

It's Not Selfish to be Happy

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We often find the goodness of moral actions dismissed if the person acting has something to gain from it. “You only donate to charity because it makes you feel good,” or “You only are nice to your teachers because you want them to like you.” Some feel that if an action makes us happy, it has less moral worth. I would content the opposite, that one’s happiness and ability to be moral do not conflict with each other, and in acting morally, we also move towards our happiness. To argue this, I will be in conversation with three philosophical texts: Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle outlines his theory of human telos and virtue.¹ Kant’s *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in which he argues for moral commands from reason and his categorical imperative.² And Lastly Macintyre’s *After Virtue* in which he discusses our current inability to discuss morality in the modern day and argues bringing back elements of Aristotle’s virtue.³ Using these texts, I want to argue that personal happiness is not independent or opposed to moral behavior but is aligned with it. There are two main points I want to contend. First, in ethics, there is a distinction between human nature as-it-is and human nature as-it-could-be, or telos. Second, what is suitable for our eudaimonia is ultimately good for our community. In arguing this, I will unpack Macintyre’s argument for the importance of *telos*. Then, look at how Kant articulates happiness in his non-teleological ethics and the problems that it brings. Lastly, look

1 Aristotle, W.D. Ross, et al., *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford World’s Classics) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 Immanuel Kant, et al., *Ethical Philosophy: The Complete Texts of Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals and Metaphysical Principles of Virtue (Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals)* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1983).

3 Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: Univ of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

at how Aristotle understands our telos as eudaimonia and how he communicates the relationship between our well-being and being a moral person.

Macintyre argues that we can only correctly discuss morality by thinking about it in a teleological framework. He says that when considering how human nature plays a role in ethics, there must be an understanding of telos, as it is what gives the contrasts between human nature “as-it-is” and human nature “as-it-could-be.”⁴ Human nature as-it-is desires what appears good for us. In contrast, human nature as-it-could-be desires what is *actually* good for us. Having the distinction of human nature as-it-could-be is crucial as otherwise, we only understand human nature as-it-is. This means we think of human nature as desiring only what appears to be good for us. Macintyre says there should be three elements to any schema of ethics, “the conception of untutored human nature, the conception of the precepts of rational ethics, and the conception of human nature as it could be if it realized its telos.”⁵ If any of these three elements are to be intelligible, they must reference the other two.⁶ By removing this teleological thinking, we can only understand human nature as a force that does not align with moral behavior. Enlightenment moral theorists were “inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other.”⁷ The other consequence of losing teleological thinking is that ethics doesn’t have an end it is moving toward. If you do not have a conception of human nature as-it-could-be, then you view human nature as something that could only be independent or counter to what is moral.

Kant does not share this mindset, for him happiness and human nature cannot be aligned with what is moral. Happiness is either tangential to what is moral or works against it. Kant does say that “to secure one’s own happiness is a duty (at least indirectly)” but the reason he thinks this is because, in a state of unhappiness, there might “become a great temptation to transgress one’s duties.”⁸ This passage gets to the heart of how Kant views happiness. Personal happiness is not good in and of itself. It is good only in so far as being unhappy might cause someone to not abide by their duties. Kant also articulates that happiness can get in the way of being moral if not accompanied by a desire to align with duty. Kant said that the conditions “that complete well-being and contentment with one’s conditions which is called happiness make for pride – unless there is a good will to correct their influence.”⁹ Continuing with this, Kant says that actions have the most moral worth if done without inclination and only to align with duty. If someone acts “solely from duty, then for the first time his action has genuine moral worth.”¹⁰ But actions that come solely from duty may not even be possible according to Kant, as “there cannot with certainty be at all inferred – that

4 Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 52.

5 Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 53.

6 Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 53.

7 Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 55.

8 Kant, *Grounding*, 12.

9 Kant, *Grounding*, 7.

10 Kant, *Grounding*, 11.

some secret impulse of self-love, merely appearing as the idea of duty.”¹¹ To summarize, for Kant, happiness only has moral worth as far as it affects our ability to accord with duty, and actions have more moral worth if done without any sort of personal inclination and only for the sake of duty.

However, it is important to note that how Kant articulates happiness differs from how Aristotle uses the term. Aristotle’s happiness is a translation of the word “eudaimonia.” Though eudaimonia is often translated as happiness, eudaimonia is not an emotion in the way we think that happiness is. Instead, he talks about long-term well-being. As Aristotle says, “one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.”¹² I don’t think that Kant uses the term the same way Aristotle does. In one passage, Kant says about duty that “we find that the more a cultivated reason devotes itself to the aim of enjoying life and happiness, the further does man get away from true contentment.”¹³ Here, human happiness and “contentment” are seen as opposed things, rather than contentment just being a factor of happiness. Also, Kant is not saying that you act according to duty so you can be content, but instead that it will come as a consequence.

For Aristotle, unlike Kant, happiness is not only aligned with what is good, what is good is happiness. Aristotle articulates the idea of moving towards our telos of eudaimonia as the ultimate good, and our eudaimonia depends on our ability to be virtuous within our community. As articulated earlier, Aristotle thinks that “every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good.”¹⁴ This does not mean that every action achieves good, but it is always done intending it. And this good that Aristotle thinks all actions aim at is eudaimonia. Aristotle believes our telos is eudaimonia because it is something that we “always choose for itself and never for the sake of something else,” and all other goods we aim for, such as honor, pleasure, or reason, are incidental to our aim of eudaimonia.¹⁵ Aristotle says that eudaimonia comes “as a result of virtue and some process of learning or training.”¹⁶ And the way that you move towards your eudaimonia is by practicing the virtues. Virtues are “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean.”¹⁷ These virtues are habits you practice; if you practice them and put them into action, they will move you toward eudaimonia. These virtues include courage, honesty, friendliness, and others. But for Aristotle, it is not enough to practice the virtues, for if you truly hold them, you will enjoy them. Aristotle says, “the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly.”¹⁸ This passage in particular serves as an interesting dichotomy to Kant’s thinking. For Kant, an action has the most moral worth if it is done without being motivated by inclination, while for Aristotle,

11 Kant, *Grounding*, 19.

12 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a.

13 Kant, *Grounding*, 8.

14 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a.

15 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b.

16 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b.

17 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a.

18 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099a.

an action has the most moral worth if it is a part of your inclination.

The difference between these two is that for Aristotle, happiness is good in and of itself; it is why you act morally. This contrasts with Kant's system, in which happiness is valuable only tangentially. The aims of morality and happiness are aligned with Aristotle's system. Aristotle articulates that you cannot live a selfish life and be cruel to others and then think of your life as fulfilling. To live good, fulfilling, happy lives, we must be good to others and have good relationships with others. The aim for eudaimonia may be seen as "selfish," but it's simply stating that what is good for your eudaimonia and what is good for others are not separate from each other but on the same path.

I would now like to look at particular examples to demonstrate why a teleological structure of eudaimonia does not conflict with what is good for others. An example is what Kant calls beneficence and what Aristotle calls liberality. Both articulate that it is good to give to others. They both have passages dealing with why this is good. Though they come to a similar result, I think Aristotle's manifestation is more sustainable and articulates well why giving is good for others and yourself. For Kant, beneficence is a duty. You give to others despite what your inclination may tell you as you could not will that refusing to give to those in need should "become a universal law of nature."¹⁹ What Kant articulates here is that most of the time, we don't have the drive to give what we have to those who need it more, and we should try to overcome this inclination and align with our duty. This is a fine manifestation but is based on understanding human nature as-it-is, not as-it-could-be. Kant only understands that our human nature as-it-is does not want to give to others. And not that perhaps our human nature as-it-could-be, does desire to be beneficent. And again, Kant says actions have the most moral worth if they work against inclination. So, a person giving to others for their own pleasure is of less moral value than someone who gives despite not wanting to. Aristotle articulates this idea similarly with his virtue of liberality, which he states as someone who "will give to the right people, the right amounts, and at the right time."²⁰ Aristotle says this is necessary for our happiness as if someone "happens to spend in a manner contrary to what is right and noble, he will be pained."²¹ As stated before, it is not enough in Aristotle's system to perform the actions correctly. They must also be enjoyed by the person performing them. He says, "It is the mark of virtue to be pleased and pained at the right objects and in the right way."²² Both Kant and Aristotle articulate that it is good to be generous and give to others, but what Aristotle has that Kant doesn't is this conception of telos. For Kant, our duty must be performed despite our inclinations. Aristotle has the notion of telos and human nature as-it-could-be. He recognizes that when we are not generous with our money, we feel guilty and do not feel we are using our money well. So, what is good for our telos of eudaimonia is to be generous. This connects to the broader point

19 Kant, *Grounding*, 32.

20 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1120a.

21 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1121a.

22 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1121a.

that, for Aristotle, our happiness and what is good for others do not conflict with each other, and what is good for us is also good for others.

I next want to look at how Kant and Aristotle understand friendship differently. Of course, Kant only has one line on friendship that is used as an example to demonstrate a larger idea, but it still helps demonstrate an interesting point. Kant says, “though there might never yet have been a sincere friend, still pure sincerity in friendship is nonetheless required of every man.”²³ This example is used to demonstrate Kant’s point that moral commands are absolute, whether or not they have ever been actualized. But again, Kant’s lack of teleological thinking creates a challenge. If it is impossible to realize sincere friendship, then there is no end its moving towards. I also argue it misunderstands where the value of friendship lies. Aristotle acknowledges the importance of good friendships for a life of eudaimonia. He starts his book on friendship by saying that “without friends no one would choose to live.”²⁴ What Aristotle communicates is that friendship is not about sacrificing yourself for the sake of your friendship. Being a good friend should not run counter to your happiness, but rather go alongside it. Aristotle argues that the happiness that comes from friendship “seems to lie in loving rather than being loved.”²⁵ Aristotle says that we do get pleasure from caring for the people that we are close to, that being kind to others is good for our eudaimonia. Here, we see the importance of understanding telos as eudaimonia, and the role friends play in ethics. Human nature as-it-is, may simply seek friends for personal or short-term gain. But human nature as-it-could-be recognizes that a life where you are caring and loving in your relationships is a more fulfilling and happy life.

In conclusion, happiness, and our ability to be good to others are not contrary forces but are working towards the same end. This relies on the Aristotelian idea of telos, as it can articulate the difference between human nature as-it-is, and human nature as-it-could-be. Human nature as-it-is desires what it believes will bring happiness, while human nature as-it-could-be desires what will actually bring happiness. Because Kant does not have a conception of telos, he views human desire for happiness as necessary only tangentially to morality. Aristotle can articulate that we do have an end, and this end is our eudaimonia. What is good for our eudaimonia is ultimately good for others as well. We live in communities with other people, and if we are not kind to those other people, then it will affect our own eudaimonia. Every so often, I hear discussions from friends and family about whether “true altruism” exists. Can someone perform an action that is motivated purely by selfless means? Whether the answer to this is yes or no, does it matter? Why should an action have less moral value if it is enjoyed or makes the person doing it happy? We find it is in our happiest moments that we are best equipped to help others, and in our saddest moments, we rely the most upon others. To commit to your happiness and well-being is not wrong or self-centered. Because what is good for your well-being is also what makes you best equipped to be kind and caring to the people who need you.

23 Kant, *Grounding*, 20.

24 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a.

25 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159b.