

HAPPINESS IS VIRTUOUS ACTIVITY WITH CROSSED FINGERS? THE AUGUSTINIAN ATTACK ON ARISTOTLE'S "CITY OF MAN" ETHICS

Scott M. Sullivan
Center for Thomistic Studies

The question of human happiness and what constitutes the good life was a question on the minds of many pagan philosophers. Aristotle lays out the foundation for what he thinks a good life consists of in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, book I. Aristotle judges that happiness or *eudaimonia* is attainable in this life through virtuous activity, especially through the function of man's highest faculty, his reason. However, Augustine provides a broad critique of pagan ethics in *The City of God* book XIX, and his critical net is wide enough to ensnare Aristotle's project. Augustine sees the irony and ultimate failure entailed by pagan systems such as Aristotle's. This essay examines the issue between them. The point I intend to make here is that while Aristotle's ethical system is so authentically humanistic that it is the natural ethics *par excellence*, nevertheless Augustine shows that at the same time there is also no ethical system more disappointing for man. In the end, *eudaimonia* in the City of Man is a pipe dream.

We will first look at Aristotle to see precisely that in which happiness consists and then move to Augustine's criticism of his position.

Aristotle's *Eudaimonia* and the Problem of Happiness

Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is Aristotle's initial inquiry into what makes up the "good life". Here, Aristotle ascribes to six positions on "happiness" and holding these positions creates for him what can be called "the problem of happiness". We now turn to how he arrives at these six positions, why they create a problem of happiness, and his recognition and attempt to solve the problem.

Every action and choice aims at some good, and because of this Aristotle says the good is that at which all things aim. In other words, the good involves the nature of an end. Aristotle recognizes that there is a difference among ends, some are activities and some produce a product, and there are other divisions as well. Yet it is often the case with any of these that various ends can be hierarchically arranged so that some ends are done for the sake of others, like bridle making is done for the sake of horsemanship and not vice versa. So where we have arts falling under others, the highest or master arts are preferable to all the subordinate ends that are only means towards attaining the master end.

What if there were some master end or highest good to human life itself? If there were, Aristotle rightly insists that knowing what it is would be of great value, since knowing this ultimate end would identify the target of the good life and we are much more likely to hit an identified target over one that is unrecognized. That there is indeed such an ultimate end to life must be the case, since, Aristotle argues, otherwise there would be an infinite regress of ends, to wit, everything desired for the sake of something else, etc., etc., *ad infinitum* and so there would never be a reason why we are acting and hence no action at all. In other words, if every reason for acting were only a means for something else, then every reason for acting is only a means, and means without an end are means for nothing. Having no end vitiates the very *raison d'être* of the means.¹

¹ All of this is found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 1-2, 1094a1-1094b7. All of my subsequent citations will follow the Ross translation.

So there must be an ultimate end, that for the sake of which everything else is chosen. And it seems this end is the object of the master art, politics, since politics rightly governs all the other sciences. The science of politics governs all the rest and so the end of politics must be the good for man. That Aristotle says the ultimate end is the study of politics is very significant, because this shows that Aristotle is concerned with the good for man *in this lifetime*, in other words, a *secular* happiness.

This ultimate end is not pleasure, honor, or things of this sort, because these things are superficial and the good Aristotle is seeking is that which is not easily taken from us. This good has the note of *stability*.²

This good is also *attainable*. Aristotle argues *contra* the Platonists that even if there were a separate Idea of the Good, still it would not matter because such a separate good is not achievable while Aristotle is “seeking something attainable”.³ It will be something available and common to human nature, so that “all who are not maimed [impeded from virtuous action] may win it by a certain kind of study and care.”⁴ So Aristotle is not proposing some sort of far off utopian dream state, this happiness is supposed to be something that apparently most of us can reach.

This chief end also needs to be something *complete*. Aristotle is not concerned with partial goods and partial fulfillment, he is not concerned with imperfect goods but with an end that is something complete and perfect.⁵ This good is “perfect without qualification” in the sense that it is always desired for itself and not for the sake of something else.⁶ It is “lacking in nothing” and self-sufficient.⁷ This completeness or perfection is also taken chronologically, since “one swallow does not make a summer” neither does one good day or a good year constitute a “good *life*”.⁸ This excellence then is not only complete in the sense that it is not a means to something else, but it is also complete in that it pertains to a lifetime as a whole.

As a matter of fact, Aristotle says we already have a word for this ultimate end, “happiness” or *eudaimonia* (ευδαιμονία). The common translation “happiness” is misleading, for by *eudaimonia* Aristotle means something long lasting, successful in “hitting the mark” and complete (as contrasted with the partial “happiness” and subjective satisfaction so common in contemporary usage). Nevertheless, keeping this understanding in mind I will stick to using “happiness” interchangeably with *eudaimonia*.

Eudaimonia is the state a man has achieved by completely fulfilling his natural and essential aspirations. In other words, when the ends of our nature are fulfilled we have met and satisfied the meaning of human existence and have “hit the mark” of “the good for man”. Good *qua* man means an excellence (*arête*) which is in conformity with his rational nature. Thus, the human good turns out to be an *activity* of the soul in accordance with complete excellence.⁹ Happiness in its essence is grounded in human activity and in this way it is within our reach. Since this

² *Ibid*, I, 5, 1095b25-26

³ *Ibid*, I, 6, 1096b 33-35 As Broadie notes, “It is important for Aristotle to stress that happiness is an *end* for us, in the sense of a practical objective, because this blocks the possible suggestion that being divine in some way, it is beyond our power to achieve.” (Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press 1991) p. 32)

⁴ *Ibid*, I, 8, 1099b18

⁵ *Ibid*, I, 7, 1097a 25-28

⁶ *Ibid*, I, 7, 1097a 34-35

⁷ *Ibid*, I, 7, 1097b14-16, cf., 1097b20-21

⁸ *Ibid*, I, 7 1098a19

⁹ *Ibid*, I, 7, 1098a15, cf. 1099a1-5

happiness is grounded in rational activity, it is not open to irrational animals or even children.¹⁰ The virtues are components of this happiness, and there are two kinds; intellectual and moral.¹¹ The moral virtues (*hexis*) are states, that is inclinations or habits that relate well with reference to the passions and are a mean between states of excess and deficiency. Yet these moral virtues are rational only in a derivative sort of way, and because of this they are not as important as the intellectual virtues in attaining our ultimate end.

But there is another key element. To be *eudaimon* is incompatible with misfortune; and no one would defend the position that a man who undergoes misfortune could still be happy unless they were just being argumentative.¹² *Eudaimonia* needs external goods, not that these external goods constitute the essence of happiness, which is an activity of the soul, but because external goods and good fortune are the *sine qua non* foundations of happiness. It is impossible to achieve *eudaimonia* without the proper equipment. After all Aristotle reasons, who could be happy if they did not have good birth, beauty, and other tokens of prosperity?¹³ These external goods are so important that Aristotle mentions this is why some mistakenly take them to constitute the essence of happiness itself. So while external goods and fortune are not “essential” to happiness in the strict sense (that is constituting the species of happiness) nevertheless external goods and fortune are “essential” in the sense that without them there will not be happiness at all.

So to summarize, according to Aristotle there are six characteristics of *eudaimonia*:

1. *Eudaimonia* concerns this lifetime
2. *Eudaimonia* has the characteristic of stability and is not easily lost
3. *Eudaimonia* is attainable
4. *Eudaimonia* is complete and perfect. It is not a means to something else and it requires a complete lifetime.
5. *Eudaimonia* consists in an *activity* of the soul in accordance with complete excellence of a man’s rational nature.
6. *Eudaimonia* requires external goods and good fortune as *sine qua non* conditions.

The Fly in the Ointment

But isn’t there a tension here? It is between the compossibility of 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Happiness is supposed to be in this lifetime, attainable, complete, and yet still dependent on good fortune. The problem is we don’t know in advance if any man will fall into misfortune or not, and because of this ignorance we cannot say the complete life was happy. In other words, we cannot satisfy criterion 4 until we are sure that we have cleared criterion 6, but we cannot say that until a man’s life is over and that seems to run counter to criteria 1, 3, and 5! Suddenly Aristotle’s predication of *eudaimonia* is starting to look like the contemporary evangelist’s dilemma on the assurance of one’s salvation. “Once saved always saved” but if we look at those who were “saved” at one time but later seem to have fallen away from the faith and become “not-saved”, the typical retort is, “Well that just shows they were never *really* saved to begin with.” How can we have assurance of one’s *eudaimonia* in this life, and if we cannot, then how is it ever attainable?

Yet Aristotle is too astute for this tension to escape his notice. First, he fully recognizes the possibility of future misfortune undermining one’s happiness:

For there is required, as we said, not only complete excellence but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous

¹⁰ *Ibid*, I, 9 1100a1-5

¹¹ *Ibid*, I, 1103a1-10

¹² *Ibid*, I, 5, 1095b 31-33

¹³ *Ibid*, I, 8, 1098a32 – 1099b7

may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one calls happy.¹⁴

And he also realizes, *contra* the earlier Socrates and the later Stoics, that not even being a good virtuous man can protect happiness against misfortune:

Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense.¹⁵

So falling into great misfortune is enough to vitiate one's happiness and absent knowledge of the future we can never be sure that will not occur. So we are left to consider Solon's dictum, "Call no man happy until he is dead." Aristotle thinks it is absurd to call a dead man happy since he equates happiness with activity, and asks how then can we predicate *eudaimonia* of a man still living?¹⁶

Aristotle's Attempt at a Solution

It would indeed be odd for us to have to wait until someone is dead in order to say they *were* happy, when during that time happiness could not be predicated of them. But then again, we do want to call the same man happy and then later not happy as if being *eudaimon* was as transitory as the colors of a chameleon.¹⁷ So Aristotle assures us that this problem confirms his definition of happiness as grounded in excellent activities since these are durable. Thus, rational activity is the attribute that belongs to the happy man and this will help him be happy throughout his life. The happy man "will bear the chances of life most nobly and altogether decorously, if he is 'truly good' and 'foursquare beyond reproach.'" ¹⁸ This man will not be swayed by small vicissitudes and no blessed man (*makarios*) can become miserable but will make the best of his circumstances.

But this doesn't solve the problem because Aristotle is already committed to good fortune as foundational. If a man could now maintain happiness without good fortune, then he would be recanting what he laid out previously. So even in the midst of this attempt at a solution, Aristotle seems to reconsider and again say explicitly that a happy man can fall from this state:

For neither will he [the happy man] be moved from his happy state easily or by many ordinary misadventures, *but only by many great ones, nor, if he has had many great misadventures, will he recover his happiness in a short time, but if at all, only in a long and complete one in which he has attained many splendid successes.*¹⁹

Given what we have seen it seems Aristotle thinks there are two types of a "happy man" who in some way falls from happiness. First, there is the type just mentioned, the man that falls from *eudaimonia* but *not* into misery. This is the *truly* good man. The second type though comes from the earlier reference to Priam, viz., the man who *appears* to be happy but in the end does not bear

¹⁴ *Ibid*, I, 9 1100a 4-9

¹⁵ *Ibid*, VII, 13, 1153b 19-21 The *Magna Moralia* is also straightforward, "For it is not possible to be happy (*eudaimon*) without external goods, over which fortune is supreme (1206b 33-34), "and fortune and good fortune displays itself in things that are not in our own power and of which we are not masters nor able to bring them about." (1207a 16-20) "Since happiness cannot exist apart from external goods, and these result from good fortune, as we said just now, it follows that it will work along with happiness." (1207b 16-18)

¹⁶ *Ibid*, I, 10, 1100a 10-17

¹⁷ *Ibid*, I, 10, 1100b 1-6

¹⁸ *Ibid*, I, 10, 1100b 20-21

¹⁹ *Ibid*, I, 10, 1101a 9-13

great misfortune well and ends “wretchedly”.²⁰ So given this distinction between the truly good and the apparently good, either way Aristotle still holds that both types can fall from happiness, albeit to different depths. But this only exacerbates the problem, because now we are not only in the dark about if great misfortune will occur or not, but we also cannot even seem to separate the really good from the apparently good unless it does occur and we see how well one weathers the storm. Thus, there is now both an *ontological* factor to the problem of happiness (will great misfortune occur?) and an *epistemological* factor to the problem of happiness (absent a great misfortune, how will we know if a man is really good or only apparently good?). It seems that the best-case scenario is for a man to be virtuous, hope for the best fortune, and provided that fate is good to him; trust that he is not fooling himself.

Other Attempts to Defend *Eudaimonia*

Few commentators appear eager to tackle this issue, and those that do, do not seem to succeed. Broadie waffles in step with Aristotle and at times says that even those that suffer severe misfortune may still merit the accolade “happy”, while only admitting the man would be “better off if such difficulties were removed.”²¹ But this is not the last word, as Broadie later seems to admit, for that would conflict with the very text of Aristotle. We never know if fate will bring to us the equivalent of “the rack”, and to call this man “happy” because he is good is to talk “nonsense”.

Sparshott thinks Aristotle has a threefold response, but his explanation of it actually reduces to two.²² First he thinks we can call a man happy with the understanding that it is a *human* happiness “and we must keep our fingers crossed”.²³ The second is that Aristotle has another word for those that make it through, *makarios*, and we can reserve that word for those who stay happy until the end with the qualification that it is still being applied to humans and not gods. In response to the first, this is not Aristotle’s understanding of *eudaimonia*. Happiness is said of a good *life*. If we have to “keep our fingers crossed” about our *eudaimonia*, then this shows it is not yet complete and an “incomplete *eudaimonia*” that leaves more to be desired is a non-Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. In response to the second point, one can, if they like, reserve the term *makarios* to be predicated of the man who perseveres in happiness, but merely switching to another term does nothing to salvage the coherence of the original term and the compossibility of its constituent elements.

Solomon admits that Aristotle’s view is problematic,²⁴ and says that the traditional attempts to save it, such as Ross’ that restricts the meaning of *eudaimonia* to a man’s “external prosperity” that could survive his death, do not do justice to Aristotle’s understanding that happiness is “an activity of the soul”.²⁵ So Solomon recommends that Aristotle’s understanding of *eudaimonia* be abandoned in favor of a “satisfaction of desires” understanding of happiness.²⁶ The merits of this alternative however, I will not pursue since it is an explicit departure from Aristotle. I mention it here only because it suggests such a departure.

²⁰ *Ibid*, I, 9 1100a 4-9 Reeve comments, “The person envisaged here performs virtuous actions and so becomes wretched in the end. That is why no one counts him as *eudaimon*. Was this person ever virtuous? There is no reason to think so. If he had been virtuous, he would have never [...] fallen into vice and wretchedness. Thus while *eudaimonia* is to some extent at the mercy of luck, wretchedness like virtue is not.” (C.D.C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) p. 167)

²¹ Broadie, *op. cit.*, p. 52-3

²² Francis Sparshott, *Taking Life Seriously: A Study of the Argument of the Nicomachean Ethics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1996) p. 68

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Solomon, Robert “Is There Happiness After Death?” *Philosophy* 76; 51 189-193

²⁵ W.D. Ross, *Aristotle* (New York: Meridian, 1959) p. 186

²⁶ Solomon, p. 190

It is clear that Aristotle has not given what I am calling “the problem of happiness” a sufficient answer, and so leaves this Achilles heel of his ethical project exposed to critique. We now turn to a certain bishop from Hippo that will do just that.

Augustine’s Critique of Pagan Happiness

We begin by situating book XIX contextually.²⁷ The first part of *The City of God*, books I-X, is Augustine’s response to different pagan objections raised against Christianity. The second part, books XI-XXII, is the examination of two societies, the City of God and the City of Man, existing intermingled with one another yet distinguished by different ends. Book XIX is fundamental in this latter section, since it is here where the different ends are clarified. Book XIX itself is divided into two parts, the first (chapters 1-20) are Augustine’s replies to Varro on the good life, and the rest handles Cicero understanding of the commonweal. Our focus is on the first part of book XIX. Here Augustine argues that the various philosophical sects have failed to ascertain what the supreme good is and that in which happiness consists. He wants to expound on and critique “the arguments advanced by mortals in their efforts to create happiness for themselves in the midst of the unhappiness in this life” in order to show the difference between “their vain beliefs and the hope which God gives us.”²⁸

Following Varro, Augustine narrows the various philosophical positions on this issue down to three; that virtue is to be sought for the sake of the goods of nature, the goods of nature are to be sought for the sake of virtue, or that both virtue and the goods of nature are to be sought side by side. Since Varro thinks that a man is a soul and body composite, he thinks both the goods of nature and the virtues are to be sought for their own sakes. The happy life is that which “enjoys virtue and the other goods of soul and body without which virtue cannot exist”, but happiest of all if it enjoys good things without exception, and does not lack even a single good of soul or body.”²⁹ Since man is a social being, his happiness includes a good social life, from the household, to the city and extending to the whole world. Augustine is not concerned with the further details about who exactly held what between the New and Old Academy, the Stoics, etc., since he is more concerned about judging the merits of the ideas themselves than in pinning down which men thought them.

So what is the City of God to think of these views? The philosophers have made a fundamental error by supposing that the Final Good and Evil are to be found in this life. From this assumption all other problems will follow. Augustine’s argument that follows is broad enough to cover any philosophical ethic that places happiness in this world. Whether it be a Stoic ethic that needs only virtue and not goods of nature and fortune, or a view akin to the Old Academy’s that says a man needs both virtue and goods of nature and fortune, either way, if the happiness is said to be in this life Augustine’s argument will apply. So we see already that even though Aristotle is not mentioned by name, the “Peripatetics” are, and although they have “a more intelligible doctrine” when compared to the Stoics since they admit that misfortunes can be evil, nevertheless “theirs also is a surprising mistake”.³⁰ Thus, it is clear that the *Nicomachean Ethics* also falls within the scope of Augustine’s target and it is this line of Augustine’s argument that I pursue here. It seems one can distill two arguments in his critique; what I will call the “external goods are necessary but

²⁷ I follow Haggerty here whom I think is correct; William Haggerty, “Augustine, the ‘Mixed Life,’ and Classical Political Philosophy: Reflections on *Compositio* in Book 19 of the City of God” *Augustinian Studies* 23, 1992 149-163.

²⁸ *The City of God*, XIX, 1. All of my citations and page numbers are from the Dawson translation; Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* ed. and tr. R. W Dawson (Cambridge 1998).

²⁹ *Ibid*, XIX, 3 p. 917

³⁰ *Ibid*, ch. 4 p. 922

undependable” argument and the “need for virtues as indications of misery” argument. We now look at both.

The “External Goods are Necessary but Undependable” Argument

Augustine’s argument here is neither new nor intricate. It makes no claims to novelty or complexity, yet it is strikingly and devastatingly simple. The only new element over and above what someone like Aristotle saw is its candor to follow the logic through to where it leads:

The philosophers, however, have supposed that the Final Good and Evil are to be found in this life... With wondrous vanity, these philosophers have wished to be happy here and now, and to achieve blessedness by their own efforts.... For, indeed, when, where and how can what are called the primary objects of nature be possessed in this life with such certainty that they are not subject to the vicissitudes of chance? For is there any pain, the contrary of pleasure, any disquiet, the contrary of rest, that cannot befall a wise man’s body? Certainly the amputation or decay of his limbs undermines a man’s soundness; deformity ruins his beauty, sickness destroys his health, weakness his strength, lassitude his vigour, torpor or lethargy his activity... But what if a man’s spine is so curved as to bring his hands to the ground, so that he becomes a kind of quadruped? Will this not subvert all the body’s beauty and grace whether it be at rest or in motion?³¹

But of course the evils of this world do not stop there, there are also tragedies that befall our capacities for knowledge and contemplation:

But what kind of sensation remains, and how much of it, if a man becomes blind or deaf, to say nothing of other disabilities? And to what place will reason and intelligence withdraw, where will they slumber, if a man is driven insane by some sickness...And what shall I say of those who suffer attacks of demonic possession? Where does their own intelligence lie hidden and buried while the malignant spirit makes use of their soul and body according to its own will? And who is certain that such an evil cannot befall a wise man in this life?³²

The pagan’s quest for happiness reveals the catch-22. Natural goods are needed for temporal happiness, but natural goods are fleeting things subject to all kinds of radical alteration. It does not even have to be the case that one has actually lost natural goods; just the *threat* of loss is enough. Insecurity and fear of loss are incompatible with happiness and to not fear what is needed for happiness is to lack wisdom. If the happy life is attainable, Augustine tells us that external goods cannot serve as its foundation since these hang on fortune and are exposed to mishaps. In other words:

His reasoning here is that beatitude should be thought complete only when we have secure access to what we take to be the source of delight and satisfaction. If that source is transitory and subject to loss, the condition of our completeness cannot be met. We cannot, for instance, place our beatitude in temporal things and still expect to control when and for how long we possess what we desire. Our beatitude will remain imperfect as long as its source of satisfaction remains vulnerable to adventitious loss.³³

The “Need for Virtues as Indications of Misery” Argument

With the goods of the body and mind exposed, Augustine begins to pick off the virtues as vehicles to happiness in this world. As for temperance, as long as the spirit resists the flesh there will be internal warfare, but who can pretend that as long as there is internal warfare there is happiness? “God forbid then, that, for as long as we are engaged in this internal warfare, we

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 920

³² *Ibid*

³³ James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 57

should believe that we have already attained that happiness: that happiness which we seek to attain by our own victory. And who has achieved such a degree of wisdom that he no longer has to maintain any struggle against his lusts?"³⁴ Similar things can be said for the other virtues. Take prudence, that we need prudence is itself a testament that we live in the midst of evils or that evils are within us. That we need to concern ourselves with justice and giving others their due indicates that justice is not already fulfilled. Courage is "the most evident witness to human ills; for it is precisely those ills which she is compelled to endure with patience."³⁵ So it seems that even presupposing one had the necessary natural goods and fortune for happiness, Augustine still insists that these virtues, far from delivering you the rest of the way to happiness, instead will always confirm that you have not yet attained it. We can state Augustine's point formally as:

No one who needs prudence, temperance, justice, and courage is in a happy state
Man in this life is one who needs prudence, temperance, justice, and courage
No man in this life is in a happy state.

Augustine thinks the major is obvious. That we need these things indicates there are dangers, temptations, unsatisfied debts, etc. The minor is supplied by the pagan philosophers, and the conclusion follows necessarily.

Augustine's True Virtues

Of course Augustine is not against the notion of virtues *per se*, but their inability to deliver what the pagan philosophers promise they can within the City of Man. True virtues do not claim they can protect people from suffering miseries in this world. True virtues do not make false claims about their ability to secure happiness against worldly evils. They do, however, have the ability to make human life happy when infused with *hoping* for the world to come and in the hope of salvation. Accordingly, true virtue must be directed at God, who is the true object of happiness and the true perfection of the saints. In fact, evils in this world are good in the sense that they lead us to seek out true happiness more fervently where peace is most full and certain.³⁶ So Augustine's solution to what Aristotle wanted is a *mitigated* happiness in this world, a man may be called happy in this world *via* a future hope and it is simply unwise to direct the cardinal virtues towards a hopeless happiness:

Present reality without that hope, however, is a false happiness and a great misery, since, in that case, the true goods of the soul are not enjoyed. For no wisdom is true wisdom if it does not direct all its prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice towards that final state where God shall be all in all in an assured eternity and perfect peace.³⁷

Man's condition should not be sugarcoated. Looking at the different levels of society we see strife within families, internal and external threats to the city, and the threat of war throughout the world (it is the iniquity in the world that calls for the need of a just war in the first place). Augustine wants to be a realist about "the wretchedness of man's condition".³⁸ In fact, *pace* the Stoics and perhaps even Aristotle to some degree, if a man doesn't feel misery at certain things he is more the miserable still:

Let everyone, therefore, who reflects with pain upon such great evils, upon such horror and cruelty, acknowledge that this is misery. And if anyone either endures them or thinks

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 921

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 924

³⁶ *Ibid*, ch. 10 p. 932

³⁷ *Ibid*, ch. 20 p. 950

³⁸ *Ibid*, ch. 6 p. 928

of them without anguish of soul, his condition is still more miserable: for he thinks himself happy only because he has lost all human feeling.³⁹

It would be even more of a defect not to be miserable at the loss of a child or loved one. To react otherwise would be inhuman and that sort of “virtuous” is not a virtue *qua* man but a denial of part of the man.

Conclusion

Now Augustine has been accused of being “utopian” and guilty of “dogmatic other-worldliness”.⁴⁰ In response to the first, it seems to me that Augustine is just the opposite, warning us against false utopias. Far from utopian, Augustine is a realist to the core. As for the second accusation, dogmatic he may or may not be, but the principal question turns on whether or not this “other world” is *true*. Space doesn’t permit investigation, but Augustine certainly thought it was and any critique of “other worldliness” can only stick in so far as that worldview turns out to be false.

But even if this *tu quoque* could stick, that doesn’t save Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*. Aristotle cannot be faulted for missing Augustine’s mitigated happiness or “happy in hope” for salvation, as that comes by way of special revelation, but Aristotle did see the problem of his own view and did not provide a workable solution for it. Aristotle shot for happiness in the perfect sense and characterized *eudaimonia* in a way that turns out to be a *de facto* impossibility. Unable to decide between, “Call no man happy until he is dead” and “Call a man happy while he still lives,” Aristotle resisted demoting the predicate “happiness” to be exclusively the job of the obituary writer, but moved on with his project anyway without answering this fundamental difficulty (One wonders if this is the motivation why Aristotle at times seems to have toyed with the idea that it would be preferable never to have been born!⁴¹). Perhaps some lowering of the bar was in order.

However Augustine’s view can account for the truth of both by making the appropriate distinctions; “Call no man happy [perfectly] until he is dead” and “Call a man happy [by hope] while he still lives.”⁴² At the same time Augustine’s two arguments show that both problems for pagan ethics, the need for good fortune and the need for virtue, stem from the same source. The same tumultuous and unpredictable nature of human existence accounts for both why external goods are undependable and for why we need virtues to restore order and peace to the extent that we can. So while it is quite true that, “Aristotle was too much of a realist to be unaware that chance, with its favorable coincidences, the free gifts of good fortune, plays an indispensable role in the happiness of a human being,”⁴³ it is also true that Aristotle wasn’t realist enough; he was an insufficient realist and not the realist that Augustine was. Aristotle did not see, or at least did not admit, that the project he sets forth is a practical impossibility. *Eudaimonia* in the City of Man is a happiness dependent upon the very same “vanitas vanitatum” error that the Preacher admonishes us to avoid.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 929

⁴⁰ For an argument against Augustine’s view being “utopian” see Dorothy F. Donnelly’s “The City of God and Utopia: A Revaluation” *Augustinian Studies* v.8 1977 p. 111 For the other charge see, Wetzell, p. 108

⁴¹ *Eud. Eth.* I, 5 1215b 18-30

⁴² I do not claim that Augustine has his own clearly defined and detailed understanding of the virtues. Clearly he is reacting more against his opponents than formulating his own detailed doctrine.

⁴³ Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son’s, 1964) p. 34