大阪公立大学 Osaka Metropolitan University 学術情報リポジトリ

Does Happiness Die With Us? : An Aristotelian Examination of the Fortunes of the Deceased

メタデータ	言語: English
	出版者:
	公開日: 2014-05-19
	キーワード (Ja):
	キーワード (En):
	作成者: DuBois, Edward C.
	メールアドレス:
	所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.24729/00006982

Journal of Philosophy of Life Vol.4, No.1 (January 2014):28-37

[Essay]

Does Happiness Die With Us?
An Aristotelian Examination of the Fortunes of the Deceased

Edward C. DuBois*

Abstract

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tackles a very interesting issue when he inquires about the words of the wise man Solon. Solon suggests that we count no man happy until he is dead, that we must 'look to the end' before we judge. In this paper, I examine how Aristotle interprets Solon in two different ways, and how he responds to these interpretations. I contend that they result in something of a 'Solonian Circle' that is hard to escape. I then examine the work of Paul Gooch and Kurt Pritzl, who discuss how Aristotle breaks out of the Solonian Circle and how he ultimately harmonizes these interpretations with his own account of happiness. Finally, I argue that the issue of happiness after death is largely irrelevant to the project of virtue ethics and human flourishing, though how we think about the happiness or unhappiness of the dead plays a major role in our moral lives and thinking.

1. Introduction

If we can believe the ancient reports, the Greek sage Solon remarked that we ought to count nobody happy until he has died. Solon does not suggest that death itself is a happy occasion, or somehow brings happiness to the deceased. Instead, what Solon means is that the adjective 'happy' is not something to be bestowed while one still draws breath; too many unpredictable and unfavorable circumstances may intervene to diminish our happiness while we are alive. Rather, it is only after the possibility of such circumstances is precluded that we might be called happy – once we are, in Aristotle's words, "beyond the reach of evils and misfortunes."[1] Further, the consensus is – at least in Aristotle's day – that the issue goes deeper than the grave. The received opinion, discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* I.10-11, is that the happiness of the deceased may be affected by the behavior of their descendants. A person's reputation may be enhanced by successful and honorable children, while profligates and

* Graduate Student, Part-Time Lecturer, Dept. of Philosophy, University at Albany (SUNY), 1400 Washington Ave, HU 257, Albany NY 12203 USA.

[1] Aristotle (1889), p. 23.

dishonorable progeny may easily tarnish the family name. As Kurt Pritzl points out, acquiring honor and avoiding dishonor in Greek society was a social business: "of necessity one must rely on one's family and friends to do so."[2] This idea about honor and happiness is seen to apply equally well to the living and the dead, since the Greek tradition holds that the dead are "inactive but conscious, and conscious especially of the fortunes of their descendants."[3]

Yet, Aristotle treats this account with circumspection because his own account of virtue identifies happiness with an active life of noble and virtuous deeds (emphasis on the word *life*). This would preclude the dead, necessarily, from taking part in the kind of happiness that Aristotle sketches in the *Ethics*. This apparent tension has been examined by many, though an accurate explanation of how Aristotle resolves the tension (and what his own view really is) has been lacking in the literature. As such, this conflict sets up the background to this paper.

2. The Aim of this Paper

In this work, I examine the apparent discord between the common account of happiness after death and Aristotle's own conception of happiness as activity. Part of this analysis includes original research into the origins of this common account itself. Then, I argue that authors Paul Gooch and Kurt Pritzl are able to provide helpful insight into what Aristotle means to say about happiness after death. In light of this explication, I discuss why exactly Aristotle's position is important to our moral thinking, and that there is a deeper meaning to be gleaned from his work in the *Ethics* I.10-11.

3. The 'Common View' of Death and Happiness?

In ancient Greek tradition, Hermes is the 'messenger of the gods.' Not only does Hermes deliver messages between the Olympian gods themselves, but he also ferries warnings, demands, and tidings between the various realms of men and gods. Moreover, one of his titles in Greek is *psychopompos*, literally translating to 'leader of souls'. It is Hermes' task, then, to guide the newly deceased to the appropriate venue of the afterlife. The Greeks – most Greeks,

[2] Pritzl (1983), p. 107.
[3] Pritzl (1983), p. 107.

anyway – believed that the dead person's soul remained as the intellectual consciousness of the deceased individual. As such, it was able to talk and converse and understand as the living do, and it was also attuned to the events going on in the realm of the living. A particularly striking characterization of the nature of the deceased can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*, Book XI (Odysseus' trip to the underworld).

According to Homer, the abode of the dead is a place without happiness. Tiresias the prophet tells Odysseus that the halls of Hades are "domains unknown to joy" and his mother claims that the dead exist just as "gloomy shades" of their living selves.[4] This point is reinforced when Odysseus' mother shrinks back from his gesture of love: 'O mother, dost thou shun my fond embrace? Locked in each other's loving arms we might in Hades even find a joy in woe!'[5] When Odysseus speaks to the shade of Achilles, the great Greek war-chief, he exclaims that he would rather be the "veriest thrall" to a "needy, landless master" than to be "lord of all the skill-less dead" in Hades.[6] What these excerpts show is that the greatest foundational poet of the Greeks, Homer himself, takes the underworld to be a place of sadness and utterly devoid of things which resemble earthly happiness.

This presents a complication when we consider the 'common account' of happiness after death as offered up by Aristotle. Pritzl points out that by Greek tradition the dead are "inactive but conscious, and conscious especially of the fortunes of their descendants."[7] It is plausible that, at least for Odysseus, everyone whom he encounters in the land of the dead has a sad story to tell. They are inactive ('skill-less') but aware of how things are developing above the ground; the ghostly interlocutors of *Odyssey* XI tell the hero of their joyless existence and the rather unhappy circumstances surrounding their death and the plights of their descendants. Perhaps this simply emphasizes the relationship between Greek *hybris* (pride) and the eventual downfall that will come to those who are criminally overproud. Yet, it is odd then that the underworld is such a gloomy place; as Robert Garland claims, "[g]ood and evil alike lead an equally cheerless existence" in the house of Hades.[8]

Yet, to be sure, there are extant textual examples of a belief in a

---

[4] Homer (1879), pp. 303, 307 respectively.
[5] Homer (1879), p. 310.
[6] Homer (1879), p. 326.
[7] Pritzl (1983), p. 107.
[8] Garland (2001), p. 60.

judgment-based system in the afterlife which at least makes room for a soul to be happy in some respect or other. For instance, Hesiod's *Works and Days* sets out the idea of the "Isles of the Blest" for certain mythical warriors, and mystery cults (the Eleusinian and Orphic, e.g.) seem to hold that practitioners will be 'prosperous' after they die for having been initiated into esoteric knowledge.[9] These exist not as rewards for conduct, but for other qualities and actions. However, among the philosophically inclined, the belief of the soul's potential reincarnation may provide a basis for a system of ethical judgment in the afterlife which bears on the soul's ensuing prosperity and the potential for happiness; Garland discusses the reincarnation 'merit ladder' developed by Empedocles as well as other examples (including some from the poet Pindar) of merit-based judgment in the afterlife, though the most famous that comes to mind is the system developed in Platonic philosophy such as the dialogues *Meno* and *Phaedo* as well as the *Republic*.[10]

What is clear, then, is that what emerges as the 'common' account of the afterlife is anything but common or homogeneous, especially by the time of Aristotle. Depending on who you ask, you might get at least two – and possibly more – conflicting accounts. This makes sense from a social and ethnological perspective, as the Greek belief system was an alloy of native Hellenic myths combined with the beliefs of the cultures with whom the Greek city-states fought and traded. This, and the popularity of mystery cults like those mentioned above. While almost all Greek cities agreed on the supremacy of the Olympic gods and goddesses, and major themes and stories involving these deities, an equally congealed understanding of death, dying, and the afterlife did not seem to arise until much, much later in the culture's history. So – where does this acknowledgment leave us in the broader context of Aristotle's discussion of happiness and death in the *Ethics* I.10-11?

In actuality, it seems that Aristotle manages to avoid pinpointing what account he is dealing with. He does not speak at length of a certain tradition or eschatological commitment, but instead treats with the prevailing (general) opinion that the dead have some notion of what is going on with their friends and families, and that they have at least a minimal capacity for happiness and sorrow in their current state. Perhaps this is something he calls the common opinion because it is the core assumption of the majority of edified religious

[9] Garland (2001), p. 61.
[10] Cf. Garland (2001), p. 63.

views at the time (suggested by the prevalence of the mystery cults during Plato's and even Aristotle's lifetime). Or, perhaps this assumption about the dead is common because it is what most individuals tend to believe about the afterlife, in conscious or unconscious defiance of the 'gloomy' precedent of Homer. Regardless of this question, though, we see Aristotle adopt a starting point for his argument in the *Ethics* I.10-11 which at least has some history in Greek religious and mythological thought, and thus may defensibly be seen as the common view of death and happiness.

4. Bypassing the Solonian Circle

We have established Aristotle's starting point about death and happiness. Now, we must use that view to interpret what Solon the Wise means when he tells us to 'look to the end' in order to determine someone's happiness. Following Pritzl as well as Gooch, Aristotle identifies two ways to interpret the idea of looking to a person's end to evaluate happiness.[11] These are as follows:

(i) Solon could mean that a person, being dead, is therefore happy. Gooch calls this the 'literal' interpretation of Solon's famous dictum, and it would seem to make death the necessary and sufficient condition for happiness. Yet, there are problems with this. First, Gooch as well as Pritzl note Aristotle's objection based on his own understanding of happiness as requiring activity of some kind. Aristotle's own account suggests that happiness is to be found in a life of virtuous action (among the political living, whom we can help and befriend).[12] Aristotle dismisses the literal reading by saying that it seems "absurd" to those who (like him) "assert happiness to be a kind of energy [activity]." Since activity (and presumably whatever consciousness a person has) is terminated at the point of death, this interpretation cannot be correct.[13]

(ii) The remaining interpretation of Solon is that we cannot reasonably claim a person to be happy or unhappy *until* he is dead, since only then is he beyond the effects of life's ups and downs [good and evil]. His state of happiness, whatever it is, becomes stable after he passes.[14] Yet, even this interpretation has its problems. Aristotle acknowledges that if it is true that good and evil can

[11] cf. Pritzl (1983), p. 104; Gooch (1983), p. 114.
[12] cf. Pritzl (1983), pp. 104-105; Gooch (1983), p. 114.
[13] Aristotle (1889), p. 23. What Browne has translated as 'energy' here is more properly translated as 'activity'. The term in question is *energeia*, with the root *ergon* (work, toil, activity, deed).
[14] cf. Aristotle (1889), p. 23; Gooch (1983), p. 114.

happen to the living without their knowledge, then there is nothing that logically denies the same possibility to the dead: "honours and dishonours, and the good and evil fortunes of children and descendants generally" may still enhance or detract from a dead man's reputation. Yet, there is difficulty in imagining that fortune can really affect a dead person's *happiness*. In (i) above, Aristotle relies on the idea that death is the end of the robust consciousness that we enjoy during life. He must, if he is to reject the literal reading of Solon to uphold his own account. Yet, this same commitment implies that the dead are not conscious, or at least not in the same way as the living; therefore, they cannot consciously enjoy happiness in the manner that we do above the earth. So, they are not happy nor affected by external goods, or else they may be – but in a way that we may not be able to accurately describe or characterize.

Kurt Pritzl suggests, further, that insofar as honors depend on other people, they cannot be the basis for happiness (nor dishonors the basis for unhappiness). Aristotle claims that these, and the honorable or dishonorable actions of friends and family, cannot create or destroy one's happiness but may only 'temper' or 'condition' the happiness that a person creates for him- or herself.[15] Pritzl summarizes the state of affairs thusly:

> To acknowledge honor, dishonor, and the fortunes of friends as goods and evils, that is, as factors determining the happiness of the individual, and then to insist that they apply to the dead and living alike, is directly to challenge Aristotle's account of happiness, which is based on the individual's own activity.[16]

Aristotle sees another difficulty here: if, for the sake of argument, the happiness of the dead depended on the living, then the dead would be subjected to the same whims of fortune that so notably plague the living. That is, death would be no escape at all from the threat of unhappiness. Aristotle sees this as an 'absurd' suggestion, and hints that if we accepted this then we would fail to establish any security for the label of 'happy' – the happy man, living or dead, would be "a kind of chameleon" and his evaluation "placed upon an insecure foundation." Yet, it would be equally suspicious if we were to suggest that the deeds of others *in no way* affect the dead, even if their awareness is severely

[15] Cf. Pritzl (1983), pp. 106-107.
[16] Pritzl (1983), p. 107.

diminished from what it could be on earth.[17] All of this feels like we have gone around chasing our tails; as Gooch states, "Aristotle has [now] come full circle in his consideration of alternative interpretations of Solon's saying."[18] He has exhausted his options, and either must bite the bullet on one interpretation, or else suggest a resolution.

In fact, Aristotle does see a way out of what I refer to as the Solonian Circle. He finds a way to reconcile his own account of happiness with commonly received ideas about the afterlife in order to produce a harmony between the two. Aristotle argues that virtue (virtuous activity of the soul) is what produces happiness in a living being: it is self-sufficient, and in Pritzl's words, "decisive for establishing the happiness of the individual." Fortune (good and bad) cannot replace or overturn virtuous happiness, but rather it may enhance one's happiness or else test one's virtue and forbearance.[19] Aristotle applies this claim to the dead as well: they may be happy or unhappy in Hades' house, and the effects of the living may impact them there, however slightly. It should be noted that Aristotle evinces skepticism that there is an afterlife, let alone one where the dead have any degree of consciousness, but he leaves the possibility open because he wishes to avoid being 'too unfriendly' to others and it would contradict accepted sentiments (which he takes to be at least partially correct until undeniably proven wrong).[20] Pritzl argues that these should not be conflated into one large reason; rather, Aristotle wishes to emphasize the role Greek friendship plays in supporting social life (it cannot be severed completely by death) separately from a desire to not offend the public on such a sensitive topic.[21]

In the end, what is most important is how one understands Aristotle's motivations in his treatment of the topic in the *Ethics* I.10-11. The assessment by Kurt Pritzl stands as testimony to a philosopher whose overarching focus was the philosophy of human life. Pritzl remarks that Aristotle simultaneously wants to root happiness in the stability of human virtue, but he needs to avoid the strict Platonism which denies any importance to friends and family when it comes to living a good and happy life. Aristotle recognizes that external goods *do* bear on our happiness – definitely in life, and maybe even in death – but that a life of

[17] Aristotle (1889), p. 24.
[18] Gooch (1983), p. 114.
[19] Pritzl (1983), p. 108.
[20] Pritzl (1983), pp. 108-109.
[21] Pritzl (1983), p. 109.

noble action is decisive in determining whether or not a life might be a happy one.[22]

Now, though, the focus shifts from what Aristotle says to how we ought to consider it as contemporary philosophers who are also concerned with the philosophy of life. In the remainder of this paper, I seek answers to the following questions: Is Aristotle right as-is, or must his account be amended? What overall lessons about life, death, and happiness can we take away from the analysis of the *Ethics* I.10-11?

5. Conclusion: Does Happiness Die With Us?

I shall argue that it does. There are three possible outcomes, and each of them leads to the same conclusion (that happiness as we understand it is rendered moot). First, if we lose all awareness after death, then we cannot perceive any happiness that we had right up to the moment of death. Second, if our awareness diminishes or changes, then the experience of pleasure and pain must also be changed, so the analogue falls apart. We would not be talking about the same kind of happiness anymore. And, lastly, if we die but keep our awareness 'as it is', then we lose tangible and meaningful contact with friends, family, and others. We can no longer act virtuously – the decisive factor in a life's happiness – or interact as we once did in the mortal realm. If this is precluded, it seems that some measure of virtue's happiness disappears as well.

Remember that virtue for Aristotelians is rooted in facts about human life, not human afterlife – when one dies, there is presumably no more need for the kinds of behaviors that make life upon the Earth more pleasant and useful. Further, the kind of happiness that Aristotle builds his account of virtue around ceases to be important. In the absence of a conclusive picture of the afterlife, we have no reason to require happiness-for-man be equivalent to happiness-for-corpse. Furthermore, consider what Aristotle is really saying when he proposes his conciliatory solution to escape the Solonian Circle. I agree with Paul Gooch when he remarks that Aristotle's aim in this section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is only to show that the common opinions of the afterlife are 'irrelevant' when it comes to his account of happiness. You can believe them or not, but the importance of virtuous activity for happiness in this life is not

[22] cf. Pritzl (1983), pp. 109-110.

diminished in either case.[23] This is a crucial realization for those who subscribe to an Aristotelian ethical framework – the focus is flourishing in this life, and helping others to flourish when you know that you can appreciate it. However, this need not be sad news. By turning our cares away from the afterlife, we can focus on what makes a good life here and now. Such a realization prompts us to see reputation, honors, and external goods as ornaments to a good and happy life (as Aristotle suggests) but not themselves constitutive of either happiness or goodness.

It is only natural to think of the dead and whether or not they would approve of the way we live our lives, and how we treat their memory. In fact, a genuine concern with what a dead friend or relative would think seems to be indicative of the right kind of attitude towards conduct in general. A person who wonders what Uncle Alexander would think of his life, and uses this is a metric to assess his own values and life trajectory, seems to show a praiseworthy concern for how he is acting in the world (presuming Uncle Alexander was a decent person and good judge of character!) When we say that Uncle Alexander would be proud, or that Aunt Hippolyta is rolling over in her grave, we do not seem to be speculating on the possibility that they are *really* happy or sad. Rather, we appeal to the judgment of the deceased because, for all intents and purposes, we measure our own successes and failures, happiness and disappointment, against what our loved ones would want for us and what kind of people they were.

When I reproach you for lying by claiming that 'Uncle Alexander would be very disappointed in you', I am only conveying that (i) Uncle Alexander was an honest person, (ii) honest people do not tell falsehoods, and (iii) you should emulate how he lived his life because it was a morally good one. In that sense, the happiness or sorrow of the dead is used figuratively as a component in moral education and correction. What is important about the analysis of Aristotle is not whether or not the deceased are 'happy' or 'sad', but the implicit lesson about why we appeal to such an idea in the first place and why it seems to matter for us. Given these thoughts, it is reasonable to claim that Aristotle's main line (that the common views are irrelevant, and virtue in this life is most important) still carries tremendous weight in contemporary ethics and the philosophy of life. I doubt very strongly that the dead can be happy or sad, at least in the way that we

[23] Gooch (1983), pp. 115-116. It is not my project here to dwell on this particular interpretation of Aristotle's aims – and there are other competing interpretations. Rather, I only try to bring out the importance of Aristotle's apparent emphasis on happiness in this life through noble deeds.

experience while we are alive; but, I do not doubt that (e.g.) my thought of 'What would my grandparents think of me?' is one of the most morally potent that I could ever have.[24]

References

Aristotle (1889). *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*. R.W. Browne (trans.), George Bell & Sons.

Garland, Robert (2001). *The Greek Way of Death*. Cornell University Press.

Gooch, Paul W. (1983). "Aristotle and the Happy Dead." *Classical Philology*, 78(2): 112-116.

Homer (1879). *The Odyssey*. G.A. Schomberg (trans.), John Murray.

Pritzl, Kurt (1983). "Arisotle and Happiness After Death: Nicomachean Ethics 1.10-11." *Classical Philology*, 78(2): 101-111.

[24] An in-depth analysis of why Aristotelians might consistently appeal to thoughts of obligations to the deceased would make for a much-needed study in the field of contemporary virtue ethics. However, it is not my goal here to offer up such an account. Instead, I only want to point out a driving force behind at least some of our moral thinking.