

MODERN PSYCHOLOGY IN SUPPORT OF NUSSBAUM'S UNIVERSALIST APPROACH

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Abstract

In this essay the author critically examines possible objections to Nussbaum's universalist approach and shows how modern psychology can support her conviction in the existence of a single universal norm of goodness and refute the counterarguments of cultural relativism which holds that a universal norm of goodness cannot be rationally justified; that there are many norms of good life (*eudaimonia*) and they are all defined by their respective cultural settings. The author will also demonstrate the functional value of subjective well-being for universalist approach in virtue ethics and will prove that subjective well-being is a perfect universal criterion of goodness.

Keywords: virtue ethics, eudaimonia, cultural relativism, universalist approach, virtues, positive psychology.

In her *Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach* Nussbaum accused some virtue ethicists of the «abandonment of the project of rationally justifying a single norm of flourishing life for all human beings and a reliance on [local norms]». In her essay she defined the framework in which the problem of cultural relativity in virtue ethics can be solved. She expressed her conviction that «ethical progress» can take place only in the form of specifying the appropriate and inappropriate responses in the spheres of universal experience and choice in which every human being has to make morally relevant choices. «The job of the ethical theory will be to search for the best further specification [of what a virtuous action in each sphere is]», wrote Nussbaum.

In this essay I am going to critically examine possible objections to Nussbaum's universalist approach and to show how modern psychology can support her conviction in the existence of a single universal norm of goodness and refute the counterarguments of cultural relativism which holds that a universal norm of goodness cannot be rationally justified; that there are many norms of good life (*eudaimonia*) and they are all defined by their respective cultural settings. I will also demonstrate the functional value of subjective well-being for universalist approach in virtue ethics and will prove that subjective well-being is a perfect universal criterion of goodness.

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Relativists might say that it is not clear from Nussbaum's essay on the basis of which criteria the best specification of virtue can be defined. Nussbaum refers us to Aristotle: «Aristotle's ethical writings provide many examples of how such progress might go»². Yet, relativists may note that it is inappropriate to rely on Aristotle's writings because Aristotle himself failed to rationally justify his own list of virtues: the argumentation he provides is based on highly controversial assumptions.

Firstly, Aristotle did not clarify the conceptual link between good life (*eudaimonia*) and the exercise of moral virtues; in other words, he did not illustrate the connection between the facts of human nature and the necessity of being moral.³ According to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is life in accordance with the faculty that constitutes the uniqueness of human nature: rationality. Yet, why being rational means necessarily being morally virtuous? *How* does this necessity logically ensue from rationality? *How* do virtues lead to good life? One may answer in the following way: According to Aristotle, virtuous lifestyle leads to psychological flourishing,⁴ while vices generate internal disharmony in us⁵. Thus, this necessity can be easily explained in terms of rational desire to avoid suffering and frustration and to achieve internal harmony.⁶ Yet, this connection between moral behavior and psychological well-being was not illustrated by Aristotle. For example Swanton is quite critical of Aristotle's idea that virtues necessarily generate psychological flourishing.⁷ Though I do not agree with Swanton in this respect, her position is understandable, because the elucidation of the causal connection between ethical virtues and one's psychological state requires a detailed empirical analysis which was not provided in Aristotle's writings.

Another assumption of Aristotle that can be questioned by relativists is his belief in the teleological character of human nature. Aristotle's teleology presupposes the possibility of justifying a single norm of flourishing life in terms of universal human *telos* or function. However, relativists would say that the fact that human nature is teleological is not proven and therefore, the universal criterion of goodness cannot be justified.⁸ Indeed, intrinsic teleology of human nature is a very controversial claim and is not yet convincingly proven by its advocates.⁹

² Nussbaum M. *Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach* // S.M. Cahn (ed.) *Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. P. 704.

³ Kraut R. Aristotle's Ethics // E.N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition).

⁴ Harris G. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2004.01.02; Swanton Ch. *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 2003.

⁵ Kraut, op. cit.

⁶ Barnes J. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. P. 212.

⁷ Harris, op. cit.; Swanton, op. cit.

⁸ MacIntyre A. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984. P. 162.

⁹ Rasmussen D.B., Den Uyl D.J. *Norms of Liberty*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005. P. 123.

It is true that Aristotle's theory is based on highly controversial assumptions. Yet, this fact does not allow us to automatically infer that these assumptions are unprovable. Modern psychological science gives us grounds for considerable optimism in this respect. The teleological character of human nature looks quite plausible in the light of the latest theories of evolutionary psychology. As regards the conceptual link between the necessity of being moral and human nature, positive psychology demonstrates that there *is* the causal connection between ethical virtues and one's psychological state.

In this sense psychology provides us with powerful argumentation in favor of Nussbaum's universalist approach by filling in the gaps present in Aristotle's theory. It provides us with a reasonable prospect of coming up with a scientifically valid universal criterion of virtuousness. Although the scientific findings I am going to present are mostly suggestive and hypothetical, it doesn't mean that they are unworthy of our attention. Their suggestive character can be excused by the relative novelty of evolutionary and positive psychology. Taking into consideration the rapid development of science, one can be sure that in course of time it will be possible to talk about these findings with more certainty.

The advocates of natural teleology try to prove its validity by appealing to biology. Rasmussen and Den Uyl wrote that «what living things are and how they develop cannot be adequately understood except insofar as they are understood as functioning for the sake of the mature state of the organism. The process of pursuing and maintaining ends is the result of the very nature of living things».¹⁰ Thus «teleology can result from an internal directive principle that is an irreducible feature of the developmental process of the living organism itself».¹¹ This claim can be supported by contemporary evolutionary psychology. According to Daniel Nettle we are programmed by evolution to unconsciously strive for things that contribute to our reproductive success, in other words, that make us competitive representatives of our species.¹² It means that our nature is intrinsically goal-oriented, that all of us have an innate and irreducible disposition to pursue some evolutionally beneficial goal. This inborn disposition is exactly the «internal directive principle» described by Rasmussen and Den Uyl.

According to Daniel Nettle, in order to make people strive for reproductive success, evolution shaped an important conception in human mind which gives direction and purpose to all our unconscious strivings: the idea of happiness. Indeed, we desire things because we expect that they will bring us satisfaction. Without the concept of possible reward there would be no stimulus to pursue anything in life. From this we can conclude that happiness is a universal human *telos* that everybody in virtue of his or her human nature desires and tries to achieve.

¹⁰ Douglas, Den Uyl, op. cit., p. 121.

¹¹ Ibid., 120.

¹² Nettle D. *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. P. 4.

One may say that it would be more logical to conclude from Nettle's account that the real *telos* is reproductive success, while happiness performs merely a subordinate function. To this I will reply that the findings of positive psychology, which I will describe later, question this view, because happiness does not consist exclusively of goods conducive to reproductive success (such as material wealth, health and sex¹³), but also of goods that cannot be adequately explained in terms of reproductive value (the state of flow, meditation, the experience of meaningfulness of one's life). And still both kinds of goods are rewarded by the subjective experience of happiness which means that they both have some functional importance for the evolutionary process, though it is hard to say precisely what the importance of the second kind of goods consists in. Nevertheless, positive psychology makes it clear that there is much more to our internal directive principle than the primitive pursuit of biological survival.

If evolutionary psychology is correct, our nature is indeed teleological, and Aristotle's function argument makes sense indeed.

Before showing the connection between virtues and one's psychological state I want to discuss the possible functional value of subjective well-being for universalist approach in virtue ethics. Though Aristotle did not understand *eudaimonia* in terms of subjective well-being and treated it rather as an objective good, I will show in subsequent paragraphs that in the light of positive-psychological research such interpretation (paradoxically as it may sound) does not contradict Aristotle's insistence on the objectivity of *eudaimonia*.

According to contemporary virtue ethicists the term «happiness» has two meanings: the classical one and the modern one.¹⁴ The former is associated with an objective good, the latter – with subjective good. Virtue ethicists like Hursthouse believe that *eudaimonia* cannot be interpreted as happiness in the modern sense of the word because such happiness «connotes something which is subjectively determined»¹⁵. Hursthouse writes that the modern conception of happiness implies that it is solely up to me to decide what happiness is and whether I am happy or not, because there is no happiness common for all of us; there are many sorts of happiness, varying from individual to individual according to his or her desires. If we define *eudaimonia* in terms of modern meaning of happiness, that is, in terms of subjective well-being, we risk losing the objective criterion of right and wrong which is the primary function of *eudaimonia* in virtue ethics.

A similar position on the nature of happiness/subjective well-being is held by another famous virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre. His main argument against utilitarianism is based on the critique of the concept of maximization of happiness. Utilitarianism holds that our moral choice should be guided by the considerations of general happiness or pleasure. Yet, MacIntyre points out that it is unclear *which* pleasure, *which* hap-

¹³ Nettle D., op. cit., p. 163–164.

¹⁴ Hursthouse R. *Virtue Ethics* // Zalta (ed.), op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

piness should guide us, because happiness understood in terms of subjective well-being is «not [a state] of mind for the production of which [enjoyable] activities and modes are merely alternative means»¹⁶.

Thus, both Hursthouse and MacIntyre, despite their radically different positions on the issue of cultural relativity, share the same pluralistic view of subjective well-being. This view holds that the fact that happiness is subjectively determined presupposes plurality of happiness. *My* happiness is not *your* happiness. These are two different and incommensurable phenomena because firstly, we have different sets of desires and therefore different things make us happy; secondly, the very feeling of happiness may be experienced differently by us. Thus, there is no one single happiness, there are many happinesses. Plurality of happiness in turn excludes the possibility of using subjective well-being as an objective universal criterion of goodness.

However, this pluralistic view of happiness is undermined by the discoveries of positive psychology and neurophysiology which demonstrate that the sharp distinction between «objective» and «subjective» happiness drawn by virtue ethicists is inappropriate, because subjective well-being is in fact *objectively determined* and therefore is not different from happiness in the classical sense of the word.

Neurophysiologists found out that there is a direct connection between brain activity and mood.¹⁷ When we experience positive emotions, certain parts of the brain become active, and the more intense emotions are, the more active are the neural circuits which correspond to those emotions.¹⁸ Although it is possible that we experience happiness somewhat differently, it occurs in the same neurophysiologic framework, and in this sense there is no considerable difference between my happiness and yours. Physiologically speaking, it is one and the same state.

More interesting in this respect are the findings of positive psychology. Positive psychologists deal exactly with the modern understanding of happiness:

«we define happiness as it is most often defined in the literature, that is, in terms of frequent positive affect, high life satisfaction, and infrequent negative affect»¹⁹.

They would agree that happiness is something personal, subjective and that it is up to a person to decide whether he or she is happy or not. Yet, these scientists are sure that «the fact that the judgment of happiness is necessarily subjective does not mean that influences on that judgment cannot be studied empirically»²⁰. Taking this direction, using

¹⁶ MacIntyre, op. cit., p. 64.

¹⁷ Layard R. *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2005. P. 18.

¹⁸ Layard, op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁹ See *Review of General Psychology*. 2005. Vol. 9, № 2. P. 111–131, *Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change*, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Kennon M. Sheldon, David Schkade.

²⁰ Ibid.

a complex methods of interviewing combined with emotional monitoring, positive psychologists found out that happiness, though experienced subjectively, is, nevertheless, possible only under certain objective conditions (such as the presence of flow, meditation, goal-attainment, the feeling of meaningfulness of life, respectable status, intimate relationships etc.). And these conditions are common for all human beings. Their absence results in depression, anxiety and negative overall evaluation of one's life.

Among other things, happiness is impossible without the practice of psychological traits traditionally called «virtues» (which proves Aristotle's belief in the link between virtue and internal harmony). Seligman, Peterson,²¹ Haidt²² and other leading contemporary psychologists²³ demonstrated in their works that such virtues as love, kindness, forgiveness, gratitude, friendliness produce strong positive emotions in us. The regular and active practice of these psychological dispositions can be an enduring source of positivity in our lives, resulting in the decrease of stress, anxiety and depression, better physical health, feeling of meaningfulness of one's life, and the formation of enduring social connections which make a person feel comfortable, safe and confident. Vices on the contrary generate negative emotions and in general have exactly the opposite effects on our psyche.

From this we can conclude that although we may have different sets of desires, it doesn't mean that different things make us happy.

Thus, if positive psychology is correct, there is no inconsistency in interpreting eudaimonia in terms of subjective well-being. Such interpretation is fully in harmony with Aristotle's objectivist approach to eudaimonia and supports Aristotle's arguments about the connection between virtues and one's psychological flourishing. As paradoxical as it may sound, such interpretation does not deprive eudaimonia of its status of objective good. Pluralistic position that happiness is «subjectively determined» and therefore cannot be an objective criterion of goodness is wrong, because according to positive psychology, happiness is determined by a range of objectively existent conditions in our psyche and environment; it is determined among other things by the objective presence or absence of virtuous activity on our part. Thus, subjective well-being is in fact an objective good, because it contains a substantial element of objectivity. The objectiveness of subjective well-being allows us to speak about the essential singleness of happiness in the sense that individual experiences of well-being are not different and incommensurable phenomena, but merely *variations* of one and the same phenomenon.

²¹ Peterson Ch., Seligman M.E.P. *Character Strengths and Virtues : A Handbook and Classification*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2004.

²² Keyes C.L.M., Haidt J. (eds.) *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2003.

²³ Csikszentmihalyi M. (ed.) *Life Worth Living : Contributions to Positive Psychology*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2006.

The singleness of happiness makes it a perfect criterion on which Nussbaum's project of defining universal virtues can be based. From the idea of singleness of human subjective well-being we can naturally infer the single universal norm of flourishing life which can be defined in terms of objective factors that promote our subjective well-being. Since we all share the same general human characteristics which define our nature and make us one species, happiness is one and the same for all human beings regardless of their cultural setting. Therefore, the appropriate response in each sphere of universal experience and choice outlined by Nussbaum will be the response which is proved to be conducive to human subjective well-being.

Thus, modern psychology may be very helpful in defending the validity of universal criterion of goodness. It fills in the theoretical gaps present in Aristotle's writings and proves that Nussbaum's suggestion to rely on Aristotle in her project of defining a single norm of flourishing life is appropriate, because in the light of modern scientific research his assumptions about the intrinsic teleology of human nature and the direct connection between virtue and one's psychological state do not seem so implausible as relativists see them.