

THE GREEKS AND THE GOOD LIFE: A DIALOGUE

Thomas M. Robinson / Aikaterini Lefka*

Abstract: The article sets out to examine the notion of the classical Greek concept of the “good life” (*eu zen, eudaimonia*) as the primary practical objective of human existence, and to offer a fresh view of the current opposition between teleological and non-teleological theories on the matter, leading to a re-evaluation of the contributions to the topic made by ancient philosophy. The form of the article is original: the authors have created a dialogue between two fictional characters, each representing a different philosophical approach. In so doing they wished to pay tribute to the work of Socrates and Plato in the realm of ethics, and at the same time to underline the continuing relevance of many features of that work to contemporary studies in moral philosophy.

Key Words: Aristotle, Eudaimonia, Eu zen, Ethics, Good Life, Greek Philosophy, Happiness, Plato, Socrates, Virtue.

Os Gregos e a Boa Vida: Um Diálogo

Resumo: Este artigo pretende examinar a noção do conceito grego clássico de “boa vida” (*eu zen, eudamonia*) como o principal objetivo prático da existência humana e apresentar uma nova

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visão da atual oposição entre as teorias teleológicas e não-teleológicas sobre o assunto, levando a uma reavaliação das contribuições feitas pela filosofia antiga. A forma do artigo é, em si, original: os autores criaram um diálogo entre dois personagens fictícios, cada qual representando uma diferente abordagem filosófica. Sendo assim, eles pretenderam homenagear o trabalho de Sócrates e Platão na esfera da ética e, ao mesmo tempo, sublinhar a contínua relevância de muitos aspectos daquele trabalho para os estudos contemporâneos em filosofia moral.

Palavras-Chave: Aristóteles, Eudamonia, Eu Zen, Ética, Boa Vida, Filosofia, Felicidade, Platão, Sócrates, Virtude.

[Scene: The Ef Zin Bar, with a view to the beach, Pythagoreion, Samos.

Two old friends are sipping Samaina, the well-known wine of Samos. They first became acquainted at the University of Chicago and have now accidentally met here after many years without seeing each other. Athenaeus was studying classics and philosophy, Simplicia structural mechanics. Their common interest, it turned out, was chess, and meetings at the Chess Club led to a number of conversations about Greece and things Greek, including Greek philosophy. So much so that at one time Simplicia even picked up and read a translation of the Republic. Since then Simplicia has made a career managing a small engineering firm in Biloxi, Mississippi, and Athenaeus has managed, in spite of all material difficulties, to enjoy a life according to his wishes: rather ascetic, but rich in study, in London].

SIMPLICIA: I love the name of this place! Though somehow I don't think too many people around here — or in the bars or on the beaches of, say, Mykonos or Rhodes — would react to it in quite the way I do.

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ATHENAEUS: And what way is that?

S.: With a certain wry bemusement, I guess. I only know a few words of Greek, but I remember vividly from that book of Plato's you put me on to in Chicago that "living well" (*ef zin*, or as we pronounced it, *you zayn*) was a big preoccupation of Socrates and Plato. And they seemed to have a lot more in mind by the phrase than just the sybaritic life. In fact they seem to have been both thoroughly turned off by the sybaritic life.

A.: Well, certainly Plato was; Socrates appears to have enjoyed things a bit more from time to time, by various accounts; the occasional boozy banquet, for example (though he probably took care, in his own case, about over-imbibing). And you are right about their stress on "living well", and how differently they understood the phrase from the way the legions of the topless around here seem to do.

S.: It's funny how a simple phrase can take you back to what seems another universe. I don't think I've told you this, but that *Republic* of Plato's so intrigued me that I have since been reading a lot of his other stuff just as a hobby, so to speak. I've now read the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Theaetetus* and the *Timaeus*, and I'm just beginning the *Laws*. In fact I splurged a few years ago and bought myself a copy of the *Collected Dialogues*! And the craziness didn't stop there; I carry it around with me, just to dip into when I feel inclined. Just look here!

[*She pulls a copy of the Collected Dialogues from her rucksack.*]

A.: Now that's enthusiasm (to use a good Greek word). You must like Plato a lot.

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S.: Not so fast! I said he intrigued me. Such a great writer, but also saying so much I find difficult to grasp. Most of the time I sense that he is discussing something really important, but I'm seldom sure what it is, and on the occasions I do feel reasonably sure, I suspect he's often wrong. That's why it's fun meeting up with you again; I hope you'll be able to set me straight on a few things.

A.: Trim your hopes, my friend. If there's one thing I've learned from Plato it's the centrality of dialogue. So what you'll get from me will be simply a response, eliciting in turn, I hope, a response from you, and so on. Where we'll finish up I don't know. But if it's a dead-end, no matter; given the "ending" to so many of Socrates' own conversations, we'll be in good company in that regard. All we need concentrate on is our dialectical exchange (to use Socrates' way of talking); that will be reward enough, I think.

S.: Sounds good to me. More wine? [*They replenish their glasses*].

Well, let's start with the name of this bar again, *ef zin*. If I have understood Socrates and Plato, they seem to feel strongly that to live truly well is to live a life of virtue, and such a life constitutes the highest form of happiness. Put that way, their claim has a certain partial plausibility for me; I can see how one can get personal happiness out of helping the dispossessed, and so on.

But Socrates seems to want to go a lot further than that in his claim. In the second book of the *Republic*¹ Glaucon and Adeimantus set Socrates what looks like a really crazy challenge — to show that the virtuous life is the most beneficial one — and that apparently means the most happiness-producing life — *no matter what*. No matter what the mental and physical tortures the virtuous

¹ Plato, *Republic*, II, 361 d-362 c.

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man is subjected to for a lifetime, for example, he's still the happiest man. (These Greek writers are all men, and keep talking about "men". Is it o.k. if from now on we just say "persons"? I don't think it affects the argument, and we'll both feel a lot better).

I just can't make sense of this. How can one possibly talk of the "happiness" of a person who spends a lifetime on a rack? Or in the "black hole" of Alcatraz? Or perpetually threatened with the imminent death by torture of his children?

A.: You should stop there for the moment. (And yes, by the way, do talk of "persons"). A big part of your problem is that translation: "happiness". What Socrates means is (to get back to the name of this bar again) "well-being", and specifically well-being in respect of what he considers to be our real self, the soul². The good person, whatever his sufferings, is "well off" in respect of the only thing that counts, his soul. Indeed, he's the *best* off of humans, if he is fully virtuous.

Or to put it a little differently, his life is one of stable and eternal "bliss", just like the life of the gods. As Socrates understands it, he is "blessed" in the way the gods are "blessed", and this transcends any suffering he might undergo. The very word so often translated as "happiness" has overtones of divinity, in fact; the term *eudaimonia* implies the divine attributes of perfection, stability and everlastingness. To be *eudaimon* is to possess an essential characteristic of the gods : eternal and complete felicity. For Plato, our soul is immortal, and hence the only part of us able to achieve this ideal.

² Ibid., I, 353 e-354 a.

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According to a more concrete interpretation, to be *eudaimon* is to be “well off in respect of one’s guardian divinity (*daimon*)”, who was believed to have as his (her) task the protection of one’s well-being³.

We ourselves, not being into talk of guardian divinities, might want to talk of “conscience” instead; the good person is “well off” in the sense of having a totally clear *conscience*, thanks to the possession of a perfect interior harmony, which manifests itself in his principles, his words and his actions. And *that, no matter what*, is the only thing that really counts.

S.: That clarifies things a bit. And it comes part way towards answering a question that has puzzled me from the beginning, and that is, why did Socrates walk into the trap of accepting Glaucon and Adeimantus’ challenge in the first place?

If you are right, Socrates saw well-being as being, primarily if not totally, a state of consciousness of some sort, rather than, as most people assume, some sort of feeling (as in: “I feel good”, “I feel happy”). So he could cheerfully talk of a virtuous man as one who is in a harmonious and balanced state of consciousness (in his terms, a balanced state of soul), the awareness of which gives him that clear conscience which makes him truly “well off” in respect of his real self, his soul, regardless of feelings of pain and suffering. So the challenge was presumably much less of a problem to him than to someone (most people, surely) to whom well-being is primarily if not totally a matter of feeling.

³ See, for example, Plato’s *Timaeus*, 34 a-b; *Phaedrus*, 247 a; *Symposium*, 202 c (*eudaimonia* as a characteristic of the gods); *Phaedo*, 107 d-e; *Phaedrus*, 248 c, 250 b-c and *Republic*, X, 617 d-e (guardian divinities).

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A.: Maybe, but it is hard to be sure. The state of balance of the excellent soul that you talk about is what he calls “virtue” (*arete*), and I’m not sure he simply wanted to equate this with *eudaimonia* (can we just keep the word in Greek for a while, so as not to pre-judge matters till we are a little further into things?). Though it’s true that on occasion he sometimes talks as if he equated them⁴.

But the truth is, I think, that he wanted to say that along with the state of virtue in a person there invariably comes what one might call a “feeling of satisfaction” that he has achieved a goal, and this goal, the only one which is worthwhile, as far as Socrates is concerned, is virtue or “excellence”. (This may *co-incide* with what you call a “good conscience”, but the two notions are I think different). So a certain feeling is involved after all, though not a feeling in the sense of the word used by most people, who are much pre-occupied with feelings of pain and pleasure, both physical and psychological⁵.

And this is a possible reason for Glaucon and Adeimantus’ astonishment that Socrates can call his virtuous person *eudaimon* while subjected for a lifetime to physical and psychological torture.

S.: O. k. But that just raises another difficulty for me. If Socrates really meant what you say, hasn’t he just made his point by a piece of equivocation? When Glaucon and Adeimantus offered him their big challenge, they surely had in mind the feelings of pain and suffering you have just talked about (they certainly

⁴ See, for example, Plato’s Apology of Socrates, 30 a-b; Gorgias, 507 a-c; Republic, I, 352 a-d; Laws, II, 660 d-663 c.

⁵ Plato often insists, counter to common opinions, that the life of self-awareness, virtue and justice is also the most agreeable one: see Gorgias, 506 c-508 a; Philebus, 51 e-52 b; Laws, II, 662 a-e.

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described them in graphic enough detail!), even if they might have conceded that there was also this *other* use of the word “feeling” that would have included phrases like “a feeling of satisfaction”.

So why couldn't they have stopped Socrates right there and asked him whether he really believed that the virtuous man subjected to a lifetime of torture has a “feeling of satisfaction” (in his own virtue) to keep him going which trumps all those other feelings they have just described? (Say, burning needles thrust under one's finger nails every half hour).

I looked at Aristotle's *Ethics* some time ago, and I notice that he for one felt that *eudaimonia* involved a good deal *more* than just virtue and a feeling of satisfaction that one had attained it⁶.

A.: You are certainly right on that last point; and we can talk about Aristotle later. As for the business of what various interlocutors do and don't do in the dialogues, I'm not sure much good is gained in second-guessing in this area; we just have to get along with the dialogue we are presented with. This may not be an optimal situation, but at least we can look at real arguments presented, real positions taken, and so on, and that has its own satisfaction — for me at any rate.

Now, regarding what you say about Socrates winning his argument by some sort of subterfuge — by a piece of deceptive ambiguity in fact, where *eudaimonia* means one thing to Socrates and another thing to his interlocutors, I think that everything turns on translating the term correctly.

If we just keep on translating it “happiness”, as most books do, I think Socrates does indeed leave himself open to such a charge. If on the other hand

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1097 b 7-14, 1099 a 32-1099 b 7.

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you translate it “well-being”, he is in effect simply telling Glaucon and Adeimantus that the problem they pose is not answerable in exactly the way they pose it, but it *is* nonetheless interestingly answerable!

And that’s why one has to say that there is a need for hermeneutical generosity, too, if we are to understand what Socrates is really up to. We can accuse him of game-playing by the use of a sly ambiguity, or we can take him to be telling his interlocutors of the need for certain careful distinctions if some of their worries are to be met⁷. I am myself much more inclined to believe the latter, on the grounds that sound philology and hermeneutical generosity both seem to demand it.

S.: Fine. I won’t argue with you on that. Some more wine?

[Pours another glass for Athenaeus, and one for herself].

S.: That feels better. Now let’s get back for a while to this word “virtue”, so you can see the full range of my qualms before we try to make final sense of things, if we can.

A.: Oh, not more qualms!

S.: Relax, I think there’s a good deal of sunlight at the end of this.

A.: Sunlight? You are not referring to... ?

⁷ For the willful use of rhetorical ambiguity by Socrates in Plato’s works, see Rossetti, L. (2001). *La rhétorique de Socrate*. (In Gourinat, J.-B. (Ed.) & Romeyer Dherbey, G. (Dir.) *Socrate et les Socratiques* (pp. 161-185). Paris: Vrin.

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S.: Not really; but I can see what you are thinking about! Let's just try to get some clarity on this word "virtue" first. From my own investigations, it seems pretty clear that *arete* in classical Greek was the basic word for "efficiency" (or, in the case of humans, "proficiency"). And Socrates uses the word in just such a way when he talks of virtue. A good pruning knife is "virtuous" if it has a fine cutting edge and so is efficient at pruning; a good carpenter is "virtuous" if he has and exercises the skills involved in good carpentry, etc. And by analogy, the good or "virtuous" person is one who has and exercises all the skills involved in what it takes to be a person⁸.

A.: And Aristotle, I might add, picks up the argument at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*⁹. But I think it's a bit more complicated than that. The word *arete* means, I think, both efficiency at performing a function, and, in the specific case of humans (and even more so, of gods), excellence in the performance of that function. For the Socrates of the *Republic*, this excellence is only achievable when a person has attained a knowledge of what the various virtues are, and in particular a knowledge of "the good" overarching all virtue. This knowledge he knows how to translate into practical virtuous action, and in this way he achieves human excellence.

S.: Are you sure of this? As I read Socrates' argument, efficiency and excellence are identical: the efficient pruning knife is simply "excellent at its job". I don't think he says anywhere in the argument that excellence is of some higher order than efficiency. But I can see how you are pushed in that direction

⁸ Plato, *Republic*, I, 352 e-354 a.

⁹ Aristotle, *N.E.*, I, 1097 b 22-33.

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when you use a term like excellent rather than efficient; the very use of the superlative term excellent pushes you to think of degrees of achievement, but I don't see any mention of degrees in Socrates' argument.

A.: Maybe – if you simply confine yourself to the argument in the first book of the *Republic*. But the *Republic* goes on to say a lot more than what is found in this opening argument, and there clearly are for Socrates (or is it Plato?) *degrees* of virtue in humans. The philosopher-ruler, for example, is clearly more virtuous than anyone else in the ideal society. So there really is a case for saying that human virtue, in the sense of excellence, is of a higher order than mere efficiency at performing a job of some sort.

And as you will remember, in the central books of the *Republic* knowledge is described as acquaintance-knowledge rather than practical knowledge; the future philosopher-ruler comes to know the essences, or forms of the various virtues, and then, finally, that of the supreme good¹⁰. His (her) virtuousness is grounded on rational argument and in this way comes close to equaling that of the gods themselves. Learning how to *be* virtuous, by contrast, in the context of living a life (which may indeed be likened to a skill) seems to be a quite different process.

S.: I see what you are saying. But I'm not sure that what Socrates says in *Republic* One and what you have just described from the later books are really compatible views on virtue. I suspect that the views of Socrates in *Republic* One are those of the historical Socrates, and the material in the central books an imposition of Plato's own.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, V, 475 e-517 c.

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The whole point of Socrates' stress on virtue as analogous to the arts and crafts seems to be that it involves moral *skills* in the way the arts and crafts involve artistic and craft skills. "Seeing" essences or forms of virtues with a supposed "eye of the soul" seems to be something *Plato* tacks on to the discussion, possibly because he feels that Socrates' position is unsustainable unless supplemented by some such doctrine as he proposes. And one can see why.

I myself would have some hesitation claiming that my late sister-in-law Margaret (*sit terra levis illi*) was the utterly good person she was because she had some set of moral *skills* or other. (I'm sure she herself would have found the idea astonishing, had someone ever put it to her). But I certainly found Socrates' comments brilliant when I first read them; provided of course one goes along with his basic teleological view of things.

You remember that statement, again in that passage near the end of *Republic* One where he says the goal or objective of anything is what it does "uniquely or best". So the goal of a pruning knife is pruning vines and the like. This is what it does "uniquely or best"¹¹. You can, if you want, use a pruning knife as, say, a door stopper; but that could never be classified as its goal, because stopping doors is not what it does uniquely or best.

As for persons, what they do uniquely or best, he says (and Aristotle famously builds upon this), is pursue intellectual and moral activity (something either leading to, or possibly identifiable with, *eudaimonia*¹²). So a person will reach full personhood to the degree — and only to the degree — that he/she

¹¹ Ibid., I, 352 e-353 a.

¹² Aristotle, N.E., Books II-VI.

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achieves efficiency, as I said before, or excellence, as you yourself preferred, in those two spheres.

A.: But what's the point of talking about the "brilliance" of an argument if in the final analysis you find it implausible? You clearly think teleology a non-starter as a claimant to the title of "serious" philosophy, so what's left here to discuss?

S.: Have some more wine! We are at the beginning, not the end of this discussion!

[They drink another glass of wine, and nibble on some grilled calamari]

A.: But seriously, you talk in ways that make me think you have no chance of understanding Socrates, however benevolent your intentions. To understand Socrates (and most of the Greek thinkers of classical times for that matter) you just *have* to have some sympathy for the teleological stance that most of them just assume; for their essentialism; and for their satisfaction that the goal of life is *eudaimonia*, in some sense or other at any rate of the term *eudaimonia*. To come at the world from an empirical, Darwinian base just guarantees failure to find anything in common with what they are trying to say.

Why are you smiling?

S.: You'll forgive me, I hope, but you are formulating an argument I myself used to find very plausible.

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A.: What do you mean, “used to find”?

S.: No prizes for guessing: I no longer believe it! Or at any rate I no longer think it self-evident. It’s true that the supposed gap between an essentialist, deontological vision and a non-essentialist, purely consequentialist vision of the world has long seemed, to philosophers on either side of that divide, simply unbridgeable. But I’m no longer sure we need be that pessimistic.

A.: Please continue! Now it is /who am the sceptic... Are you referring, by any chance, to current efforts by various so-called “Virtue Ethicists” to give a new answer to this question, claiming Greek, and specifically Aristotelian philosophy as the foundation for their views?

S.: Not at all. I’m far from convinced by their arguments (though that’s another discussion), and am trying to say something quite different. As I see it, a big part of the problem is the common assumption that, if we find the arguments that produce certain conclusions unacceptable, the conclusion is somehow itself unacceptable. But that may not be true. A conclusion may be acceptable simply as a statement of fact, regardless of the quality of the arguments supposedly underpinning it. It may in fact lend itself, with the application of some ingenuity, to defense by a much *better* set of arguments.

A.: Fair enough. But, while that may be true as a basic principle, you are surely not going to say that a Darwinian and a teleological approach to the world are compatible? Or, more generally, that essentialism and non-essentialism are reconcilable?

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S.: Let me conceal my cards on that one for the moment. I just want to grapple with your point that, if Socrates is to be of value to our times, contemporary philosophers may just have to take “on faith”, so to speak, a number of basic commitments of his that they simply do not in their hearts believe. My own response to that is to call any such move what existentialists used to call an instance of *mauvaise foi*, and to tell you that I would be myself appalled to follow any such path.

A.: Well, that’s nice to hear! But doesn’t it back you into an impossible corner? Aren’t we dealing with simple incompatibles here?

S.: I’m less sure of that, as I said, than I used to be.

A.: Come on, out with it! You have really succeeded in intriguing me now, and all you do is dance around the problem.

S.: O.k., but we really need another glass of this excellent Samaina first.

[*They sip another glass of Samaina, and order another plate of grilled htapodia*]

S.: That’s better. Now, *revenons à nos moutons*.

Let me try out on you an idea about teleology first; then we’ll get back to *eudaimonia*. I have in fact been scribbling something on this matter quite recently, and I hope you are up to just listening to it for two or three minutes.

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A.: Be my guest! If you let me down, I know the Samaina won't.

[*Simplicia pulls a couple of crumpled sheets of paper from her rucksack*].

S.: "Well, to the question: 'What is the function (*telos*) of the heart?' a good teleologist would reply, in line with the doctrine laid down in *Republic One*, 'to promote the circulation of the blood'. While 'in order to produce rhythmic sounds' might *also* be put forward as a function, it would fail as the required explanation because the production of rhythmic sounds is not what the heart does uniquely or best.

But to the modern ear the teleologist's answer is *also* in fact perfectly acceptable, though this time not in terms of a supposed 'essence' of the heart but rather in terms of the heart's perceived biological history. That is, the natural function of x will consist of those effects, 'among those produced in the past, which made the organ more fit, or more likely to get reproduced' (to quote a friend of mine)¹³.

If this agreement between Socrates (or Plato, or Aristotle) and contemporary biologists seems too good to be true, it probably is, in the sense that with the great gain comes a big loss too. Because, while concluding on simply empirical grounds to the existence of a function of the heart, and the very same function, at the same conclusion where the teleologist had arrived at on the grounds of a supposed 'essence' of the heart, the modern empiricist stops short of any notion that such a *telos* is, as it was by definition for Socrates (and Plato and Aristotle), a 'good thing'. It may or may not be, depending on circumstance. The classic

¹³ De Sousa, R. B. (2004). Two-Track Minds: How rational thinking keeps us from being enslaved to our genes (a review of the book: Stanovich, K. E., *The Robot's Rebellion: Finding meaning in the age of Darwin*). *The Literary Review of Canada* 12.7, 6. The example of the Irish elk is also his.

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example illustrating this is that of the Irish elk, in which the ever-larger antlers preferred by the females became too gigantic to live with, leading to the extinction of the species.”

A.: But (if I may butt in) isn't that loss a big one?

S.: Maybe, but the gain seems to me incomparably bigger. Because, “while it is true that empiricism will never in all circumstances fit an essentialist template, in a very large number if not the vast majority of cases it looks as though it will, and a ‘uniquely or best’ explanation of function will turn out to coincide with one of perceived adaptation for reproduction.”

A.: That sounds very persuasive. And I certainly want to think about it. But haven't you made life easy for yourself by picking the most likely area in which a coincidence of Greek and contemporary philosophy might be found? I mean, the realm of biology, and more specifically, the realm of the history of non-human biological forms?

S.: Well, not quite. My point works perfectly well, I think, for the *telos* of humans as well, as defined by Socrates and Plato and Aristotle. “The profoundest anti-essentialist, it seems to me, could well finish up agreeing with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and on the purely empirical grounds of perceived biological history, that part of the function of man is indeed the operation of intelligence, in the sense that the effects of the operation of intelligence, ‘among those produced in the past, made man more fit, or likely to get reproduced’¹⁴ .

¹⁴ Ibid. (above, n. 13).

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And the same might well go for that other aspect of man's function, the operation of moral sense. Here again, even the profoundest anti-essentialist might well concede to the teleologist that, in terms of our powers of reproduction, not simply as individuals but as members of a community that has to cohere together or risk perishing, the function of man will include the operation of moral sense as well, and in particular the operation of a sense of fairness and justice, in that the effects of the operation of moral sense, too, 'among those produced in the past, made man more fit, or more likely to get reproduced as a member of a viable society'¹⁵."

A.: My head is starting to spin a bit! It is the wine, or the coils of your argument, or both? But I really have to think through what you have just said. Because, if you are right, a lot of presuppositions, on either side of the great philosophical divide, as it has been supposed to be, are going to have to be questioned.

S.: But isn't that what Socrates is forever telling us to do – question presuppositions? Anyway, catch your breath for a moment, and have some more Samaina. Because, as you say, you need to snatch a few minutes to look again at what I've just been trying to say – and because we also still have to get back to the matter of *eudaimonia*!

[*They re-fill their glasses, and set to work on the htapodia, which have just arrived*].

¹⁵ Ibid. (above, n. 13).

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S.: On reflection, I think we could spend all the rest of our time talking about the last argument I put forward, and the range of its implications if valid and sound. So perhaps that can be deferred to another occasion. For the moment, I suspect we'll have all our time cut out to try to clarify a little more what *eudaimonia* is all about.

A.: Fine. But so much ink has been spilt on the topic that I can't imagine our saying anything new.

S.: Maybe. But engineers like challenges, particularly female engineers who have made it in a world of male engineers.

A.: Point taken. Let's go!

S.: Well, let me start by laying out a few qualms, as I did with terms like "virtue", and then see where we get.

First, as you can imagine, it is strange, after all these centuries of rights-based political theorizing, and concepts of virtue so centered on relating fairly to *others*, for someone like myself to find people like Socrates so apparently committed to something that seems by contrast so inveterately inward-looking and *self-oriented* as "the care of the (individual) soul"¹⁶ and the personal *eudaimonia* that might accrue from this.

It's true that the *Republic* spends most of its time discussing a just society, but all that is nonetheless technically a digression, in terms of what the dialogue

¹⁶ See, for example, Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, 29 d-30 b, 36 c; *Phaedo*, 107 c-d; *Alcibiades I*, 124 a-c, 132 c.

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is setting out to do: that is, to discuss *individual* virtue and *eudaimonia*, as illustrated by these things “writ large”, so to speak, in a paradigmatically just state.

A.: But surely it *is* just a technicality. From the beginning commentators (including Aristotle) took it as a book about the paradigmatically good *polis*, and Plato had ample opportunity to refute this interpretation and never did.

Moreover, among the ancient Greeks, where the political communities they lived in were relatively small city-states, individual excellence and well-being influenced the common well-being in a decisive way, and vice versa. Personal *eudaimonia* just couldn't be conceived separately from the *eudaimonia* of the *polis*, which was in fact considered to be the most important of the two¹⁷.

S.: That seems right. But in many places Socrates seems to talk of virtue in a vacuum, so to speak; in dialogues like the *Phaedo* and *Alcibiades I*, for example, “care of the soul” seems to be for him a universal desideratum, regardless of persons, and regardless of political context¹⁸. The big stress on society, and on stratified groupings within it (with differential abilities to achieve virtue) may well be a new, Platonic way of looking at things.

A.: Possibly; a number of people have thought that way and scholars are still discussing it. But to understand the particular view expressed in any given

¹⁷ For the invariable link of private and public *eudaimonia*, as well as the predominance of the latter, see Plato's *Republic*, V, 466 a; *Laws* III, 693 b –c, 718 a-b and Aristotle's *N.E.*, I, 1094 b 7-12, *Politics*, I, 1252 a 1-7, VII, 1324 b 31-1325 a 12.

¹⁸ See above, n. 16. Socrates is presented looking for the definition of the virtues (whose acquisition constitutes the “excellence of the soul”) in most of the early and middle Platonic dialogues: in the *Euthyphro* he examines piety, in the *Laches* courage, in the *Charmides* self restraint, in the *Euthydemus* wisdom...

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Platonic dialogue, one needs to take into consideration the context and the main subject of that dialogue. In the *Republic*, it's a question of defining justice in an ideal city, for example. By contrast, in *Alcibiades I*, Socrates is still operating in the context of the Athenian democracy, and concerned that each of the (equal) citizens of that community "takes care of his soul" — even more so for those who, like Alcibiades, have the ambition of becoming major political figures. This is his "divine mission", as he puts it in his *Apology*, aiming primordially at the good of his own city¹⁹. However, as Socrates says that he conversed also with foreigners, he might think that there is a "universal" "care of the soul". In the *Phaedo* his main interlocutors aren't Athenians, and the main subject — the nature of the soul and its fate after death — concerns every human being.

S.: It's certainly true that, as readers of the dialogues, we have to be careful to take the context into account where it seems clearly relevant. So I imagine you'll offer me the same type of resolution to my second qualm, and that is (as you yourself mentioned earlier), how in the central books of the *Republic*, Socrates (or, as I myself suspect, Plato) shows how the truly, unequivocally just and wise person in the paradigmatically just society turns out to be the philosopher-ruler. His/her virtue is "philosophical" (in Socrates' own words), while the virtues so-called of everyone else merely "popular".

If this is the case, however, we still appear to be stuck with a problem, since, if there really is a hierarchy among virtues, then only the person at the top of the ladder of virtues, the philosopher-ruler, has any chance of achieving complete *eudaimonia*²⁰.

¹⁹ Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 29 d-31 b, 33 c, 37 e.

²⁰ The doctrine is one that Plato seems to have adhered to till the end. For a collection of the passages throughout the dialogues in which it occurs see Archer-Hind, R.- D. (1894). *The Phaedo of Plato*. (London), Appendix A.

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A.: I don't see why this is such a big problem for you. It simply means that Socrates, in replying to Glaucon and Adeimantus' challenge, feels the need to distinguish between *degrees* of *eudaimonia*. The philosopher-ruler is simply the one with the most self-conscious, perfect and stable balance within, and thereby the greatest capacity for *eudaimonia* of, his or her soul.

In the *Republic* the division into "classes" is based on the supposed predominance of one of the parts of the citizen's soul and the excellent functioning of the city as a unique "live organism" depends on the particular practice of the relevant virtue of each class. But there is no question that all members of his paradigmatic society, if they are "doing their job", achieve the maximum *eudaimonia* consonant with the balance within²¹. All of them will be practicing the other virtues too, to the extent everyone is capable²², and in a way such as to secure the the final objective, which is the *eudaimonia* of the city as a whole.

S.: That's fine, except for the implications of your last statement. Because it seems fully compatible with the view I'm myself trying to propound, and that is, that in the paradigmatically just society all except the philosopher-rulers, while achieving *eudaimonia*, will apparently achieve it in some degree less perfectly than does the philosopher-ruler. Add to this Socrates' claim that all except philosopher-rulers operate at a merely "popular" level of virtue (according to the *Phaedo*, barely any virtue at all)²³, and I think I can see why Aristotle has some qualms about the theory.

²¹ Plato, *Republic*, IV, 441 c-443 b.

²² In Plato's *Protagoras*, 329 c *sq.*, Socrates defends the unity of the virtues.

²³ *Idem*, *Phaedo*, 68 b-69 d.

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A.: Good heavens! What time is it? If you are going to start on Aristotle, we'll be here till tomorrow morning!... O. k., keep it short.

S.: Well, let me start by going back to that passing comment you made about Aristotle. Earlier on, you will remember, you said that Aristotle famously agreed with the “function” talk at the end of *Republic One*, and this seems to me true. But Aristotle notoriously *disagreed* with Socrates on *eudaimonia*, and I'm interested to know how all this fits in with a more positive view of Socrates' position that I want to try out.

For a lot of people, as you know, it is more or less self-evident that Aristotle makes more sense than Socrates when he says that much more is needed for *eudaimonia* than simply the possession of a wise and virtuous soul – one needs friends, family, good health, and so on²⁴. Where do you stand on this? Most people feel both can't be right.

A.: Sounds reasonable. But I can't say I'm sure of that; you are full of surprises, and I have a funny feeling there's a surprise in the offing here too....

S.: Oh, I'm just feeling my way forward, as usual. Maybe I'll surprise myself!

But let's re-engage. Aristotle, as far as I can see, thinks that Glaucon and Adeimantus need a precise answer to the question they posed; that a precise

²⁴ See Aristotle, *N. E.*, IX, 1169 b 16-22, VIII, 1157 b 20-25, X, 1177 b 28 and the passages cited above, in n. 6; *Eudemian Ethics*, VII, 1244 b 5-28, VIII, 1249 a 18-b 25.

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answer can be made; and that the precise answer in question (*his* answer) makes sense. In so doing he of course uses the word *eudaimonia* in the popular sense in which they themselves understood it, where it is indeed this time more sensibly translated “happiness”, because it is now clearly being understood as a feeling term rather than a state-of-consciousness term.

His disagreement with Socrates seems to be over what one might call “total well-being”. For Socrates this seems to be strictly confined to psychic well-being; for Aristotle it involves a number of bodily and external goods in addition. In response to Glaucon and Adeimantus, Socrates had said: virtue is enough for total well-being, despite physical (and mental) suffering.

Or to put it more bluntly: one doesn’t have to “feel happy” (= *eudaimonia* 1) to enjoy “total well-being” (= *eudaimonia* 2).

Aristotle, in response to them, says: to enjoy total well-being (*eudaimonia* 2) and the feeling of happiness (*eudaimonia* 1), which are in fact the state-of-consciousness and feeling-facets of a single state of affairs, one needs both virtue and the possession of certain bodily goods (including freedom from great pain and suffering) and certain external goods.

A.: An interesting position, but you might want to express it differently. Aristotle himself adopts another stance with regard to the problem and argues that there are also degrees in the realization of the best human life. So he talks about the “first” or highest form of *eudaimonia* (which is a life including as much contemplation as possible, and leads to the intellectual wisdom reserved to the

²⁵ *Idem*, *N.E.*, X, 1177 b 24-1178 a 9.

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philosophers) and other, secondary forms of it that depend only on the acquisition of practical wisdom and the moral virtues²⁵. Both of them naturally need the elementary basis of necessary material and social goods. And it is this latter point, along with the rejection of the notion of an Idea of the Good, that distinguishes the Aristotelian theory from the Socratic or Platonic theory of the “good life” for the individual.

S.: Thank you for that! Let’s dream up a new locution for *eudaimonia 1* and *eudaimonia 2* afterwards.

A.: To get back to what you just said: the way you are putting it, it sounds as though you think Aristotle has the better argument, since he seems able to come up with a plausible-sounding response to Glaucon and Adeimantus’ direct question. But I still can’t see how this squares with your earlier defense of Socrates.

S.: It does if you see that they are operating from different understandings of what a person is. For Socrates the person and the soul are one and the same; for Aristotle, the person is the complex of soul and body²⁶. In view of this, each is driven to deal in his own special way with the question posed by Glaucon and Adeimantus, and each of the two of them (!) comes up with an argument which makes sense.

²⁶ See Plato’s *Alcibiades I*, 130b-e; *Phaedo*, 115d-e and *Republic*, V, 469d. For Aristotle’s definition of soul as the actuality of body see *De Anima*, 414a14-29. For an interpretation opposing the current belief of the Aristotelian vision of the soul as existing only as long as it is linked to a mortal body, see Bos, A.P. (2003). *The Soul and its Instrumental Body. A Reinterpretation of Aristotle’s Philosophy of Living Nature*. (Leiden-Boston: Brill).

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A.: Another example of hermeneutical generosity! But wait a moment; hearing this, it gives me an idea of my own! What if you are *wrong* in your surmise that Glaucon and Adeimantus conceived *eudaimonia* simply as a “feeling of happiness”? What if they, too, thought of it in terms of well-being, of the “excellent human life”, like Socrates? If they did (and why not?), they wouldn’t have been in the least surprised or disconcerted to find Socrates discussing it in terms of a definition of what constitutes the person, giving to this metaphysical quest a different answer from their own.

S.: Uh-oh...another problem I have to grapple with if I’m going to convince you (or myself). Fortunately [*looks at her watch*], we can defer that to another discussion! You did ask me to keep this bit short, didn’t you?

But I’ll say that for the time being I’m not unhappy (although not yet perfectly *eudaimon*, of course!) with our discussion of *ef zin*. As for leaving things without a firm conclusion — well, Socrates had a habit of doing that, as you said, so we are in good company!

A last glass of Samaina and I’m off for my siesta. This sun is not only dazzling, but also burning!

A.: Yes, I’m off for a snooze too. Do you want us to meet again tonight for the feast in the town square?

S.: Sounds great! You once said that you would teach me some steps of a few of your gracious Greek dances, remember?

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A.: It will be a pleasure, my friend, equaled only by the pleasure of this discussion!