

## ARISTOTLE AND THE HAPPY DEAD

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ALTHOUGH *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 10–11 is not part of the textual core of Aristotle's ethics, it nevertheless ought not to be disregarded: these two chapters show Aristotle's attempt to relate his account of happiness to a popular Greek aphorism that forbids the attribution of happiness to anyone alive. Thus, as Kurt Pritzl argues in the preceding article, the passage is of interest for an understanding of Aristotle's methodology, an interest which has been obscured by much of the traditional commentary. While Pritzl has provided a helpful setting of the passage in its social context and a useful commentary on some points of interpretation, there inevitably remains more to be said. This reflection upon his article first reinforces his reading of one passage, but in the second part qualifies his general assessment of these chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

### I

A major point of Pritzl's paper is the interpretation of 1100a18–21 as allowing for the consciousness of the dead, contrary to the accepted reading of the passage. His argument in summary is this. Solon's dictum "look to the end" can be understood in two ways, according to Aristotle. The first is literal and implies the conscious happiness (or misery) of those who have died. The second "more sophisticated" understanding is what we can call the "post mortem evaluation" thesis: what Solon means is not that people are aware of anything after death, but rather that we can sum up their lives as happy (or otherwise) only after their lives have ended (to add an illustration: we cannot pronounce a plot good until we know its ending). Aristotle's dispute with the post mortem evaluation thesis is that, according to popular belief, good and evil can befall the dead just as the living without their awareness. Traditionally, commentators have seized on the words "without awareness" (1100a19–20 *μη αισθανομένω*), arguing that Aristotle here continues to deny the literal interpretation of the conscious happiness of the dead. Good and evil befall not the dead themselves but their reputations. Against this Pritzl reasons that the goods and evils are things outside the individual's control (honors bestowed by reputation, the misfortunes of one's associates) but not outside his ultimate consciousness. Although the living are not always immediately aware of their honor or fortune, their happiness depends on their learning of these

goods and evils. Likewise the passage means that the dead, though not immediately aware of goods and evils, do come to learn of them (perhaps indirectly and weakly) and are affected by what happens after death to their survivors.

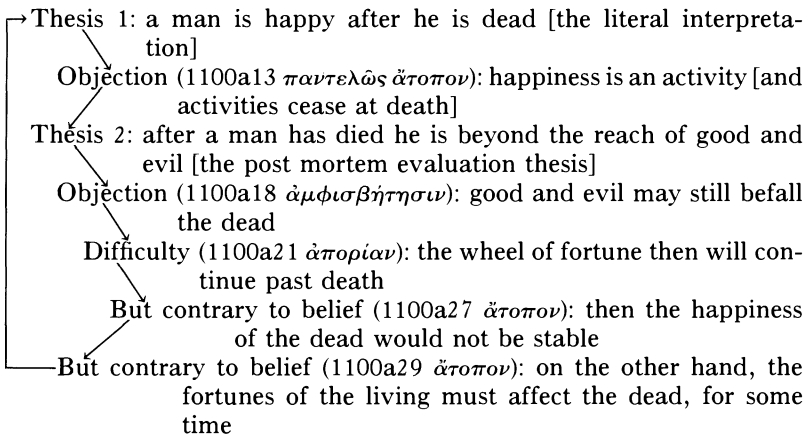
Pritzl's interpretation of these lines may be taken as a defensible reading of the text. In the case of the living who are not at present conscious of honors or misfortunes, *μὴ αἰσθανομένων* does not have to mean "without their ever being aware"; no more is it strictly required to mean this in the case of the dead. Nevertheless, the reader may well be strongly tempted to believe that the words do entail that the dead are never aware, so Pritzl's interpretation requires more defense than he offers. In his aid it can be suggested that it would be wrong to succumb to the traditional interpretation because of the place of these lines in the logic of the argument. To demonstrate this we need to look more closely at the structure of the first part of chapter 10 (1100a11–a30).

On the customary reading, it works like this. Aristotle has proposed the post mortem evaluation interpretation of "look to the end." The commentators believe that this is his own view, so they must make what follows compatible with it. What follows is an objection (1100a18 *ἀμφισβήτησιν*) to the interpretation and a difficulty (1100a21 *ἀπορίαν*) with the objection.<sup>1</sup> The objection is the passage we have just discussed (good and evil come to the dead without their immediate awareness); the difficulty is the problem of the wheel of fortune's rolling past death into the afterlife—the happiness and misery of the dead would continue to rotate with the good and evil fortunes of their survivors, and there would be no "end" to which it would be possible to look. To make the objection and its difficulty compatible with an Aristotelian post mortem evaluation thesis, the commentators must read them as describing not the happiness of the dead but our estimation of their lives. The whole argument then becomes this. When we call X happy after his death we mean [thesis] he had a good life. But [objection] that life continues in his family and friends, and their lives can be good or bad. Moreover [difficulty], as the goodness and badness of the extended "life" of X rolls on, X's life will continue to alternate between good and bad.

One can appreciate the attractiveness of this interpretation, for it brings a certain consistency into the text. It does this at some expense, however. It treats the objection and its difficulty as of a piece, as though the only problem Aristotle could see in the post mortem evaluation thesis was the lack of a terminus for the evaluation. But that strains the text and the argument. There is a natural parallelism in the opening sections of chapter 10. The first, literal interpretation is checked by the view that the dead cannot themselves be happy since all activities (and presumably consciousness itself) cease at death. The second, sophisticated interpretation

1. Pritzl calls this difficulty with the objection a "digression" in the argument (see p. 104 in the preceding article), but in my view it is an essential unfolding of the problems in the rival interpretations of Solon.

is checked by the objection that there is good and evil for the dead themselves (not just their reputations). The following difficulty arises out of this objection only if the conscious happiness of the dead is assumed; and it must be noted that there are two points within this difficulty. On the one hand, the assumption leads to the strange conclusion (1100a27 ἄτοπον) that the happiness of the dead is not stable; on the other hand, it would be strange (1100a29 ἄτοπον) if the dead (not only their reputations) were not affected at all by the fortunes of their survivors. This would scarcely be strange if the dead are not conscious. The series of interpretations, objections, difficulties, and problems can be set out as follows to make plain their structure:



From this it seems then that Pritzl's reading can be defended. The objection Aristotle raises to the post mortem evaluation interpretation of Solon's dictum rests on the common belief that the dead are in some way conscious, though not immediately aware of goods and evils, and that they are therefore capable of happiness. This belief was denied by the objection to the first literal interpretation. The difficulty raised by the wheel of fortune then reintroduces the literal interpretation, and the section closes with the claim that it would be strange to solve that difficulty by denying any effect upon the dead. Aristotle has come full circle in his consideration of alternative interpretations of Solon's saying.

## II

We come now to a general assessment of these chapters. It should be apparent that Aristotle's enterprise in the passage just analyzed is the exploration of the compatibility of beliefs and interpretations. Accordingly, it would be hasty to extract from this passage by itself any clue to Aristotle's own convictions about the happy dead. However, the rest of chapter 10 will not help us decide Aristotle's beliefs on the subject, for it

is designed not to throw light on that issue, but instead to show that in spite of either interpretation of Solon's dictum his own definition of happiness can stand. The problem of the wheel of fortune is for the most part irrelevant, since happiness does not depend upon external fortune. Insofar as happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, the good man will achieve happiness by making the most of what fortune hands him; and if this is the general pattern of his life, we will call him happy at the time when he is happy. The literal interpretation of "look to the end" wrongly suggests difficulties with fortune's wheel in an afterlife: the truly virtuous can rightly be called happy in spite of most fortunes, whenever they occur. The sophisticated interpretation is inadequate because it too is predicated on the possibilities that fortune may hold right up to one's death: we will call "blessed" the man who is not only virtuous but fortunate in a completed life, but that does not mean it is impossible to predicate happiness of good people before that time.

It is in chapter 11 that Aristotle returns to the literal belief that the dead may be conscious and affected by the fortunes of survivors, thinking perhaps that this common opinion deserves a little more comment. Pritzl argues that Aristotle here allows the common belief to stand, though his skepticism does not permit him to endorse it. But this conclusion, though temperate, is too strong. The chapter is best read as a commentary on the observation in chapter 10 noted earlier, that it would be strange (according to accepted opinion) if the dead were not affected by what happens to their associates still living. In this life we are indeed affected by others, says Aristotle, but in different degrees. And death makes a great difference. Suppose we grant the opinion that the dead are conscious: their awareness of our fortunes will be weak and insignificant. The image Aristotle uses is instructive. It makes a difference to the spectator whether a horror is acted out on stage or presupposed in the plot before the drama begins. There is an even greater difference for the dead: our horrors will be known to them more remotely than inferred events in dramatic creations. The bonds of family and friendship will not stretch into the afterlife as anything more than dimly perceived shadows.<sup>2</sup> The point of chapter 11 is therefore to qualify the importance of the common belief in the afterlife by showing that it does not affect Aristotle's account of happiness.

To conclude then: in these chapters Aristotle "harmonizes" his view of happiness with two interpretations of Solon's dictum, not simply the received opinion about the happiness of the dead; further, his "harmony" is not so much a passive acceptance of the happy dead as a demonstration that such beliefs are irrelevant. That is all he cares to do in this passage.

2. For this reason Pritzl's interpretation of *λίαν ἀφίλον* (pp. 109–11 of his article) is problematic. He wishes to find in Aristotle's works a desire to respect the importance of friendship in the Greek social order, and in that context to support the influence of the living upon the dead. However, even if *λίαν ἀφίλον* could be made to bear the weight of "too much against friendship itself," Aristotle's own conclusion that happiness could never be affected by the fortunes of living descendants is severely damaging to the institution of friendship.

Indeed, given what Aristotle says elsewhere about immortality,<sup>3</sup> it is hard to believe that he cared to do more than this at all.

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3. Whatever Aristotle believed about immortality, it was not the received opinion about life after death. That opinion requires the dead to be individual persons with knowledge and memory of events in the life which they have left, events which continue to influence their own emotional and cognitive states and their social relations. We know, however, that Aristotle rejected the notion that the individual person will survive the decay of death. His general view of soul does not allow it to be a separate substance; and he argues that although mind (*voûs*) seems imperishable, such activities as discursive thinking, loving, hating, and remembering belong to the whole person (not just *voûs*) and fail when the individual perishes (*De an.* 408b19–30). The same seems true for all the affections of the soul (403a16). If mind itself is more divine, only active mind is separable, immortal, and everlasting—but again this excludes memory, because active mind cannot be acted upon (430a10–25; cf. *Metaph.* 1070a26, where Aristotle suggests that it is impossible for the whole soul to endure: only [active] mind can remain). So from Aristotle's general psychology and metaphysics it can be concluded that he would not accept the common opinion about happiness in an afterlife.

It is another question whether any sense at all can be made of immortality and happiness in Aristotle's philosophy. At *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177a12 ff. he suggests that perfect happiness will be found in the activity of divine mind (*voûs*), but the implications of this are unclear: as Aquinas pointed out, one ought not to look for metaphysical doctrine in a practical treatise (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, lec. 17, n. 212). For a discussion of some of the problems in constructing a systematic account, see H. H. Joachim, *The "Nicomachean Ethics,"* ed. D. A. Rees (Oxford, 1951), ad 1176a30–1179a32.

However the broader issue is settled it will not help Pritzl's case. He argues that Aristotle's failure in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1. 10–11 to reject outright the popular opinion about life after death is evidence of Aristotle's respect for and passive acceptance of the view; further, this acceptance is an expression of Aristotle's methodological desire to harmonize his account with received opinions. Against this it can be said that, since Aristotle's general position on immortality cannot be reconciled with popular opinion, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he needs only to show that popular opinion about life after death is irrelevant to his account of happiness.