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Josu Ahedo Ruiz & David González Ginocchio

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 7th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 3th – Saturday 5th January 2019.

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



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Josu Ahedo Ruiz (josu.ahedo@unir.net)

David González Ginocchio (david.gginocchio@unir.net)

International University of La Rioja, Spain

1. Two senses of *eudaimonía*

Aristotle holds that happiness is “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (or excellence, *aretê*), and if there are many virtues, then in accordance with the best and most complete” (EN 1098 a 16-18). However, this idea of happiness as the epitome of the practical life, as the excellence proper to the virtue of *phrónesis* is *eudaimonía* in a subordinate sense, according to Aristotle (EN 1178a9). Bueno (2007) points out that this kind of happiness, one according to moral virtues, is of a secondary or derivative kind. Abba (1992: 77) even holds that it is imperfect because “The virtuous life is not all the happiness that human beings are naturally capable of.” Dahl (2013) refers to it as a secondary life since it is a human happiness, as opposed to a divine happiness.

But Aristotle also speaks of a different and perfect kind of happiness, one that corresponds to the contemplation of a divine being. The difference lies in the fact that the imperfect happiness belongs to us as composed of body and soul, while the perfect kind relates to the spiritual principle, the soul. Aquinas (2000) asserts that the happiness that consists in the perfect life as directed by prudence is the life of the composite of body and soul, and this is a human happiness. The life and happiness belonging to the contemplative life, on the other hand, is proper of the intellect, it is separate, and it is divine. Reeve (2012) also distinguishes an incomplete happiness that lives in the activity of all the virtues of character, and the complete one, whose activity emerges from theoretical wisdom. In this vein, Assein (1989) explains that happiness is *teleion* and *eudaimon*, while virtue is only *teleion*. Therefore, life according to contemplation is superior to the political life that characterizes the exercise of ethical virtues, above all because the proper end of political life is honor, and honor cannot be our final end because, unlike happiness, it is not self-sufficient and it sought in lieu of something else (Dahl, 2013).

Are both kinds of happiness compatible? Yarza (2001) answers favorably, while arguing that they belong to different orders. Imperfect happiness, which Aristotle studies in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, belongs to a life that properly exercises moral virtues, a life that is fully compatible with the contemplative life suggested in Book X (Cantú 2004). While Aristotle insists they are hierarchically ordered, unfortunately he does not provide a full account on precisely how this is so. In Yarza’s account, their relation is one of subordination: not as the kind of a means to an end, as they are different kinds of happiness and the contemplative life is loved for itself and not for something else, while moral virtue is loved for the good one can achieve through action.

Broadie (1991) wonders in this vein whether being happy and doing what is good are the same. He claims that it is possible for a virtuous person not to be happy, because happiness is not a disposition, that is,

something that is acquired as a habit as the result of a good action, but rather an activity. Happiness is not a habit, a disposition, but an activity: while I can happily fall asleep, happiness is not a disposition that belongs to me in the sense that one who sleeps does not possess the operations of life in a perfect way (Aquinas 2000). And indeed Aristotle claims that the “possession of virtue seems compatible with being asleep or inactive throughout one’s life” (EN 1095b33-34), but one cannot be happy while being inactive. Happiness, therefore, cannot consist in possessing a *habit* of being happy (Cantú, 2004). Regarding this point, Shields (2013) explains that happiness is an activity rather than a state because the best way of life is active rather than passive. Thus, happiness does not equate to the simple exercise of reason – in that case everybody would be happy (Zagal 2013). Being happy implies an excellent and regular use of rationality throughout our whole life.

Vigo (1997) highlights that the theory of happiness in Aristotle is clearly teleological because it asks for the final end of practical life, that is, for the knowledge of what exactly is the usefulness of being good. This general view places the question in relation to the matter of the usefulness of character education, and whether being good or possessing virtues achieved through moral perfection – through human flourishing – is sufficient for being happy. We may wonder if, for Aristotle, the end of practical life, human flourishing, is also the global end of life, or if there is perhaps a different and superior end to this one. In our view, without moral life one cannot be happy, and thus morality is a *conditio sine qua non* for achieving perfect happiness.

2. Eudaimonía and contemplation

The commentators of Aristotelian ethics have argued whether perfect happiness is inclusive, that is, whether it contains imperfect happiness and whether all goods are necessary for a good life; whether perhaps it should be understood as dominant, as a superior good that is above all other goods, thus regarding happiness as the fundamental good. On the other hand, the comprehensive view of happiness holds that perfect happiness is more sublime and does not contain the operating happiness of moral virtues, for Sophia is superior. Assein (1989) claims that if it really is complete and central, it is final. Reeve (2012) insists that happiness is just like human flourishing: one can always grow in moral life, just as one can always be happier until the end. This, it is useful to show that happiness is not an absolutely finalized term, something that once reached renders us static.

Aristotle distinguishes the theoretical life, consisting in the pure contemplation of being, possessed by a person who exercises the virtue of wisdom, and the fulfilled life, the summit of the practical life, proper of the good political character that lives according to moral virtues. Cantú (2004, 57) writes that “in order for the act of contemplation to exist, it is necessary that the intellect be perfected by the highest of intellectual virtues, wisdom.” The radical distinction between contemplative life and *phrónesis* (1178a2-22), between theoretical and moral life, is analogous to the distinction between *noûs* and moral virtues. Hence, happiness is an operation: not an external product, but a good that is proper to the soul (Aquinas, 2000).

In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle teaches that happiness is the activity of a good soul (EE, 1219a35) and that it should be the activity of a perfect life according to virtue (EE, 1219a38-39). *Perfect* here means complete and total; however, it is not clear whether a happy life includes the complete exercise of all virtues or just some of them.

And what is the life of the *noûs* about? To begin with, Aristotle claims that the theoretical life itself is above the human level (Ackrill, 1987). It is a life that consists, according to Asselin (1989), in the capacity to know the truth and what each thing is. It is the most divine activity of human beings, consisting in theoretical contemplation (Nagel, 1972). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle explains just how it involves a quasi-divine principle within us:

Such a life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. (EN X 7, 1177b 26-30)

This is the activity of the *nous*, a divine principle, and thus the actions of the practical intellect cannot be the highest function of reason. What is then the relation between the *noûs* and the other parts of the soul? In this regard, Dahl (2013) points out that the contemplative life embraces the exercise of ethical virtues, which consequently become an instrumental mean for the contemplative life. We hold that this is not just a mean but a necessary condition. How can one be happy without exercising virtues? This would mean that the contemplative life cannot be itself exercised if it is not lived according to ethical virtues. And still, *condition* should not be understood here as *necessity*, for whoever lives a contemplative life lives something different from ethics, something in a different order, in which no means are necessary to obtain goods, insofar as this kind of life is lived only in accordance to the ultimate end. Dahl (2013) claims this is a desirable life, lacking in nothing (an *eu zên*). But how should contemplation be understood? as a state of the soul in repose? That cannot be the case, for happiness is, again, an activity and the contemplation of the ultimate end of life offers a universal way of behavior for everyone (Cantú, 2004).

3. Katharsis and self-knowledge

Is there a way to link moral and contemplative happiness? ‘Romantic’ authors (in a very general sense) thought so (Pérez Guerrero 2018): through aesthetic experiences we cultivate our aesthetic sense so that we elevate ourselves to become representatives of humanity in general. Our aesthetic faculty turns then into a powerful ally of our moral convictions, and taste becomes a means to educate and a way to the conviction that we are part of humanity as a whole.

This kind of formation of taste can also be traced to Aristotle. Indeed, there is a distinguishable interpretation of his idea of *katharsis* in this vein, an *ethical* interpretation, according to which “the experience of tragedy purifies ethical character and clears the mind at the same time” (Woodruff 2009, 622; he assigns this view to Halliwell 1986: 201). But this is not the only sense in which we may interpret *katharsis* nor is it the only way to link both *eudaimóniai*. We will take inspiration from another possible reading of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* is a complex text, of which we seem to have only a substantial fragment, but a fragment nonetheless. It is hard to reach many certifiable conclusions, and a prudential austerity of interpretation seems to be the best option. It is also one of the most commented treatises in the history of philosophy, so getting mired in multiple discussions is all too easy, even with seemingly straightforward notions like

katharsis.¹ We will follow here a minimalist approach to the theses we have in mind. They have to do with *katharsis* and the self-knowledge a reader can acquire through the poetic experiences.

The *Poetics* deal at some length with tragedy and its elements as well as the epic. (Apparently a second book dealing with comedy is missing.) It does not, however, provide a full definition of poetry. As such, it would be unjustified to simply equate the views in the *Poetics* with art or even literature in general. However, it does offer some insights that we may take advantage of, even if we do not hold to a scrupulous reading on the text. Among the commonly accepted propositions in the *Poetics* we find:

(1) The unity of Aristotle's *Poetics* comes from the consideration of *mimesis*. Poetry is an art of imitations – specifically, imitations of actions through language [1447a19-21]. Aristotle holds that humans are the most imitative of animals and learn through imitation; furthermore, “it is natural for everyone to take pleasure in works of imitation.” (*Poet.* 4, 1448b6-9)

(2) There is a general overview of tragedy: “A tragedy is the imitation of an action which is serious and, having grandeur, complete in itself, done in language seasoned with embellishments, each appearing separately in different parts of the work, in dramatic rather than narrative form, accomplishing by way of pity and fear the catharsis of such feelings” (*Poet* 6, 1449b22-28). Pity and fear are aroused not primarily in the actors but in the audience (Barnes 1995, 277).

(3) Tragedy produces pleasure and understanding (*Poet.* 4) through *katharsis*, which meant purgation in Greek medicine, or purification in religious rituals. How to actually interpret *katharsis* in Aristotle is still a matter of discussion among scholars. According to Woodruff, there seems to be no absolute indication that *katharsis* is the *telos* of poetry, or tragedy, but the term is employed in the general context of the ends of tragedy (*Poet.* 6, 49b27). Specifically for tragedy, “The aim is a certain kind of *action*, not a quality” (50a17) that raises its own peculiar kind of emotions: pity and fear (*Poet.* 13-14).

(4) Tragedy does not intend to generate *real* feelings of pity and fear: the generation of feelings through imitation is what causes pleasure (1453b12), which in Aristotle is always a side-product and not the main *telos* of actions. A certain awareness is needed here, otherwise the effect would just be analogous to the natural one. “Complicity [in the *mimesis*] allows me to take pleasure in what would be a painful experience in nature.” (Woodruff : 616). I keep the dispositions in the soul “that belong to pity and fear, but not the set of beliefs that would make those motions painful – not the beliefs that these fearful actions are actually taking place.” (Woodruff 2009, 616).

We can link these general insights to one interpretation of the products of poetry, *katharsis* and understanding. In this view, what poetry does is not exactly, or at least not principally, an alignment of our moral and aesthetic inclinations, but rather a specific kind of self-knowledge. Aristotle calls this knowledge *anagnorisis*, “a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune” (1452a). *Anagnorisis* is a practical form of self-awareness, originated in the artificial setting of the *théatron*. We feel pleasure because we *know* that what is going on is a representation. While aesthetic pleasure may not directly ‘make us’ moral, it allows for self-consideration in an executive sense, an executive view of a subject’s own ‘practical identity’. The purification or purgation of emotions may perhaps not refer to a straightforward, mechanical process by

¹ “Interpretations of *katharsis* are a cemetery of the living dead; not one of the proposed accounts remains unburied by scholars, and yet not one of them stays in the grave.” (Woodruff 2009, 619)

which the contemplation of imitations makes me feel proper pity or even create an example of moral behavior for me, the spectator, to imitate in turn. It may not necessarily be the case that after watching a tragedy I feel more apt to pity or fear in the appropriate manner or to dominate my emotions.

Tragedy concerns a pitiable end: the fall of an “intermediate kind of person, a man not preeminently virtuous or just, but who enjoys a high reputation and prosperity, whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some fault [*hamartía*]” (1454a6-10). It is not a question of morality, but rather of a wrong action or calculation: “A tragic *hamartia* is simply a mistake” (Barnes 1995, 280). “Oedipus had no way of avoiding the mistake: he could not have found out that the man he met at the crossroads was his father. His fault was, practically speaking, unavoidable. (I do not mean that the whole thing was fated, or planned in advance by the gods – although this is a matter which properly exercises students of Sophocles’ tragedy. I mean simply that, in the imagined circumstances, Oedipus had no chance to discover the truth.)” (Barnes 1995, 280).

And so it *feels* like fate. This generates pity, and fear: I pity Oedipus when he realizes his actions fall under the description of patricide. I fear that in a rash or wrong decision my whole life will be undone like his. And yet I experience pleasure in these feelings, because they bring a special kind of realization regarding our existence: our finitude. “The vulnerability of good people to ethically significant reversals is among the central themes of tragedy” (Nussbaum 1992, 263). Through *katharsis* I become aware of the actions of a flawed, finite character, just like myself. And just like the imitated character, a global understanding of life is opened through this mimesis, “the true nature of the causal chain that has been unfolding is revealed” (Nussbaum 1992, 279). What *mimesis* does is to build this emotional road (theatre is a *téxne*) so that I can, through a final *peripeteia*, achieve that end (*katharsis*).

Aristotle’s view of praxis is self-referential and teleological: the end of praxis is not given outside praxis itself. Acting agents shape themselves through their own actions and decisions, amassing a *répertoire* of habitual dispositions (*héxeis*). Personal individuality cannot ignore this ‘moral character’ – the construction or recognition of identity is not purely a theoretical exercise. *Who I am* has to do with the moral dispositions brought about by specific actions in a temporal frame just as it has to do with beliefs and theoretical dispositions (Vigo 2010). Hence the way I ‘handle myself’ has to do with a global interpretation of myself and a practical identity that is diachronically construed through particular choices and actions (Vigo 2008). It is precisely this kind of global diachronic view of myself what we suggest is allowed by *katharsis*.

One could hold, of course, that participating in aesthetic representations may purge or purify one’s own passions. Perhaps the goal of tragedy really is providing this kind of medicinal succor. But the main tenets we wish to take from the Aristotelian position here are much more limited:

- (1) An agent’s identity is not only theoretical in kind but also practical; it builds from the reference of particular, specific actions to a diachronic, global conception of life.
- (2) The tragedy brings forth a special kind of self-awareness, namely, practical self-knowledge, the knowledge of oneself as an agent, albeit limited, mortal, finite.
- (3) This kind of awareness can help us tune into the contemplation of life as a whole. It is thus not necessarily tied to a direct purge or purification of emotions or even to the witnessing of a ‘moral example’ but rather to a moment of special awareness of the agent as a limited moral agent.

4. Including happiness in the educational curriculum

At the beginning of chapter 9, Book I of the NE, Aristotle wonders if happiness is something that can be learned through practice or exercise or even if it is perhaps something received through divine intervention or mere chance. It would seem that true happiness cannot be something as inconsistent as chance, but rather something stable. This is a basic point, for educational curricula do not usually include learning about happiness. Nobody teaches us at school how to be happy. Perhaps this is due to the fact that happiness has all too often been reduced to a psychological description just meant to affirm that children can be happy, unlike the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimôn*, which cannot be predicated of the youth (Reeve, 2012). Hence we should worry about how to educate in school how to lead a happy life in a perfect way. If the happiness of living well according to ethical virtues is imperfect, the education of character is even more insufficient if a final end or sense is not ascribed to it. Furthermore, students may rightfully feel cheated of not being taught about an ultimate sense of happiness. Nagel (1972) holds that we should cultivate that part of our nature that allows for the transcendence of the rest.

It is hard, however, to delineate this transcendental sense of happiness and therefore to understand how to educate in happiness, for “we cannot train for happiness as we do for sports” (Mateu 1991, 20). Still, according to the Aristotelian view, we can aim for an approximate answer. In the first place, the difference between a subjective and an objective sense of happiness should be clarified in the curriculum, as pointed out by Shields (2013). ‘Feeling happy,’ something closer to an emotional response, should be shown as something different from ‘being happy,’ which relates to the activity proper of a virtuous life. This objective sense of happiness implies our capability to relate and give to those others with whom we build relations, insofar as moral life, our habitual dispositions, makes us capable to provide more to others. The classic difference between social and interpersonal relations applies here (Ahedo, 2017). Social relations are built upon mere coexistence; there is little sharing and rules are based in tolerance and respect. Interpersonal relations, on the other hand, involve personal knowledge, and are defined by the active desire for the well-being of others. They can be defined as an optimization of what is personal for each one, as giving oneself to others highlights what is more proper to human beings (Ahedo 2017).

We should also explain that the practical life, the life according to moral virtue, requires a favorable emotional state (Reeve, 2012). Furthermore, it entails an emotional normalization through adolescence as a condition to acquire virtues (Ahedo 2017). Finally, it requires a direct education of affectivity. Mateu (1991, 18) claims that educating in happiness “requires changing competition for collaboration, prolonged absence for friendly rapprochement, what is superficial for what is profound, suspicion for confidence, desperation for sanity, consumerism for balanced growth, the bitter life for a happy one.”

Our research group at UNIR is focusing on the final sense of the education of character. One of our hypotheses is that acquired virtue is training, insofar as a virtue is a stable disposition acquired by a subject (*héxis*). The moral perfection of each person necessitates constant improvement in interpersonal relations. We become better when acquired virtues allow us to help other that we relate to because we aim for the good of that person. The education of character should imply a kind of learning in which interpersonal relations are not just grounded in utility and pleasure but rather in what Aristotle calls a perfect form of friendship.

Our proposal is that the education of character makes it easier to understand why perfect happiness consists in the contemplation of the good. Moral perfection acquired this way entails doing what is good for its own sake and not as the means of being happy. Enjoying happiness is something more than just the feeling of doing something good because feelings are not as strong dispositions as acquired virtues. Acting for the good itself, in turn, implies understanding that the greatest good is the one we do for the benefit of others. Educators should teach that perfect happiness helps each student live interpersonal relations based on obtaining the good for another.

Finally, the aesthetic dimension of education should not be left out of the formal curriculum. While it would be terribly simplistic to assume that an aesthetically educated character translates without much ado into a moral character, it must also be noted that the aesthetic experience brings forth a particular kind of practical self-awareness without which the possibility to contemplate my life as a whole dims. While the theoretical life and the theoretical sense of *eudaimonía* is not something that can be directly taught in a formal setting, aesthetic experiences can help to set up a proper kind of platform that brings about this reflexive mode of contemplation in students.

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