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Lear argues that in the Nichomachean Ethics (NE hereafter) Aristotle advances a monistic rather than inclusivist conception of happiness. According to the monistic conception, virtuous activity approximates but is not equivalent to contemplative activity. According to the inclusivist conception, contemplative activity includes virtuous activity because virtuous activity is choice-worthy for its own sake. In Lear’s view, if one interprets NE in light of Aristotle’s conception of teleology as defended in his many works on metaphysics, cosmology, physics and biology, the monistic conception of eudaimonia represents the better of the two positions.

Lear’s argument in favor of the monistic conception of happiness rests on a treatment of many familiar themes. The following is a partial list: the finality criterion, teleological relations of approximation, virtues as goods with intrinsic value, and the role of practical and theoretical reason in the happy life.

There are also some unfamiliar themes which play an important role in Lear’s argument. Perhaps the best example is the emphasis Lear places on Aristotle’s work on metaphysics and physics. For instance, Lear argues that in order to fully grasp the place of teleology in Aristotle’s ethics one must appreciate the central place of teleology in Aristotle’s philosophical system. This interpretive strategy, according to Lear, provides support for her claim that the “teleological relationship of approximation” (p. 72) is central to understanding Aristotle’s ethics. As Lear puts it:

…I am not the first to suggest that approximation is one of the ways of acting for an end
that Aristotle has in mind when he describes people as doing everything for the sake of *eudaimonia*. But it has not played any significant role in the interpretation of how the happy person could act for the sake of contemplative *eudaimonia*. Perhaps this is because readers of the *Nichomachean Ethics* have not sufficiently recognized how important this way of acting for an end is for Aristotle in other areas of his philosophy. (p. 73)

This is a very interesting position. According to Lear, the conception of teleology that Aristotle affirms in his work on metaphysics and natural philosophy can illuminate Aristotle’s position on the role of the virtues in a happy life. For instance, in Aristotle’s cosmology the teleological relationship of approximation explains why the “first heaven” is “moved by its desire to become as much like the Prime Mover as it is possible for it to be.” (p. 80) The same teleological relationship of approximation explains why, for Aristotle, the virtues are middle-level goods whose intrinsic value comes from their relation to and approximation of contemplation. The virtues stand in a teleological relationship of approximation to contemplation as a *subordinate end* whose value is *transmitted from the higher end of contemplation*. (p. 87)

In Chapter Seven Lear offers an analysis of three Aristotelian virtues: temperance, courage, and greatness of soul. Each virtue is interpreted by Lear in a way that construes them as middle-level ends that approximate the ultimate end of contemplation. This position has some surprising consequences. One is that “Aristotle’s virtues are fine because they point to the superior value of the most perfect reasoning, which is contemplative.” (p. 147) This does not imply that the virtues have instrumental value, for instance, as mere means to the end of contemplative activity. Rather, virtuous action is choice-worthy for its own sake yet the intrinsic value and thus inherent choice-worthiness of the virtues is explained by showing the connection between virtue and contemplation.

One might suspect that Lear is trying to have things both ways. On the one hand, contemplative activity is affirmed as the highest good; contemplative activity is higher than virtuous activity which stands in a subordinate yet teleological relationship of approximation to contemplative activity. On the other hand, virtuous activity is said to be worth pursuing for its own sake. Can this position coherently explain the choice-worthiness of virtuous action? Lear acknowledges that on its face courage “provides a particularly difficult case” for her position. (p. 149). She tackles this difficulty head on by arguing that “we cannot understand why courageous actions and their circumstances are fine solely by reference to the magnitude of the threat they tackle.” (p. 150) This is a claim that many will find counter intuitive. Isn’t courageous action courageous precisely because and to the degree to which the agent faces a threat with a very high order of magnitude? However, courageous activity, though choice-worthy for its own sake, is choice-worthy because of the end it serves. And since the virtues are middle-level ends, there is nothing untoward about a view which claims that courageous action is choice-worthy for its own sake and that virtuous action is an approximation of contemplative activity. If Aristotle’s conception of teleological relations of approximation threads together his conception of the relationship between virtuous and contemplative activity, then Lear has got her hands on a compelling argument.

Read superficially, Lear’s argument might be thought to advance an interpretation of *NE* that is hard to square with much of what Aristotle claims about the connection between the virtues and *eudaimonia*. However, in Chapter Eight “Two Happy Lives and Their Most Final Ends” Lear shows that the Aristotelean ideal is not that of an amoral superhero who entitles herself to a
permanent moral holiday in order to attain a self-perfection unattainable within the constraints of moral considerations. Each of the virtues, courage, temperance, etc. may be pursued for its own sake. Moreover, virtuous action is simultaneously pursued for its own sake and for the sake of contemplative activity. It is true that only contemplative activity qualifies as “our most final end, the human good, and perfect or most final eudaimonia. The philosopher who devotes everything he does to contemplation leads the happiest human life.” (p. 175) But this claim must be put into the context of Aristotle’s own claim that “If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it be in accordance with the best (virtue); and this would be (the virtue) of the best part.” (NE, 1177a12-13, quoted on p. 181). Lear’s monistic conception can make sense of this passage in a way the inclusivist conception cannot.

According to Lear, when Aristotle suggests the highest form of happiness is an activity in accordance with virtue and that the activity which accords with the highest virtue is the highest happiness, this does not imply that only the courageous, the temperate, etc. lead the best lives. Rather, the best life is lived by the philosopher for whom contemplation is the final end. In making contemplation one’s final end, one will have a proper concern for the virtues. The best life for humans can only be achieved by agents who live in accordance with an arrangement of goods including those which approximate the highest. Lear offers a clear summary of her position when she writes:

We began by wondering how a life devoted entirely to the monistic good of contemplation could be recognizable as a happy life in Aristotle’s sense, a life worth choosing and admiring, a fully flourishing life lacking nothing. What place would such a life have for proper moral concern? Aristotle’s answer is this: When we protect those we love courageously, dine with them temperately, give to them generously, and accept the honors 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. (p. 207)

Happy Lives and the Highest Good is an ambitious book. Lear defends a position that will strike some as implausible. The monistic conception of eudaimonia seems to imply that the best form of happiness fit for human perfection involves a god-likeness that is not identical to the life of a morally virtuous person. Some will contest this interpretation. Is the courageous agent one for whom the life of virtue is worth choosing because she understands that the practical truths of morality approximate the theoretical truths of contemplation? Lear anticipates and responds to this worry. First, Lear attempts to mount a case for her interpretation which is supported by a thorough survey of the textual evidence. In her view, the evidence favors the monistic conception. Secondly, Lear also attempts to resolve an apparent difficulty with her thesis. If the highest good is contemplation and if contemplation is a theoretical activity, then why does Aristotle spend so much time defending a view that looks like an ethics that identifies virtue with happiness? Lear rises to the challenge of this difficult question by offering a detailed and systematic analysis of many concepts and features of Aristotle’s position. For example, a significant part of Lear’s argument hangs on establishing that virtuous activity is both intrinsically valuable and choice-worthy for the sake of something even more valuable. Since virtues are middle-level ends—and thus intrinsically valuable yet not that for the sake of which the best life is lived—agents who exercise the virtues do so as an approximation of and ultimately for the sake of contemplation. In Lear’s words:
The most fine uses of our practical reason occur in circumstances where there is a challenge to overcome. By facing hardship in an orderly way, the virtuous person shows there is something above his mere animal nature that makes his life worth living. But the very fact that practical reason judges the challenges of war and political business worth moving beyond suggests that such circumstances and the sort of virtuous activities that only they make appropriate are not the ultimate value. (p. 187)

Virtue is worth choosing both for its own sake and because knowing the proper place of virtue in a human life approximates contemplation. (p. 207)

*Happy Lives and the Highest Good* is worth reading for at least two reasons. First, the scholarship is rigorous and thorough. Lear is careful to distinguish her interpretation of Aristotle from those she rejects as well as those that are similar yet in subtle ways differ from her own. This feature of the book should be especially appealing to Aristotle scholars. There is also a systematic attempt to establish connections between the arguments in *NE* and the rest of Aristotle’s work. This feature of the book should be especially appealing to those with some familiarity with *NE* yet less familiarity with the rest of Aristotle’s work. Secondly, Lear’s argument in favor of the monistic conception of happiness is compelling.

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