges for those who lack the benefit of good fortune and upbringing. Although it is never argued explicitly in the text, I claim Aristotle's *NE* implies that when poor moral luck prevents us from achieving what we naturally desire most—perfect happiness—there remains a praiseworthy disposition to persevere in the face of misfortune and strive toward an ultimately unattainable end. The unfortunate person of poor upbringing therefore achieves, at best, a deficient degree of moral excellence, an imperfect happiness. Even when this striving toward an unattainable end results in viciousness, we are prone to valorize and empathize with those people who are able to render this

1 For brevity *NE* shall refer to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Footnote citations refer to Bekker numbers. See bibliography for the edition and translation used.

2 *NE*, I.3 – 4.

3 *NE*, I.8. 1099b, 1 – 10.

4 *NE*, I.10. 1100b, 21 – 1101a, 20.

quintessentially human weakness, our vulnerability to chance, in a sympathetically beautiful way.

II.

The *NE* is one of humanity's earliest and most comprehensive attempts at providing a philosophical account of what constitutes the good life, and presumably it provides the student of ethics with a guide for attaining of the most final and fulfilling end of all human activity: happiness. Indeed, the fact that it remains a foundational and frequently debated work of ethical philosophy thousands of years since its inception is a testament to how compelling it is. However, if it were the case that Aristotle had provided a tried and true manual for achieving moral excellence, arguably the world would be a much more peaceful and happy place than it is today. The universality of Aristotle's highest human good relies on what has been dubbed the function argument. Briefly, the function argument claims that the final end or good of any thing is related to that thing's function, and that human beings are distinguished from all other living organisms by the ability to reason. Therefore, if the highest human good is happiness, and if human beings are defined by a rational faculty, happiness must involve exercising our rational faculty well, in the same way that an artist achieves the end of their craft when they are said to create art well. In other words, the good life according to Aristotle involves choosing morally virtuous behaviour for its own sake, as dictated by human reason.⁵

It is commonly argued that Aristotle's *NE* fails, specifically because of its reliance on these metaphysical claims about human nature. The general position is that a modern scientific understanding of human nature—one which does not privilege reason as our defining faculty—makes Aristotle's function argument, and the rest of the *NE*, untenable. Besides being anachronistic, this objection ignores the early caveat of Aristotle's *NE*, that only those of a good upbringing, one which trains the rational faculty to produce a good state of character, are equipped for an education in ethics. A reading of Aristotle's ethics which is predicated on this caveat rather than any modern scientific claim about

⁵ *NE*, I.7. 1097a 15 – 1098a 20.

human nature better explains Aristotle's argument.⁶ It has also been argued that, because the *NE* makes normative claims predicated on human nature qua rational animals, it apparently fails on these grounds as well, because human beings can often be irrational, and even rational people can be utterly immoral. As Iakovos Vasiliou has pointed out, Aristotle's distinction in defining his audience is not between rational and irrational agents, it is between those of a good upbringing and those of a poor upbringing. Vasiliou argues that, if Aristotle's argument were really meant to persuade any rational person, he would not explicitly direct his claims only toward a smaller subcategory of people who also have had a good upbringing.⁷

Assuming Vasiliou is correct, this would significantly diminish the universal appeal and practical utility of Aristotle's *NE* by implying that moral excellence is the privilege of the well raised, and not available to all human beings by virtue of their reason. As a defence of his argument and contrary to those scholars and translators who have interpreted Aristotle's methodology in the *NE* as a movement toward first principles, Vasiliou argues instead that, by explicitly directing his argument to those of a good upbringing, Aristotle proposes a movement from first principles, which are acquired during this upbringing. On this reading, Aristotle claims that one must have experienced enough to have perceived, induced, and habituated oneself to moral acts, yielding some preliminary grasp of ethical first principles, before a philosophical study of ethics can properly begin.⁸ Indeed, Aristotle seems to provide support for Vasiliou's reading when he says, “[p]resumably, then, *we* must begin with things known to *us*. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits.”⁹ What this implies is that for Aristotle, the nature of being human is first characterized by possessing reason,

6 Iakovos Vasiliou, “The Role of Good Upbringing in Aristotle's Ethics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Dec. 1996): 771-773.

7 Vasiliou, “The Role of Good Upbringing,” 774-775.

8 *Ibid.*, 776-778.

9 *NE*, I.4. 1095b 1 – 5.

but the habituation of that rational faculty, such that it can apprehend and desire the right ends, namely those which are morally virtuous, constitutes a kind of second nature which is developed through good upbringing. Therefore Aristotle is not attempting to make normative claims about what human beings, by their first nature, ought to acquire in terms of their character. His remarks regarding the intended audience of his *NE* point out that some rudimentary second nature of moral habituation must already have been acquired in order to study ethics properly.¹⁰ Therefore, if only those of good upbringing are suitable students of ethics, and if a good upbringing is an external good brought about by chance, then the good life would be unattainable to all but a privileged few blessed with good fortune. Ostensibly, this is a problem.

One possible solution could be to argue that, although external goods of this kind facilitate moral virtue, they are not strictly necessary. Aristotle does suggest that, even when deprived of external goods, the truly virtuous man “bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command.”¹¹ In addition we could say that, even if many external goods are both necessary and subject to chance, a good upbringing is not among these particular goods. However, neither of these solutions seem tenable. All of Aristotle's ethical arguments agree that for any human being, a good life of happiness consists in extended morally virtuous behaviour, but his argument in the *NE* is unique and explicit in its additional claim that we need external goods to facilitate this kind of behaviour. John M. Cooper summarizes: “The final and considered Nicomachean theory of what it is for a human being to flourish is, therefore, (a) to live a complete life (b) in the active exercise of the human virtues, of both mind and character, (c) equipped with sufficient external goods.”¹² When referring to the necessity of external goods for happiness, Aristotle seems to have two distinct things in mind: goods which are brought about by one's

10 Vasiliou, “The Role of Good Upbringing,” 779-781.

11 *NE*, I.10. 1101a 1 – 2.

12 John M. Cooper, “Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 94, No.2 (Apr. 1985): 174.

own actions but which are not virtues, and goods of fortune which are brought about by chance. Some external goods are necessary to certain morally virtuous behaviours—wealth is often necessary in order to act generously—and these, when lacking or overabundant, impede one's morally virtuous behaviour, and when present, facilitate said behaviour.¹³ A good upbringing, clearly not brought about by our own actions, would be an external good brought about by chance. However, unlike other external goods which are required only for the exercise of specific moral virtues, Aristotle seems to say that a poor upbringing precludes moral excellence entirely.

The fact that Aristotle deals with this problem so briefly in the *NE* could be taken as evidence that he does not consider it a significant problem for his argument. It could be maintained that the misfortune of a poor upbringing—poor enough to prevent a truly good life—is a rare exception to the general rule, and therefore the roles of chance and good upbringing are not a problem worth addressing. Alternatively, perhaps Aristotle intended to treat the issue of upbringing in a separate work that deals with the ethical implications of raising children to become morally upright citizens. This is of course mere speculation, and on the other hand, the problem of chance is made particularly salient when we consider part of Aristotle's methodology. In the chapter “Saving Aristotle's Appearances” from her book, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Martha Nussbaum analyzes Aristotle's methodological reliance on *phainomena*, or appearances. Her claim is that, while Plato argued we only choose to do what we perceive as good, and do bad only out of ignorance, Aristotle rejects this argument because it is in disagreement with how things commonly appear, namely that people often seem to knowingly do bad things. Aristotle repeatedly returns to this appeal to common opinion and appearances in his ethical arguments. Even though an argument may produce logical conclusions, Aristotle insisted that only those conclusions that measured up with the *phainomena*, with the appearances, were to be taken as

13 Cooper, “Aristotle on the Goods of Fortune,” 173-181.

valid.¹⁴ Assuming Nussbaum's analysis is correct, it is reasonable to suggest—and Aristotle would likely have agreed—that based on the way things commonly appear, many people do not receive a good upbringing entirely due to chance, and therefore many people are born deprived of any opportunity to achieve true happiness. On this reading it appears that the good life is reserved only for those fortunate enough to be well brought up, but such an elitist ethical theory is unsatisfying. If happiness—the highest human good—is only available to those fortunate enough to enjoy a good upbringing, this would seem to imply that our characteristically human function is not to reason, but to gamble with the goods of fortune afforded to us by chance. It is hard to believe that Aristotle would knowingly allow such a quagmire to undermine his argument.

Although the subject is not treated with great precision, Aristotle does try to argue that our states of character are chosen, not fated by birth, insofar as we choose those actions which habituate us to those states of character. It is in fact essential that choice be involved for our actions and dispositions to be praiseworthy or blameworthy, virtuous or vicious at all.¹⁵ However, he also claims that “both children and the lower animals share in voluntary action, but not in choice, and acts done on the spur of the moment we describe as voluntary, but not chosen.”¹⁶ In other words, choice is involved in determining our actions and states of character, and therefore our moral excellence, but only once we have attained the age of reason. Even Aristotle admits that before this time we cannot be said to choose at all, let alone to choose our upbringing. Aristotle therefore gives two apparently contradictory claims: (1) that states of character are chosen, and (2) that a good upbringing—an external good subject to chance—is necessary to cultivate moral character. While the former claim establishes moral accountability insofar as we must exercise practical wisdom and deliberate when we make choices of a virtuous or vicious nature, the latter claim implies that the person of poor upbringing cannot develop a

14 Martha C. Nussbaum, “Saving Aristotle's Appearances,” in *The Fragility of Goodness*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 240-263.

15 *NE*, III.4. 1113a, 25 – III.5. 1115a, 1.

16 *NE*, III.2. 1111b, 6 - 9.

good moral character, and therefore is unfit to study ethics and develop practical wisdom. As A.D. Smith has pointed out, an ongoing scholarly debate regarding the circular relation between Aristotle's conception of character and practical wisdom indicates a point of incoherence in Aristotle's *NE*. To be morally virtuous is to possess a state of character habituated to choose morally virtuous action. At the same time, Aristotle argues that practical wisdom makes salient the dictates of reason which allow us to deliberate and choose well. However, the practical wisdom which reveals moral virtue as an end in itself is established by an unreasoned disposition of character acquired by chance—a good upbringing. In other words, a good upbringing allows for the development of a good character independently of reason, and a good character allows for the rational agent to become practically wise and identify happiness as the highest good. In this way both components are primary at different stages in a person's moral development,¹⁷ but neither good character or practical wisdom are available to those of a poor upbringing. “Indeed,” Smith continues, “Aristotle stresses the near impossibility of reforming those who have been badly brought up by any appeal to reason.”¹⁸

Yet another way to solve this problem of chance and good upbringing might be to appeal to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.¹⁹ It is generally taken for granted that Aristotle considers, in his claim that ethical acts strike a mean between extremes of deficiency and excess—a mean relative to us—that morally virtuous acts are relative to the individual. Lesley Brown argues that in fact this view of Aristotle's relative mean is a persistent misinterpretation, and that the mean is only relative because it is human-specific, not individual-specific. There are a number of variables to consider in determining the mean: how one should act, toward whom, to what degree, at what time, and so on. In this sense the mean is only relative insofar as every situation in which we make a moral choice is different, and we must consider each situation individually when we choose how to strike the mean.²⁰ However, if moral

17 A.D. Smith, “Character and Intellect in Aristotle's Ethics.” *Phronesis*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1996): 56-58.

18 Smith, “Character and Intellect...” 61.

19 *NE* II. 6 – 9.

20 Lesley Brown, “What is 'The Mean Relative to Us' in Aristotle's 'Ethics'?” *Phronesis*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1997): 77-81.

actions are not relative to the agent, but are relative to the situation, this would imply that any rational and moral person would act in exactly the same way in a particular situation. This fails to account for the role of chance and good upbringing entirely, while remaining vulnerable to the same objection made by Vasiliou, that Aristotle's *NE* is not a normative argument intended to apply to any and all human beings capable of reason, but specifically directed at those of a good upbringing. Contrary to Brown, I maintain that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is in fact intended to assert that moral acts are relative to the individual agent, partly because each individual's character constitutes a unique variable in every moral situation. Therefore to separate the individual from a situation of moral significance, and say that striking the mean is relative to one and not the other, fails to acknowledge the variability of being human. When considered in relation to Aristotle's function argument and his comments about chance and good upbringing, Aristotle's doctrine of the mean may help us formulate a solution to the problem at hand.

III.

Aristotle's ethical arguments rest upon a foundational claim that human nature includes a single and final end or goal as determined by our defining function: to reason. The normative claim that implicitly follows is that we should study ethics and deliberate over how to achieve this end, which Aristotle identifies as happiness. The practical question which then arises is, to what extent do people really plan out their lives, and insofar as they do, do they plan with a single end as their goal? Arguably we are all capable of planning our lives to some extent, though this need not necessarily be directed at a single aim in either a broad or particular sense. In addition, to say that the final end of all human activity is a good life or happiness is an empty claim until we can demonstrate what the good life consists in. As W.F.R. Hardie argues, if the good life consists in a multiplicity of goods, then it cannot be achieved by acquiring one or a few at the expense of the rest.²¹ Therefore, if we are to plan our lives

21 W.F.R. Hardie, "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics." *Philosophy*, Vol. 40, No. 154, (Oct. 1965): 277-279.

with the goal of happiness in mind, we necessarily must direct our pursuits toward instrumental ends which may seem at times incommensurate with happiness. In this light, Aristotle's aforementioned normative claim appears overly simplistic; in reality we tend to deliberate over the means to ends which are instrumental to our most final good, and more importantly, many of us are simply unsuited to the study of ethics which would broaden our deliberative horizons.

Included in Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is the premise that we only ever deliberate about the means to an end, and never the ends themselves. Some scholars take this to imply that happiness, the most final end of all human activity, is in principle exempt from all deliberation, but as Smith points out, this interpretation is weakened by Aristotle's claim that “[practical] wisdom presupposes a goal that is fixed by a goodness of character.”²² Therefore, while not an act of deliberation per se, the development of a good character strikes upon the most final end of human activity, in much the same way that the practically wise deliberate in order to strike upon the choice best suited to bringing about that end. It is clear that Aristotle argues for a kind of moral virtue which, in the full sense, cannot be realized without a good character of habituated virtue capable of guiding practical wisdom to the highest human good.²³ What is missing is an account of moral virtue which is comparatively diminished by the absence of certain external goods, but this account can be inferred from what has already been stated. Implicitly, Aristotle argues that, in the event that a poor upbringing produces a deficient state of character, this would fix in the moral agent a final end that is deficient to the perfect happiness available to those of good upbringing. In other words, the unfortunate man of poor upbringing may naturally desire the highest human good—perfect happiness—but mistakenly identify it with what is in fact an imperfect happiness commensurate with a deficient character.

What I have endeavoured to show so far is that, according to Aristotle, human beings are defined by a rational faculty which directs our actions toward a single and final end. In the fullest

²² Smith, “Character and Intellect...” 59.

²³ *Ibid*, 58-60.

sense, that end is perfect happiness, which consists in a full life supplied with the external goods that facilitate extended morally virtuous activity. To choose morally virtuous acts, we must be able to deliberate well regarding the means to achieving our ends—or in other words, we must be able to reason well—and a study of ethics can help teach us how to do so. The problem is that, to study ethics and learn to reason well in a reliable and consistent way, one must be fortunate enough to receive a good upbringing. A poor upbringing makes it impossible for one to properly study ethics or to identify moral virtue as the most final end of human activity, and consequently precludes choosing—insofar as choice involves rational deliberation directed at the means to a particular end—virtue over vice. Moreover, contrary to Aristotle's assertion that the disposition of our character is the result of freely willed choices, the character instilled in us as a result of upbringing is purely a result of chance.

With all of this in mind, we can begin to formulate a kind of Aristotelian ethical framework as it applies to the unfortunate, specifically those of a poor upbringing. To illustrate my argument, I would like to return to an example Aristotle uses in the *NE*: Homer's *Iliad*. Returning to the passage referenced earlier, in which Aristotle claims that the truly wise and virtuous will weather misfortune nobly and thereby preserve their happiness, he then goes on to reference the character Priam of the *Iliad* as an example of how “many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes.”²⁴ Here he makes a distinction between happiness and blessedness when he says, “the happy man can never become miserable—though he will not reach *blessedness*, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam.” Aristotle goes on to say, “neither will he be moved from his happy state easily or by any ordinary misadventures, but only by a many great ones.”²⁵ Priam undoubtedly represents Aristotle's ideal student of ethics, and provides a felicitous example for him to illustrate the role of misfortune for the otherwise perfectly happy person. Despite his good upbringing and being supplied with all the necessary external goods to accommodate an extended life

²⁴ *NE* I.9. 1100a 5-6.

²⁵ *NE* I.10. 1101a 5-11.

of morally virtuous activity, Priam nonetheless met with terrible misfortune in Homer's mythical depiction of the Trojan war, though this never compelled him to, in Aristotle's words, "do the acts that are hateful and mean."²⁶ Which is to say, he never became vicious. While the misfortunes Priam bore robbed him of perfect happiness (I will use the phrase 'perfect happiness' here as equivalent with Aristotle's use of the word 'blessedness'), he maintained an imperfect happiness by exhibiting a virtuous indomitability in the face of tragedy.

Similarly, we can say of those who meet with grave misfortune in the form of poor upbringing that, while perfect happiness may be unavailable to them, they nonetheless retain the ability to strive toward the most final good they are capable of achieving. This final good may not be the nearly divine and perfect happiness Aristotle focuses on, but rather a deficient and imperfect happiness. The analogy with the *Iliad* provides more support for this reading. Interestingly, in his use of Homeric heroes to illustrate the role of chance in the *NE*, Aristotle seems to cast Priam as the hero of the *Iliad*, when in fact it is the far more complex and arguably more vicious character, Achilles, who is the central protagonist and ultimate hero of the epic poem. Where Aristotle refers to Priam as the man of virtue who suffers misfortune, I would similarly refer to Achilles as the man of a poor upbringing who suffers likewise. This illustration is admittedly imperfect, and a more modern and salient example may be readily available, but regardless the present argument reasonably assumes that Achilles, as the son of a goddess who takes no part in raising him, can exemplify the man who is born into the misfortune of a poor upbringing. Though his ability as a warrior is unmatched, Achilles exhibits a variety of vices. He is arrogant, self-righteous, stubborn, prideful, and utterly irascible, yet readers of Homer's *Iliad* are made to admire and sympathize with Achilles, not just despite his shortcomings, but because of them. There is a sense that, due to his upbringing—and ignoring for the moment his quasi-divine nature—his fate is sealed, and he is not altogether blameworthy for his misdeeds. In the same way, I argue that

26 *NE* I.10. 1100b 34.

those born into a poor upbringing are not as blameworthy for their misdeeds as those who endure no such misfortune, because they genuinely lack the agency to achieve moral excellence. Their virtue is found simply in the attempt at achieving what they identify as their highest good.

On this reading of the *NE*, what distinguishes the unfortunate man from the man capable of attaining perfect happiness is the final end which is available to him. Like Achilles, the person of a poor upbringing is precluded from perfect happiness insofar as that upbringing instills in them a state of character which cannot identify moral virtue as the highest human good. In other words, without a good upbringing, the moral agent's rational faculty becomes compromised, and consequently they will deliberate in a deficient way, mistakenly identifying either means or ends. The man of poor upbringing still possesses a faculty of reason, desires a final good, and deliberates over the means to achieving that good, but since perfect happiness is unavailable to them, at best they can only strive for imperfect happiness. In this context, that imperfect happiness consists in the striving toward a life of extended morally virtuous activity in the face of misfortune, despite its impossibility. However, to accommodate Aristotle's explicit claim that we never deliberate over what is impossible²⁷ we could instead say that such a person identifies their final end, not as the presence of a particular good, but as the absence of a particular vice. In other words, the unfortunate man of poor upbringing identifies their final end, not as happiness or blessedness, but as avoiding wretchedness—perhaps the same wretchedness that defined the quality of their upbringing. In this sense, what constitutes an imperfectly happy life for such a person is not extended morally virtuous activity—for this would seem impossible under Aristotle's schema—but an extended virtuous indomitability in the face of poor moral luck.

This is arguably what makes Achilles the compelling hero of Homer's *Iliad*, and what explains the perennial attraction of art and artists—consider Van Gogh, Beethoven, Hector Berlioz, Goethe, Charles Bukowski—who depict the vicious and deficient parts of the human condition in a sympathetic

²⁷ *NE* III.3. 1112a 30 - 35.

and beautiful way. Despite being robbed of the potential for perfect happiness at birth, the unfortunate person of poor upbringing can achieve an imperfect happiness by persevering through their misfortune, and striving toward the highest good available to them given the circumstances. Such a person, lacking the practical wisdom necessary to choose virtue over vice, may falter along the way, succumbing to ignorance and viciousness from time to time, but provided they do so in an innocent way, striving in earnest toward their highest good, they are at least less blameworthy than the truly wretched person. Of such a person we would say, if only they were fortunate enough to have had a good upbringing, then it is certain they would have achieved a perfectly happy life. Although Aristotle never makes such provisions himself for those of poor upbringing, the present aim is to account for such scenarios in a way that is commensurate with the overall spirit of the *NE*. While Aristotle directs his argument at those of a good upbringing, he can still be said to leave room for the other, less fortunate moral agents who did not have such good moral luck.

IV

I opened this paper by suggesting that if Aristotle had provided a reliable and universally applicable guide to the good life, we would be living in a much more peaceful and happy world today. What I have tried to demonstrate is that in this regard, Aristotle's *NE* fails to account for the multitude of people whose moral agency is compromised from birth, due to the misfortune of being fated to a poor upbringing. If we accept Aristotle's schema for the attainment of perfect happiness, which is the primary focus of the *NE*, we can still find within his ethical framework an implicit and sympathetic account for those who can only ever achieve a comparatively diminished, imperfect form of happiness. Perhaps if more people were supplied with the external goods of chance, and most importantly the external good of a proper moral upbringing, then Aristotle's *NE* would prove dramatically more applicable, and we would indeed see a much happier and peaceful world as a result. However, as is commonly apparent, we do not live in such a world, and people are frequently fated to go without such

good fortune. Nonetheless, the striving of human nature toward some good, even if it is unattainable, remains a praiseworthy disposition, commensurate with the human-defining function of reason. Those of us who read Aristotle's *NE* hoping for some kind of guide to perfect happiness may feel chagrined to discover that his promise of perfect happiness is simply out of reach, but on a deeper reading, there may be a redeeming promise of an imperfect happiness, a final end relative to us, which may fulfill our lives and make us better, happier people.

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