ARISTOTLE, EGOISM, AND RATIONAL CHOICE

Don Tontiplaphol∗

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1. Almost everyone agrees that Aristotle’s ethical thought is eudaimonistic in structure, not least because he, along with his audience, takes the chief good to be happiness (Nicomachean Ethics [hereafter, ‘NE’] I.2, 4). But commentators disagree about how to understand Aristotle’s conception of happiness, and not just because they disagree about what, for Aristotle, substantively constitutes it, a disagreement akin to what Aristotle’s own audience may have witnessed (NE 1095a19–21). Rather, commentators diverge also on what it takes for some conception to be a conception of eudaimonia at all—for a conception to be assessable as a correct or an incorrect conception of happiness, and not as a correct or an incorrect conception of something else.

One influential but hardly dominant family of interpretations endorses a considerably narrow or specialized view of Aristotle’s treatment of happiness in the ethical works; it restricts the scope of eudaimonia to action (whether good or bad), and it restricts action, in this context, to the workings (whether perfect or imperfect) of prohairesis, where that, in turn, is understood as a capacity to act specifically in the light of a (correct or incorrect) conception of human excellence, or virtue.1

To see how narrow is this interpretation, we should linger over what, then, is excluded from Aristotle’s conception of happiness, on this view. Many things we perhaps rightly consider as productive of well-being (in the ordinary sense) will be excluded, like wealth, honor, and even

∗Contact via e-mail at <tontiplaphol@gmail.com> This is very much a draft; please do not circulate without permission.

1 This family bears, as it were, many disagreements; the view, in its entirety, can be seen most notably in the work of John McDowell, David Wiggins, Christopher Rowe, Jennifer Whiting, and Gavin Lawrence. But some of its various features or planks are defended by Roger Crisp, Heda Segvic, and perhaps Michael Thompson.
virtue itself, since objects and states are not actions (1095b33). Moreover, many kinds of actions (in the ordinary sense) will be excluded, even some of what we call intentional or voluntary ones, so long as they do not manifest a conception of excellent or virtuous action. And, even if some action could count as facially prohairetic, it would fail to qualify if the relevant conception of excellence were not of human excellence (NE VI.5 1140a25–28). On this reading, a remarkably restricted terrain makes up the home for Aristotle’s understanding of the kind of human good that is his central concern.

2. There may be at least two sorts of considerations that weigh against this ethicized and strictly practical—not productive (NE I.1–2, 7)—gloss on eudaimonia.

The first suggests that it saddles Aristotle with a peculiarly oblivious or obscurantist attitude to the question of the rationality of virtuous action—or, for short, the rationality of virtue—a question that seems to have been of immense interest to Greek ethical reflection, reflection concerned as it generally was “to map the relations of happiness and virtue.” In beginning his Ethics with the identification of happiness and virtuous activity, Aristotle might seem to rule out ab initio what should have felt to be an urgent question, one that seems to form the red thread in Plato’s Republic. For, on this picture, the Socratic tradition in general was preoccupied with explaining “to each man that justice was rational for him,” that “the answer had to be grounded first in an account of what sort of person it was rational for him to be.” But, if we discount the thought that Aristotle would not have felt this urgency, then the ethicized view from above will appear obscurantist:

We can understand what led Aristotle to take this strict line on the relation of virtue and happiness: it would give the critic of virtue absolutely no ground on which to stand.

Nothing good (literally—not merely nothing good overall) can come from vice, only

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1 Please see the “Appendix” below for a textual defense of the outlines of this view.
2 Crisp, in From Aristotle to Augustine, 111.
3 Bernard Williams, The Sense of the Past, 40, original emphasis. Williams illustrates this picture with respect to Plato; but, for many if not for Williams himself, his kind of view applies to Aristotle as well. Williams registers Aristotle’s relative lack of “the sense of any combative skepticism against which morality has to be defended” on page 43. Other commentators, like Richard Kraut and Terence Irwin, say, however, that Plato’s concern with defending morality was just as alive to Aristotle.
So, if Greek ethics aimed to “map the relations of happiness and virtue,” then Aristotle’s would have to resemble, on this view, something as instructive as the Bellman’s Map.

The second suggests that, even if Aristotle had been attracted to what may appear to spark, according to the first line of resistance, the charge of obscurantism, he will have to swallow a rigorism both implausible and odd.

On the one hand, this rigoristic approach seems to say, with an air of moralism, that the virtuous man can suffer no harm—that virtuous action always and maximally and uniquely benefits its agent. But, if nothing more is said, it may be tempting to read into Aristotle a tacit “confession that to bring someone up into such ‘virtue,’ to counsel its acts, is to injure her. How could that be any more respectable, morally speaking, than binding her feet?”

On the other hand, this rigorism seems to tell us, with an air of unmotivated stipulation, that the focus of ethical reflection is prohairetic action—action performed as a manifestation of one’s conception of eudaimonia—to the exclusion of those actions that do not enjoy that special status. But why should specifically prohairetic action be of special concern? How does it mark out something worthy of a distinctive kind of evaluation or assessment? Even Aristotle’s admirers have complained of his narrow concern with prohairetic action:

> Ancient and medieval philosophers—or some of them, at any rate—regarded it as evident, demonstrable, that human beings must always act with some end in view, and even with some one end in view. The argument for this strikes us as rather strange. Can’t a man just do what he does, a great deal of the time? He may or may not have a reason or a purpose; and if he has a reason or purpose, it in turn may just be what he happens to want; why demand a reason or purpose for it? and why must we at last arrive at some one purpose that has an intrinsic finality about it? The old arguments were designed to show that the chain could not go on for ever; they pass us by, because

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1 Crisp, in *Plato and Aristotle’s Ethics*, 75.
we are not inclined to think it must even begin; and it can surely stop where it stops, no need for it to stop at a purpose that looks intrinsically final, one and the same for all actions.

I will not here try to defend, in any comprehensive or straightforward manner, the interpretation with which I began (nor to defend that interpretation against the charges of obscurantism and rigorism). Rather, I want to respond to an intelligible recoil against it, a recoil motivated by the obscurantist and rigoristic appearance that the ethicized and strictly practical reading bears. That recoil sees in Aristotle’s ethical theory a form of rational egoism, according to which the demands of virtue are validated by considerations of the agent’s interests, the agent’s happiness, somehow independently defined. If we can see Aristotle, then, as a kind of egoist, we would be in a position to turn away from what provokes the lines of resistance I charted above: if we can see Aristotle that way, we would see Aristotle as facing head-on the question of the rationality of virtue, and as supplying what some might think is a more attractive—less rigoristic, less obscurantist—basis for ethical theory.

But, as I said just above, I want to respond to this egoist recoil; and, in so doing, I aim to defend, in an indirect way, the ethicized and strictly practical interpretation sketched in §1. That  

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1. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, §21. The context makes clear that she counts Aristotle among her targets; moreover, if the passage suggests that her targets cannot include the kind of Aristotle that our initial interpretation presents, one should note that she endorses its outlines in her influential essay “Thought and Action in Aristotle.”

2. Against the charges of obscurantism, McDowell and his followers have argued, in short, that the price of whatever obscurantism there might be is rather small and that aiming to avoid it sets philosophy up for an impossible or at least gratuitous task. Against the charge of rigorism, they have argued both that the appearance of rigorism is scoped by the idealization that is the virtuous person’s outlook, and hence softened; and that the sense in which rigorism may seem unpalatable depends on a questionable homogenization of the idea of choice-worthiness or a dispensable notion of general reasons for action. See Lisa van Alstyne, “Aristotle’s Alleged Obscurantism”; and McDowell’s essays both on Greek ethics and contemporary value-theory.

3. I mean, perhaps too loosely, to class, under the family of rational egoism, views of the following (surely different) types: that the rational appeal of the virtues, or their inculcation, is underwritten by the fact that they benefit their possessor; that an action counts as virtuous because its performance benefits its agent; that a virtuous action is rational just because its performance benefits its possessor; etc.

4. That the egoist reading must be mistaken has been defended by Whiting, “Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Actions for Themselves” and “Strong Dialectic, Neurathian Reflection, and the Ascent of Desire”; Stephen Gardiner, “Aristotle, Egoism, and the Virtuous Person’s Point of View”; and, of course, McDowell’s many essays on Greek ethics, in which Terence Irwin’s and John Cooper’s more-or-less egoist readings are an ever-present object of criticism. In short, the defenses concern...
response involves bringing to light Aristotle’s emphasis on two claims: that virtue and its proper exercise are, in an important and central respect, achievements of one’s own, and (relatedly) that an agent cannot, just by his own actions, constitute happiness in someone else. So, if Aristotle might appear to recommend virtue on the grounds of its relation to happiness, due to the central place that Aristotle’s affords to an agent’s own happiness, as the egoist interpretation urges, we may rather explain that centrality by appealing to the two claims I just glimpsed.

3. What would an egoist reading of Aristotle’s eudaimonism look like? I think it might be instructive to begin somewhat far afield, in order to bring out the ease with which an egoist view appears to fit Aristotle’s own.

In a well-known passage, Rawls brings out what he considers “the two main concepts of ethics”: the right and the good. One way of understanding these concepts is to deploy them in the way teleological theories do:

The structure of an ethical theory is, then, largely determined by how it defines and connects these two basic notions. Now it seems that the simplest way of relating them is taken by teleological theories: the good is defined independently from the right, and then the right is defined as that which maximizes the good.

Now the content of any teleological view, in the above sense, will of course depend on how the good is understood. Rawls goes on to suggest different ways in which the good might be defined; he imputes one explicitly to Aristotle, while another seems, in any case, Aristotelian. First, since Aristotle takes the human good to consist in “the realization of human excellence in the various forms of culture,” his theory is “perfectionist.” Second, insofar as one defines the human good as happiness, one’s theory is “eudaimonistic.” And this second gloss, at least, sounds plausibly Aristotelian.

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2 Rawls, 21–22.
3 Rawls, 22.
Rawls’s topic here is the general structure of teleological theories. So the context tempts one to think that, for Rawls, Aristotle’s view counts as teleological, whether in a perfectionist or eudaimonistic form. In either case, the temptation has it that Rawls takes Aristotle to ground a conception of right action on an independent definition of the human good. In one case, the good consists in happiness; in the other, it consists in cultural achievement. But these purportedly Aristotelian doctrines about the human good are supposed to fit into a teleological structure, in Rawls’s sense, where “the good is defined independently from the right.” The temptation is helped by the impression that Aristotle does define the human good independently from the right.\(^1\)

Strictly speaking, though, Rawls does not say on these pages (at least) that Aristotle’s ethical theory is teleological. Rather, he tells us that, if we define the good along Aristotelian lines, we have different ways of making out a teleological theory—given that the good is to be defined independently from the right. We need not read Rawls as taking Aristotle to affirm the italicized phrase above.

But I have undertaken this brief excursus through Rawls-on-Aristotle to entertain the following. Suppose that Aristotle does affirm that italicized phrase, and in such a way as to define happiness in terms of overall “rational desire” across persons.\(^2\) Then Aristotle would be, in Rawlsian terminology, a “utilitarian.” But now suppose that Aristotle defines happiness in terms of overall “rational desire” for the agent. That would make Aristotle a rational egoist.\(^3\)\(^4\)

Now we might already want to protest against the rational egoist’s interpretation. Rawls stresses that a theory counts as teleological, in his sense, only if “the theory enables one to judge the goodness of things without referring to what is right.”\(^5\) But we might agree with Gisela Striker when she says that “Aristotle’s version of eudaimonism is not a theory like utilitarianism in which we can use the conception of the good to find out what is right, simply because Aristotle’s conception of the

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1. See NE I.7, especially on the formal qualities that a correct conception of happiness is supposed to possess.
2. Rawls, 22.
3. I have in mind Terence Irwin’s view; that Aristotle was a rational egoist in this sense forms a common thread in his many works, and it is central to the narrative Irwin tells in his monumental The Development of Ethics (3 vols.).
4. Here I assume, for our suppositional versions of Aristotle, that the relevant principle of rightness would be a maximizing one, in light of the block quotation from Rawls.
5. Rawls, 22.
human good includes moral virtue. If Striker is correct about Aristotle, given that, for him, moral virtue includes right action (NE 1105a31–32), then Aristotle’s ethical theory is not what Rawls would call teleological, since it doesn’t define the good independently from the right. So Aristotle cannot assent to that italicized phrase given above, on this view.

But what does it mean to say that “the human good includes moral virtue”? At the very least, it means that an agent, in acting viciously, falls short of the human good, which Aristotle identifies, by common consent, with *eudaimonia* (NE I.4). So an agent fails to achieve *eudaimonia* if she acts without moral virtue, and one way of lacking moral virtue is to act wrongly. But this minimalist gloss is not enough to ground the claim that Aristotelian eudaimonism diverges from rational egoism in the desired way; for the latter can also say that wrong action falls short of the relevant conception of goodness. This is because, for the egoist, *that* is what wrongness consists in.

So the idea that the human good includes right action, if it is to distinguish Aristotle from the rational egoist must say something more. One move we might then make is this: the human good is at least partly constituted by acting virtuously.

How does this compare to the teleological rational egoist—in Rawlsian terms—from above? That (first) sort of egoist takes wrongness to consist in failure to be productive of goodness, but here our “constitutivist” version of Aristotle takes wrongness to consist, at least partially, in failure to constitutive of goodness. In this constitutivist form, Striker’s claim means that Aristotle runs afoul of one of Rawls’s requirements on teleological theories: it does not distinguish “our considered judgments as to which things are good (our judgments of value) as a separate class of judgments

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2. Of course, Aristotle does not believe that women, natural slaves, children, and many others can be bearers of *eudaimonia*. But, while these views are commitments of Aristotle, they are not commitments of those elements of the structure of his theory I want to discuss. That Aristotle restricts the class of such bearers in specious ways does not, I think, affect how we should interpret the relationship between *eudaimonia* and virtue. If anything, a clear grasp of that relationship should affect how we understand some of Aristotle’s embarrassing exclusions. But that is a topic I hope to explore in a later essay.
intuitively distinguishable by common sense. Such judgments cannot be separated, for Aristotle, from judgments about what is right.

Now this talk of the constituents of goodness may lead some to suggest an egoist interpretation different from that first sort just mentioned. This second sort has it that, while Aristotle indeed identifies happiness with virtuous action, as the conclusion of the so-called “function argument” urges (NE I.7), and so as our constituency claim holds, Aristotle still aims to certify a certain kind of life as the life of genuine virtue on the basis that a life of that kind “is likeliest to be satisfactory by independent standards.” On this view, then, as we might put it: virtue pays, and so the mark that some disposition or state is a genuinely virtuous one is that it pays.

The family of interpretative strategies I’ve been rehearsing in this section takes Aristotle to supply kinds of certification—in the first instance from above, a certification of virtuous action’s choice-worthiness; in the second, a certification of a potential virtue’s choice-worthiness. But, either way, the certification will have an egoist shape: they will appeal to an agent’s interests, either in doing particular actions or in granting that a certain conception of virtue is correct. The idea is that, in connecting happiness and virtue (or virtuous action), Aristotle is providing such an appeal.

To retrace our steps. I began with a sketch of what I’ve been calling Aristotle’s ethicized conception of happiness (§1). But that interpretation may motivate a recoil to an egoist position, in light of the charges of obscurantism and rigorism (§2). So far, then, what commends the egoist interpretation is negative: it avoids those (potential) pitfalls. In defending the ethicized conception, however, I will not try to defuse the force of what appears to motivate the egoist’s reading (but see page 4n2). So, at this point, it bears asking: what positively commends that reading?

The egoist interpretation can appear tempting once we see how Aristotle and Rawls diverge. Our initial response in this section was that, for Aristotle, the good is not defined independently from the right; this disqualifies Aristotle from being a teleologist in Rawls’s sense. But this suggests that, for Aristotle, one’s good cannot come apart from virtuous action. Now Rawls, in his own

1 Rawls, 22.
3 Perhaps merely suggests; see §4.
theory of justice, doesn’t take this route. Rather, Rawls is, I think, willing to accept that the good can be independently defined, such that the right and the good can come apart. Needless to say, this is because Rawls and Aristotle differ as to the proper way of defining the good. But the point here is that the appearance of egoism is not even possible for Rawls, since the good and the right can diverge.

Now, if something like Rawls’s route were available to Aristotle, what would be the point in saying that the human good includes moral virtue? We might think that what matters is that, for Rawls, determining the right is not just a function of the good. But this is something which, in light of our initial response in this section, Aristotle is also entitled to say. Presumably, then, the import of taking moral virtue (or virtuous action) to constitute goodness is to recommend virtue (or virtuous action) by appealing to one’s prospects for eudaimonia—in Williams’s words, “to show that each man has good reason to act morally, and that the good reason has to appeal to him in terms of something about himself.”

Of course, Aristotle may simply believe the constituency claim; its truth may be point enough. But this seems to neglect the central role that considerations about the human good and eudaimonia appear to have in Aristotle’s thought. The egoist interpretation, then, appears attractive exactly because it explains this centrality. And we should, in light of the picture Williams presents, expect this kind of central role, insofar as the rationality of virtue is a preoccupation of ancient ethical thought. The picture suggests a line of interpretation, and that line is supported by the unrealized possibility of leaving the constituency claim out of the picture.

The challenge, then, is to explain the centrality that the human good has in Aristotle’s thinking, without appealing to a form of rational egoism. That aim motivates what follows.

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2 For evidence that Aristotle considered something like the divergence we see in Rawls, see Irwin, “Aristotle’s Conception of Morality,” 127–138, where he finds evidence for such a position in the Rhetoric.

3 Williams, 40.
4. However, before making out an alternative explanation, I should rehearse, quite briefly, some of the considerations that may tell against egoist interpretations, even if only to set them aside. At the very least, they should give us some reason to doubt the attractions of the egoist alternative (regardless of the threats of obscurantism and rigorism, which, after all, might not be as threatening as they appear; see again page 4n2).

First, some maintain that, when Aristotle speaks of *eudaimonia*, he need not mean the agent’s happiness. If the bearer of *eudaimonia* need not be the agent, then the attribution of egoism cannot stick. True enough, when the virtuous person acts, he acts for the sake of *eudaimonia*; but it is left open by this reading whether the agent’s own happiness is involved. My question, though, is whether we should interpret the connections that Aristotle draws between an agent’s *eudaimonia* and his moral virtue, if he draws them, as evidence of egoism. In other words, I want to grant that the relevant sense of *eudaimonia* is the agent’s. And so I will not challenge the idea that the agent’s *eudaimonia* is relevant here.

Second, Aristotle’s commitment to the claim that a virtuous agent chooses virtuous actions “for themselves” or “for their own sakes” (NE 1105a31–32; also 1105b1; 1105a26; 1139b1–4; 1140b6–7) rides against the claim that the virtuous agent should choose actions as productive means to happiness, as the first sort of egoist from above urges. And, even if we have in view the second sort of egoist, who accepts the constituency claim on which the ethicized conception relies, the external certification that the virtuous agent grasps should make trouble for his fidelity to acts of virtue: if justice, as a general disposition, pays generally, but if a particular act of justice here-and-now measures poorly against the standard that governs our judgments about general disposition, how could the virtuous agent not become unmoored from acting virtuously here-and-now?

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1 In addition to the works noted below, in this section, also see the works by the writers mentioned on pages 1n1 and 4n4; and McDowell’s “Role” and “Some Issues,” both collected in MVR; and his “Deliberation and Moral Development” and “Eudaimonism and Moral Realism,” collected in his *The Engaged Intellect*. Especially helpful is McDowell’s “Reply to Irwin,” in the collection *McDowell and His Critics*.

2 For a reading that unties *eudaimonia* from the relevant agent’s good, and thereby eliminating the appearance of egoism, see Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*. Jennifer Whiting also appears attracted to such a view, in “Eudaimonia, External Results, and Choosing Actions for Themselves.”

3 See McDowell, MVR, 45; and Michael Thompson, *Life and Action*, part III.
Third, Aristotle frequently stresses that the organizing concept behind virtuous action is the concept of “the noble” (to kalon), not a general idea of non-ethical or pre-ethical choice-worthiness, e.g.:

Now virtuous actions are noble and done for the sake of the noble. Therefore the liberal man will give for the sake of the noble, and rightly. (NE 1120a23–24)

And the magnificent man will spend such sums for the sake of the noble; for this is common to the virtues

Nowhere does Aristotle suggest that nobility is to be grounded in or validated by a general conception of satisfactoriness, something that must, if it is to serve as grounding or validating, have enough non-ethical or pre-ethical content to play that role.

If one’s conception of human virtue is the right one (by Aristotle’s lights), that will show in one’s valuing the right actions as noble; and the value of nobility will be what organizes one’s conception of the eudaimonic dimension of practical worthwhileness. It is not that nobility as Aristotle understands it is certified as an authentic value on the basis that a life of noble actions can be seen to meet independent standards for being worth going in for; it is rather that someone who has learned to delight in noble actions has thereby come to see those actions as pre-eminently worth going in for, just because they are noble.

And Aristotle is infamously silent (or perhaps even evasive) about determinate principles of ethical conduct and about determinate conceptions of what a “flourishing” life looks like. Perhaps the so-called “function argument” (NE I.7) appears to play that role, but an appeal to that patch of

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1 See also 1115b11–13, among many other places. I’ve here amended the Revised Oxford Translation.

2 [As opposed to other dimensions, ones which need not figure in a distinctively ethical register of the question, “What should I do?” Perhaps there is no question of nobility, or of ethical interest, in whether one should put peanut butter or rather jelly on one’s toast.]

3 McDowell, “Some Issues,” 42. That the virtuous agent performs virtuous actions “just because they are noble” might work to gloss what it means for a virtuous agent to perform virtuous actions “for their own sakes” (di auta); see above.
Aristotle will seem to weaken the case, exactly because the argument itself appears to put into place merely “conceptual” or quasi-formal linkages, not substantive determinations.

Fourth, the egoist interpretation explains the central role that Aristotle gives to the human good in NE I by reformulating “the chief good” with which Aristotle begins as the “good for man,” with the latter read as what we can call a dative of advantage. The egoist reading is, after all, egoist exactly in its appeal to the agent’s interests or advantage. But there is enough ambiguity in the notion of “the human good” to decline the offer; for “the human good,” if reformulated as the good for man, can mean something like a dative of respect—the good with respect to man. One can have in mind such a form of goodness without then thinking that we must, after all, be thinking of human interests or advantage or well-being; it is not obvious, on this view, that the good for man must be read as picking out what makes man better-off.

5. So what explains Aristotle’s concern to tie eudaimonia to virtuous action, as the constituency claim suggests, if not the egoist’s interpretation? One thing that the centrality of eudaimonia does in Aristotle’s thought is to pick out a distinctive form of practical rationality. (Why one should be interested in this “distinctive” form will be explored below.)

At first glance, practical rationality—rationality about what one is (in a loose sense) to do—comes in at least two forms: we can think of instrumental or productive rationality, as with technical matters concerning what means are reliably (and perhaps otherwise) effective at producing a (separately) determinate product; or we can think of constitutive forms of behavior-directed thought. In the former case, I fix a cup of coffee to avoid a caffeine-withdrawal headache; in the latter, I might return a sword to its lender because that is what justice is (demands, is instantiated by, must be instantiated by). But, even within the constituent side of the partition, we can have judgments of this form: “I am playing this game just for the fun of it.”

1 Except perhaps for ruling out a life of mere sensory gratification as merely brutish, an exclusion that should leave even someone like Callicles on the field.

Insofar as any of these actions are rational, we have in view various forms that a practical “should” might take: if drinking coffee will prevent pain, then one should fix a cup; if returning that sword is just, then one should return it; if playing this game is fun, then one should play the game. Or, alternatively, we see these judgments as picking out the forms of our actions, the shape that our actions have: I am fixing this cup of coffee because I am preventing pain; I am returning this sword because I am acting justly; I am playing this game because I’m having fun. But are all of these “shoulds” and “actions” on, as it were, all fours?

Now, in a loose sense of “action,” fixing a cup of coffee, paying back a debt, and returning a sword might indeed all be voluntary and intentional doings. An appeal just to the instrumentalist-constitutive partition will not single out what might be (for reasons explored below) of special interest, say, intentional doings (some sword-returnings) done for the sake of constituting justice. For Aristotle, eudaimonia plays the needed role, in a way similar to that in which, as I’ve suggested, the noble works as an organizing concept. But to work as an organizing concept is not the same as working as a grounding or justifying concept.

One of the lessons of the so-called “function argument” of NE I.7 is to give scope to conceptions of eudaimonia, namely, to constrain such conceptions by appeals to human excellence in rational activity. Of course, as I’ve already suggested, the “formalism” of the function argument should not be expected to ground a determinate and substantive conception of the human good, as though the schematic claims there could embarrass a Callicles or a Thrasymachus. But this formalism is not otiose. For, while we might think that playing a game well is (in a loose way of speaking) a form of excellence or virtue, an excellence of that kind need not count as a human excellence. Whether it does, or whether we plausibly think it does, depends on the kind of game at issue, and the role it plays in one’s life and the life of one’s community. But, even then, if a certain form of game-playing were to count as a form or actualization of human virtue, one would not be likely to give one’s reasons for playing the game as “just for the fun of it.” So the formal constraints can have a substantive upshot, namely, on the reasons in the light of which we see—characterize—our

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1 Michael Thompson, *Life and Action*, part II.
own actions. The key point here is not that certain games or game-playings must be excluded; it is that certain ways of thinking about game-playing are excluded: if the exclusion grips one, then one will see a distinctive kind of reason whose form one’s reasons fail to fit.

But why cast that form of reason in terms of happiness?

The first thing to say, I think, is that the pride of place that the egoist interpretation aims to explain, the centrality of happiness, can be seen in a more accommodating—perhaps deflationary—light. Indeed, while Aristotle certainly counts as a eudaimonist thinker, we should note that he is often concerned to gloss happiness in terms that might more easily fit the distinctive kind of reason I’ve hinted at above; after all, NE begins with the idea of “the good and the chief good” I.1–2; only later is *eudaimonia* brought into the picture—and then, at I.4, where it is introduced, it is quickly glossed as “living well and faring well,” with *eudaimonia* raised again only to highlight its potentially vexing content.

Second, when Aristotle speaks, equivalently, of happiness, living well, the human good, and so on, he aims to pick out the sense in which human action—in the narrow sense that the ethicized interpretation urges (§1)—is to appear rational, a sense that is “without qualification,” just as the reference to universals like happiness, living well, and the human good should suggest. NE VI.6 begins:

Regarding practical wisdom we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it. Now it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect [*kata meros*], e.g., about what sorts of things conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general [*holos*][\(^1\)]

(1140a24ff.)

It is tempting to read the “good life in general” in the way that an egoist interpreter might, as saying that a virtuous action is chosen, or genuine, because it promotes or instantiates a life that is

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\(^1\) Here and below, I follow the Revised Oxford Translation, edited by Barnes, when giving block quotations from Aristotle; I’ve occasionally inserted transliterations of the Greek, from the Oxford Classical Text.
somehow seen as satisfactory overall. But we are not compelled to read that into Aristotle’s claim. Rather, in speaking of generality (in holos), as opposed to particularity (in meros), Aristotle may be making plain what was to be had by the function argument—that the excellence we mean is subject to the kind of human generality there discussed (see above).\[1\]

Above, I had reserved the question why it would be of independent interest to isolate the kind of ethicized eudaimonia that our starting interpretation favors—independent enough for the attractions of the egoist reading to fade. And Aristotle explicitly states why we should be interested in the kinds of (prohairetic) reasons that manifest one’s conception of happiness, living well, the human good, and so on:

Both the voluntary and the involuntary having been delimited, we must next discuss choice [prohairesesos]; for it is thought to be most closely bound up with excellence and to discriminate characters better than actions [praxeon] do. (NE 1111b5–6)

One point, then, of Aristotle’s discussion of eudaimonia is to pick out a special class of actions and a special class of reasons, namely, the actions that display one’s character in virtue of the conception of eudaimonia that is at work when one performs praxeis, in the restricted sense: prohairetic praxeis. Not all bits of behavior display our character; and so not all actions—in the sense of doings—will inform judgments of praise and blame, in their focal sense. That Aristotle is centrally is concerned with the kinds of actions that do merit these sorts of assessment allows for eudaimonia’s relationship to virtue to play a role different from grounding the rationality of virtue. It allows us to focus on the fact that “action that displays the ethical character of its agent does so by virtue of the purposiveness that is operative in it,” a purposiveness picked by a constricted—or ethically scoped—conception of happiness\[2\]. Moreover, if we keep happiness unconstricted, as the egoist interpretation favors, then it will become difficult to draw as straightforward a connection between one’s conception of

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1 See also NE 1142b16–35 and VI.2 (where the ethical dimensions of choice, deliberation, and action seem most explicit); if we re-read NE I in the light of these dimensions, prominently on display in NE VI, then we will have further flexibility in minimizing the attractions of an egoist reading of NE I, as I’ve suggested above. Also see Gavin Lawrence, “Reason, Intention, and Choice.”

happiness and the character-revealing action that is Aristotle’s focus; perhaps the connection can be made, by an egoist interpreter; but the quick drift of the above quotation from the start of NE III.2 suggests that Aristotle would think any such treatment as gratuitous.

6. So far, I’ve discussed two motivations for framing, as Aristotle does, his discussion of virtue and virtuous action by references to *eudaimonia*: that references to happiness prepare the ground for seeing, in practical rationality, a distinctive form of reason, one that is “unqualified” and not merely “particular” to some interest we may have; and that such a distinctive form of practical reason is of interest because it is the home for distinctly ethical attributions of judgments of character. Without motivations of this kind, it will seem attractive to fall back onto the egoist reading: if the relationship between virtue and *eudaimonia* is *not* supposed to recommend a life of virtue, then the grand architecture with which NE begins, and which structures all of Book I, will seem needless.

Here I wish to mount another way of explaining the centrality that Aristotle places on *one’s own* happiness, centered as it is in opposition to fortune.

In *Politics* VII, as a preface to his discussion of what is “best for the state and for individuals,” Aristotle glosses what it takes for man to be happy (*eudaimonias*):

> Let us acknowledge then that each one has just so much happiness [*eudaimonias*] as he has of excellence and wisdom, and of excellent and wise action. The gods are a witness to us of this truth, for they are happy and blessed, not by reason of any external good, but in themselves and by reason of their own nature [*phusin*]. And herein of necessity lies the difference between good fortune and happiness; for external goods come of themselves, and chance is the author of them, but no one is just or temperate by or through chance.

(1323b24–29)

Here Aristotle means to emphasize that happiness must be distinguished from good fortune, at least partially because happiness cannot be a gift of chance. But his emphasis also on virtuous and wise

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1 See page 11n2, above.
action suggests that happiness requires the exercise of our causal powers, especially—if the ethicized and strictly prohairetic account of §1 is right—those powers that manifest, in prohairetic action, our conception of the human good.

So *eudaimonia* cannot, as it were, fall into our laps; it cannot be gotten *for me*, without my own action; rather, it must be had, if it can be had at all, by my own achievements. (This should not prejudice the claim that virtuous action needs “equipment,” or that the cultivation of virtue needs others’ help.1)

And we can find many echoes of this in the *Ethics*. NE I is replete with Aristotle’s attempts at excluding those conceptions of happiness that stress the possession of goods, or dispositions, or capacities, rather than the practical deployment of goods, or the rational exercise of dispositions and capacities (see I.4–5; 7–10). To do otherwise would be to allow happiness to depend on others’ views about one’s reputation (as in the case of being honored); or to allow that one could be “living well and faring well” even while asleep, or while comatose, or while paralyzed with pain and agony (a thesis only a sophist would urge); or to allow that it is better merely to be strong than to use one’s strength in honorable projects. These passages are well-known.

We can find, though, a different home for the idea that happiness must be one’s own achievement, in his discussions of choice and deliberation. In NE III.2, Aristotle hunts down the *differentiae* concerning choice and other intentional terms. With respect to wish and choice:

But neither is it [i.e., choice] wish [*boulesis*], though it seems near to it; for choice cannot relate to impossibles, and if any one said he chose them he would be thought silly; but there may be a wish even for impossibles, e.g., for immortality. And wish may relate to things that could in no way be brought about by one’s own efforts, e.g., that a particular actor or athlete should win in a competition; but no one chooses such things, but only the things that he thinks could be brought about by his own efforts.

And, in NE III.3, about deliberation:

1 Also see McDowell, “Some Issues,” 32.
Do we deliberate about everything, and is everything a possible subject of deliberation, or is deliberation impossible about some things? […] But we do not deliberate even about all human affairs; for instance, no Spartan deliberates about the best constitution for the Scythians. For none of these things can be brought about by own efforts. We deliberate about things that are in our power and can be done. (NE 1112a18ff.)

Now, for our purposes, this is just the homely thought that deliberation and choice are scoped by our causal powers; we can deliberate and choose only that which we can bring about by own efforts.

But this admittedly homely thought, when combined with the idea, from above, that happiness, too, requires our own action, suggests a further explanation of why an agent’s own happiness is of central concern to his deliberation, choice, and action. If happiness consists in one’s virtuous activity, or if one’s conception of happiness is scoped by one’s conception of virtuous activity, and, if one’s deliberation, choice, and action are scoped by our causal powers, then happiness itself, or its conception, must be scoped by our causal powers. Our actions have value, if they have value, only if they are our own:

It is not possible to hand over, as it were, an instance of the ethical kalon, because the ethical kalon is an internal good constituted by the right kind of motivation and corresponding praxis. It can come into being only through an agent’s own decision-making and acting.¹

I cannot, all on my own, make you happy; rather, what I can do is to attain happiness myself—and that is just in virtue of the conceptual connections that Aristotle underscores between deliberation, choice, and action, on the one hand, and happiness, on the other. But there is not supposed to be a controversial ethical thesis about rationality here, such as what the egoist urges.

For instance, if the egoist were to ask, “Why undertake those actions required by (your conception of) virtue?”—expecting the answer, happy to the egoist, that such actions satisfy general or independent criteria of worthwhileness or satisfactoriness—Aristotle’s answer could well be that

¹ Jan Szaif, “Aristotle on the Benefits of Virtue,” in Reis (ed.), The Virtuous Life in Greek Ethics.
such actions constitute one’s happiness. But the sense in which that would be said is just that there is no other potential bearer of eudaimonia whose happiness (in the relevant sense) could be served: I should do what virtue requires, not because doing the virtuous thing somehow benefits me, but because there is no one else that can respond to its demands in the way that is required. An agent’s happiness matters, if it does, in the sense that there is no way for him, all on his own, to make others happy.

A thought along those lines might warrant the charge of egoism; but the charge would, I think, be severely misleading. For the egoist’s position gains its force by contrast either with a position according to which reasons for acting stem from considerations of others’ happiness or with a position according to which reasons for acting work as self-standing, getting what force they have from the substantive considerations they pick out. I have hinted, in §4, at how an ethicized interpretation can respond to the egoist’s reading by availing itself of something that resembles the latter contrast. I have here, in §6, aimed to make out how the former contrast is one that Aristotle would have no reason to accept.
Appendix

On the “gerundive thesis.” The egoist interpretation looks especially plausible if we read Aristotle as saying, at 1102a2–3, that ‘it is for the sake of this [i.e., eudaimonia] that we should do all that we do’—call this the gerundive thesis. But the Greek doesn’t contain anything like a gerundive. So we should rather read: “it is for the sake of this [i.e., eudaimonia] that we all do all that we do”—call this the indicative thesis.

Moreover, the beginning of Book I confirms the indicative-mood rendering: eudaimonia is the chief good, both by common consent (1095a17–20) and by a formal argument about finality and self-sufficiency (1097a25–b21)—and the chief good is the end of all our actions (1094a18–22).

In addition, the discussion at 1095a17–28 suggests the indicative, insofar as Aristotle admits that, while all agree that eudaimonia is the chief good, many parties disagree as to what eudaimonia consists in. The recognition of terminological agreement would be out of place, if all Aristotle had wanted to say was that we should pursue what really instantiates eudaimonia.

Two objections:

(i) ‘Eudaimonia is the end of all that we do’ seems false, if doings are what we mean. Scholarly charity requires that we avoid imputing this implausible view to Aristotle, if we can credit a more plausible interpretation.

(ii) If doings are what we mean, Aristotle seems to admit that what we do need not be undertaken for the sake of eudaimonia. His distinction between incontinence and self-indulgence relies on the fact that the incontinent man acts against his prohairesis [‘choice’], while the self-indulgent man acts in conformity with it (1146b22–24). Now, assuming, what is reasonable here, that the incontinent man’s prohairesis is conducted in light of his conception of eudaimonia, the incontinent man’s action is a prime example of doings that are not for the sake of eudaimonia. (That link will be made out below.)

Reply: Objections (i) and (ii) misfire, if ‘do’ is given a more restricted sense than we give to mere doings:

(i) ‘Do’ (from 1094a18–22; 1097a22–23; 1102a2–3) is given by prattein and its cognates.

(ii) Prattein indeed has, for Aristotle, a technical, restricted use: it is denied to animals, among others (1139a12–20; EE 1222b18).

(iii) But animals possess the capacity for the voluntary (1111b7–10).

∴ (iv) ‘Do’ cannot mean something like voluntary doings.

(v) ‘Do’ should be given the same scope as prohairesis (111b7–10).

(vi) The doings of the incontinent are not outcomes of prohairesis, but they are of bouleusis [‘deliberation’] (1142b18–20).
(vii) Prohairesis is a deliberative desire to do something for the sake of doing well [eupraxia] (1139a31–b5).

(viii) But doing well [eu prattein] is identified with eudaimonia (1095a19–20).

∴ (ix) Praxeis are undertaken, by definition, for the sake eudaimonia [i.e., the ‘indicative thesis’].

(x) Also, praxeis have doing well [eupraxia] as their end (1140b6–7).

∴ (xi) In light of 1095a19–20, praxeis have eudaimonia as their end.

(xii) But praxeis are distinct from makings, since praxeis are done for the sake of themselves (1094a3–5).

∴ (xiii) Praxeis are actions that (a) stem from a deliberative desire to instantiate eudaimonia; and (b) constitute doing well.

We should note that those who favor the egoistic interpretation might be able to accept this argument (see what I’ve called the second sort of egoist, above); the point here is that, if the egoistic interpretation is plausible, it should appeal to more than, what is irrelevant, the ‘gerundive thesis.’

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1 The above exegesis first arises, in a slightly different form, in G.E.M. Anscombe, “Thought and Action in Aristotle”; and it is rehearsed in McDowell’s “Role.” Lawrence’s recent works all contain additional arguments for the above sketch.