

Happiness

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I.

What difference does psychoanalysis make to our understanding of human existence? I have been living with this question for years, and in this lecture I want to begin to give an answer. These are the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, so I should on this occasion like to focus on the question of what difference psychoanalysis makes to our understanding of our life with values, in particular, of our life with ethical values.

Psychoanalysis teaches us that wish, if not hope, springs eternal. Here is a wishful thought that comes quickly to mind when we begin to think about psychoanalysis and ethics. Might it not be possible to expand our understanding of ethical life to take account of the fact that human beings live with unconscious motivations? The idea would be to use psychoanalysis to devise a more humane ethics—one that considered humans more fully and realistically before saying how they should live. The prospect might then open for some kind of reconciliation of individual human desire with the needs of society and civilization.

The tradition I am concerned with grounds ethical life in the development and expression of character. Perhaps the greatest achievement in this tradition lies at its origin—in Aristotle's ethics. For Aristotle, character is a developmental and psychological achievement. We are habituated into certain character formations by our parents, family, and teachers, who get us to act in certain ways repeatedly, before we can understand the reasons for doing so. We thereby develop certain stable psychic dispositions—to see and think about the social environment in certain ways and to act accordingly. This is our "second nature." Now, for Aristotle, certain character-formations are better than others. Those that facilitate the living of a full, rich, meaningful life—a *happy* life—are the human excellences, or virtues.

The attraction of this character-based approach is that it purports to account for ethical life in terms of the lived realities of human motivation and judgment. Consider, for example, human kindness.¹ This character-trait is not on Aristotle's own list of the virtues, but we do not have to stick to that list to preserve the overall ethical spirit. A kind person

¹ See John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

will have a distinctive sensitivity to the world—and a special sort of motivation to act. To be truly kind, one needs to be able to distinguish a situation in which one ought to step *in* and help someone who is struggling, from a superficially similar situation in which one should step *back* and allow the struggling person to develop the requisite skills and sense of autonomy. A kind person will be sensitive to that difference—and in noticing that difference will thereby be motivated to act in the appropriate ways. On this character-based approach, there is no way to specify, in a particular set of circumstances, what is the kind thing to do independently of the judgment of a kind person.

Already the hope of an expanded Aristotelianism is coming into view. After all, if ethical life is an expression of character, and character itself can be shaped by the psychologically enlightened training of parents and teachers, why can we not include our understanding of the unconscious in that training? We might then differ with Aristotle over what the best character-formations are—a happy life might come to take a different shape from the one he imagined—but the overall approach would be Aristotelian in spirit.

It is a thesis of this lecture that such a project cannot work—and, in coming to see why not, we shall learn about the psychoanalytic unconscious and about the attempt to ground ethical life in character. In brief, I want to argue that the unconscious is too disruptive to be contained in any straightforward account of character-formation.

Ironically, this project of including the unconscious in ethical character-formation would be unassailable if psychoanalysis were one more science among others. On this normalized understanding, psychoanalysis would be distinctive because of its hitherto unexplored subject matter, the unconscious. In opening up a new realm of inquiry, psychoanalysis would be adding to our knowledge. On this conception, psychoanalysis is an extension of what philosophers tend to call “folk psychology.” Folk psychology is the attempt to explain human action on the basis of beliefs, desires, and intentions to act. Indeed, its first systematic exposition is in Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Of course, the term “folk psychology” is somewhat unfortunate insofar as it suggests that these are the mental states people ordinarily ascribe to each other before they are in the grip of some particular psychological theory. In fact, the situation is almost the reverse. People regularly ascribe all sorts of complicated motivations and emotional states—including unconscious ones—to each other. And they only talk about “folk psychology” after they are in the grip of a philosophical theory about the elementary explanation of action. Neverthe-

less, one can see the idea that is at play: folk psychology would have to be expanded to include unconscious wishes and fantasies along with beliefs and desires, but then we could formulate a character-based ethics designed to take account of the whole kit and caboodle.

But psychoanalysis is not another science in any normal sense: about this, the critics are right. Indeed, it seems to me not just mistaken, but ultimately complacent to treat it as such. For what psychoanalysis uncovers is not a new area of knowledge so much as something disturbing about ourselves. Could there be a nondisturbing way of doing this? By now it is, perhaps, a too-familiar idea that in life we somehow keep the unconscious at a distance. The process that Freud called “making the unconscious conscious” could not, he thought, be a straightforward discovery, but necessarily involved transformation of the soul. It always involved uncovering something disturbing—and the uncovering always occurred under conditions of resistance and repression. Should the uncovering be so fraught in ordinary life, but theorizing about it be straightforward? Or might the apparent straightforwardness of psychoanalytic theory itself be part of the covering over?²

But if in theory and in practice the unconscious is always being covered over, it is also always already present and manifest in the coverings over. It is this intuition I want to take back to the first systematic attempt to work out a psychologically minded ethics. The question of this lecture then becomes not “What do we have to *add* to Aristotle?” but, rather, “What is already there in Aristotle’s ethics, disturbing the self-presentation, yet not quite conscious of itself?”

This question is of more than historical interest. For we live at a time when the promising approaches to ethics are broadly Aristotelian in spirit. Philosophical culture has grown weary of rule-based approaches to ethics. By now, the critiques of Kant’s attempt to ground morality on the moral law are well known.³ In briefest outline, from the moral law it is impossible to derive any specific conclusions about how to act in a specific set of circumstances. It is, in part, because this critique has become widely shared that there is a renewed interest in Aristotle. For

²We owe to Jacques Lacan and Jean Laplanche the idea that the history of psychoanalysis can be read as a history of the resistance to its own insight. See Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); “The Unfinished Copernican Revolution,” in *Essays on Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); and Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988); *Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953–1954* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

³See, for example, Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

Aristotle, it is precisely because it is impossible to specify a set of rules on how to act well that one must turn to a psychologically informed account of how to build good character.

Interestingly, this is an approach that Freud himself ignored. Freud's critique of ethical value is itself addressed to a certain law-based interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This interpretation focuses on the Ten Commandments, the Mosaic Law, the injunction to "Love thy neighbor as thyself," and so on. Freud was concerned with a certain inexorability of unconscious guilt that life within this ethical tradition tended to facilitate. Being brought up in the Law tended to produce in individuals cruel superegos, set up over against the ego, judging it harshly and inflicting ever-greater punishments and inhibitions. This was Freud's diagnosis of life within civilization. But Freud more or less equated life within the Law and life within the ethical, and he thereby overlooked this alternative, Aristotelian approach.⁴ For Aristotle seems to hold out the prospect of an ethics based on an integrated psyche in which values are harmoniously expressed in a genuinely happy life. Is this, then, a real possibility that Freud simply ignored? It is striking that Freud turned to ancient Greece for its myths, but not for its ethics or philosophy. Returning to Aristotle, thus, opens up the possibility of a different type of psychoanalytical reflection on the ethical.

Of course, psychoanalysis is itself concerned with the returns we feel inclined to make. And there seems little doubt that in contemporary philosophical culture, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whatever else it might represent for us, has become a fantasy of origins. It is where we return when we want to work our way back to the origins of an alternative to law-based approaches to ethics. And psychoanalysis teaches us to suspect that if there is a disturbance within the ethical, one ought to find at least hints of it at the origin. Certainly, the disturbance ought to be gaining some expression in the fantasy of origin. So this ought to be a return with a difference. The hope is to find out more, not just about Aristotle, but about ourselves in our previous goings-back. What have we had to overlook in order to treat Aristotle as an origin? What doesn't get seen in order to preserve the fantasy? In answering those questions, we may start to gain insight into the distinctive difference psychoanalysis makes.⁵

⁴ Interestingly, Freud seems blind to the ways the Aristotelian approach to the virtues was itself taken up in the Christian tradition.

⁵ I also have a personal reason for going back to Aristotle. My life in Cambridge—which stretched out over fifteen years—was one of the great personal and intellectual experiences

2.

There is, I believe, reason to question the foundations of the Greek ethical experience. One can glimpse the problem at the first moment in which Aristotle invites us to participate in ethical reflection. For the very first sentence of *The Nicomachean Ethics* induces a reflective breakdown:

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason *the* good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. (*Nicomachean Ethics* [E.N.] I.1, 1094a1–3)⁶

As generations of commentators have noted, the inference is invalid. From the fact that every art, inquiry, action, or choice aims at some good, it simply does not follow that there is one good at which all things aim. There has been no shortage of articles criticizing Aristotle—here the oedipal struggle and the desire to get tenure converge—but are we really to think that the founder of formal logic committed such a blatant fallacy? More insightful commentators assume that Aristotle could not be making such a blunder, and so there have also been ingenious attempts to make this sentence come out right. I am not going to go through them all, but will take one example that I take to be among the best attempts to make sense of this sentence: Aristotle is here trying to state what the supreme good *would be* (if there were such).⁷ The problem for this interpretation is that there is no textual indication that Aristotle is speaking hypothetically; indeed, he seems to emphasize that the good

of my life. It has certainly influenced everything that has gone since. Much of that time studying and teaching was spent absorbed in a philosophical engagement with Aristotle. When I left Cambridge, I wrote a book summing up my intellectual experience—and I stopped reading Aristotle. I trained as a psychoanalyst, and when I wanted to read or teach a Greek philosopher, I turned to Plato. Now, as I return to Cambridge fourteen years later, I am fascinated by the question of what it would be, for me, to return to Aristotle. For me to see how my reading of him would now differ from my earlier readings would be to take a measure of how I have changed—of what difference psychoanalysis has made to me. Perhaps I should note in passing that when I first came to Cambridge there was no Philosophy Tripos. One read the Moral Sciences. What's in a name? As we shall see this lecture: a lot and nothing. A lesson that emerges from these lectures is that psychoanalysis could never be included in the Moral Sciences—except as a limiting case, as that which disrupts the moral sciences—whereas it could be included as peculiar kind of mental activity that was properly called philosophical.

⁶ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* (E.N.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). English translations, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁷ See Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 9.

has “*rightly been declared*” (καλῶς ἀπεφηνάυτο; my emphasis) to be that at which all things aim. I suppose one can add “if there were such a thing,” but it seems an interpretive stretch.

This looks like a dilemma: Either one accepts that Aristotle made a logical error in the opening sentence of his fundamental ethical work or one must make coherent sense of what he is saying. Rather than choose, however, I should like to shift the question away from what Aristotle is saying and ask instead what he is doing. I would like to suggest that Aristotle is here participating in a peculiar kind of *inaugural instantiation*. He is attempting to inject the concept of “the good” into our lives—and he thereby changes our lives by changing our life with concepts.

Aristotle does not do this on his own. For an inauguration to be successful there must be a context in which it occurs. The relevant context in this case is the Greek philosophical effort—notably of Socrates and Plato—to found ethics as a form of practical-rational inquiry. For Socrates, the fundamental question is “How shall one live?” Ostensibly Socrates is asking a question, but ultimately it makes more sense to see him as attempting to introduce a concept—the concept of *a life*—into life. We are now challenged to consider *our lives* in deciding what to do.

Why think of this as the introduction of a concept rather than, say, an invitation to reflect with a concept we already possessed? It is now possible to glimpse the lineaments of the twentieth century’s legacy to philosophy. One of the most significant contributions of this century to philosophy—manifest in the work of the later Wittgenstein and of Heidegger—is a working-through of the idea that there can be no viable distinction between the existence of concepts and the lives we live with them. There can be no fundamental divide between thought and life. If we consider the confusion, anxiety, and anger that Socrates generated, there is little doubt that the Athenian citizens had, in Socrates’ time, no way to think about the question he was asking. Indeed, Socrates regularly confused himself. One has only to read the *Charmides* to see Socrates get himself into serious confusions as he tries to think about how to think about one’s life. And in the *Apology* Socrates famously says that he discovered the oracle that he was the wisest of men was right because of his peculiar ignorance. Although he did not know, at least he knew that he did not know, and that lone made him wiser than anyone else. But if no one knows the answers to the questions Socrates is asking—if, indeed, no one really knows how to go about finding an answer—then there is reason to believe that Socrates is not asking well-defined questions but is rather trying to introduce new ways of thinking and living.

This is the context, as elaborated by Plato, in which Aristotle injects “*the good*” into our lives.

Aristotle takes himself to be merely extending the locus of our pre-existing concern with our lives. But remember the case in Wittgenstein of a person who takes himself to be going on in the same way with the instruction “Add 2,” but who at some point in the series starts going on in what we take to be strange ways: 1004, 1008, 1012 . . .⁸ We realize in his bizarre goings-on that he hasn’t really grasped the concept—or that he is operating with a different concept that we do not yet understand. Now look what happens *to us* when Aristotle invites us in the first sentence to move from a concern for the various goods in our lives to a concern with *the good*: we are stumped, we need his lectures to teach us how to go on. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, this is evidence that, whatever he says he is doing, Aristotle is inducting us into a new way of life.

Jacques Lacan and the later Wittgenstein have, each in his own way, argued that a successful inauguration will tend to obscure its own occurrence. Lacan takes as an example the introduction of the concept of irrational numbers.⁹ Once we have the concept of irrational numbers, it will look as though they were always there, awaiting discovery. But if we take the later Wittgenstein and Heidegger seriously, this cannot be right. Life before the “discovery” of irrational numbers was not “missing” anything. People lived with lengths; they lived with numbers. The decision to apply numbers to lengths changed our lives with numbers and lengths: it opened our lives to new possibilities, to new ways of living and thinking. For the later Wittgenstein it only looks as though the irrational numbers were already there, waiting to be discovered, because our lives with numbers have fundamentally changed. Retrospectively, it will look as though earlier life without the concept of the irrational was incomplete, missing something. But that is because we are now embedded in a life with the concept, and it has become difficult to see any earlier form of life as anything other than incomplete.

Now if we go back to the first sentence of the *Ethics*, we can see an attempt to cover over its inaugurating nature. Aristotle himself says almost nothing about goods or the good: his assertion is basically about what others have thought and said. “Every art . . . *is thought* to aim at

⁸Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I.185–89 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

⁹Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 15–21, 256–57. See also S. G. Shanker, *Wittgenstein and the Turning-Point in the Philosophy of Mathematics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

some good”: strictly, Aristotle is passing on some high-class gossip. Rhetorically, the claim presents itself as a certain kind of received knowledge—common knowledge of the right sort of group. Indeed, part of what it is to be in this group is to take it as obvious that this is what “is thought.” Notice the impersonality and passivity: “and for this reason the good has . . . been declared . . .” No one in particular is doing the declaring: impersonally, it is thus. No doubt, Aristotle’s audience would have thought of Plato—it is hardly a secret who has done the declaring—but the sentence-construction pushes one away from the activity of Plato’s activity and steers one in the direction of accepting something as common knowledge. In particular, the sentence tends to keep from explicit awareness that Plato’s own declaring might itself have been part of this inaugural instantiating activity. Aristotle enters explicitly in his own voice only with the word “rightly”: “the good has *rightly* been declared.” His own activity here is all but effaced. Notice too that the inference is constructed in such a way as to suggest that there is no real question whether there is any such thing as *the* good—it is presented as though it were always already there—the only question is what it might be like. In these ways the performative activity embedded in this first sentence is hidden from view.

If the performance had succeeded, the sentence would have looked obviously true to us. Conversely, inaugural attempts will tend to draw attention to themselves when they misfire. Instead of looking like it was always already there, waiting to be discovered, in a failed inaugural attempt something will look odd, as though it doesn’t fit in. This is what is happening in Aristotle’s first sentence: Aristotle does not quite succeed in inaugurating “*the* good.” Perhaps it is a fact about us that we can no longer take this sentence as obvious; and if it is not obvious, it must inevitably provoke some discomfort. It is worth getting clear about what is disturbing us.

In effect, Aristotle is trying to introduce the concept by means of which it would make sense for humans to take a teleologically oriented interest in their lives. For him, the birth of ethics as a serious reflective inquiry simply is the introduction of the concept of *the* good as the concept in terms of which one should reflectively evaluate one’s life. Aristotle insists that this is of immense practical importance:

Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Should we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what

we should. If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is. (*E.N.* I.2, 1094a22–25; my emphasis)

It should now be clear that for Aristotle's act to succeed the audience must remain unaware of its inaugurating nature. For Aristotle is, in effect, injecting the teleological into life, and that act cannot itself be understood in teleological terms. It is too strong to say that this insight is repressed. Nevertheless, to grasp the inaugurating aspect of this act is to bust open the form of knowing and living that it attempts to create.

One can now see how Aristotle could make his way effortlessly to the end of his first sentence—and expect his intended audience to follow along. In the context of a teleological worldview, it makes sense to inquire about *the* good for us. It is *we* who cannot follow along who are in the less comfortable position of realizing that we can no longer live like that. We can no longer live like that, in part, because we are no longer living like that: thus our discomfort with the very first sentence. And thus our mild disquiet about what else might be opened up in that recognition. For once we become alive to the idea that Aristotle might be engaged in an inaugural act that, by its very nature, would tend to cover itself, the overall argument begins to look more suspicious.

Consider, for example, the ways Aristotle justifies his claim. He points out that the goods we already recognize often form hierarchies.¹⁰ The design and making of a bridle, for example, is ultimately evaluated by the contribution it makes to military victory. The suggestion seems to be that we could keep on going. But once we become suspicious, it becomes evident that there are significant asymmetries. First, in the familiar hierarchies, we already know what the master good is. In this case, it is military victory. Second, in these cases the master good already functions in determining the shape of the lesser goods. So, to continue the example, the goal of military victory does filter down and influence the shape of the bridles that are made. That is, the familiar hierarchies tend to work *from the top down*: the overarching and known good influences the shape of the lesser goods. Now Aristotle has suggested that, in considering these familiar hierarchies, we could just keep going in order to form the conception of a larger, all-encompassing hierarchy. But this is moving *from the bottom up*—and Aristotle has given us no clue how to do this. It would seem we have been invited to move in the wrong direction.

¹⁰*E.N.* I.1, 1094a4–18.

Aristotle goes on to argue that if there were not this final goal, desire would be vain:

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. (*E.N.* I.2, 1094a18–22)

It is surprising that this argument has not caused more anxiety among readers. There is, of course, a reason for a fairly complacent reading: We know that the intended audience for these lectures are people who are well brought up and mature.¹¹ And we assume the lectures are intended to produce some form of intellectual and practical comfort: “to those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of great benefit.”¹² That is why we tend to read the second conditional—“and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain [κενην και ματαιαν]”—as offering a *reductio ad absurdum*. But suppose we don’t assume from the start that the absurd is impossible. That is, suppose through a certain form of reflection we become aware that desire is inherently slippery. Then this line of reasoning would open up the real possibility that our desire *is* empty and vain. That is, this reasoning would open us to anxiety.

Of course, the first of Freud’s two major discoveries is that unconscious desire is inherently slippery. But even ordinary reflection gives us grounds for suspicion. We know that desire must settle to some extent for us to be able to act, but we also know that it is possible, indeed usual, for us to act on the basis of limited reflection. In general, people can tell us to some extent what they are doing and why. But, if called up short for a full accounting, it is typical for people’s accounts of their own desires to trail off, perhaps pointing vaguely in some direction.

Aristotle’s argument seems designed to intrigue his readers. He invites us to reflect on the absurdity of the idea that desire does not have an end, yet he also insists that it is mysterious what that end might be. Mysterious, yet of the greatest practical importance: “Will not the

¹¹ *E.N.* I.4, 1094b27–95a11; 1095b2–13.

¹² *E.N.* I.3, 1095a10–11.

knowledge of it have a great influence on life?" Indeed, it seems that Aristotle is tempting us when he invokes the image of the archers. The implication seems to be that his inquiry will provide us with that distant mark that up until now we have lacked. If so, it would seem that Aristotle wants to have it both ways. He wants to keep us at a safe, perhaps complacent, distance from anxiety; but he also wants to suggest that without this knowledge we are missing something of the greatest importance for our lives.

Suppose Aristotle had brought us precisely to this point of the argument—and then just left us here. Wouldn't he have brought us into a position that he just declared absurd? That is, we would be desiring everything for the sake of something else (a something else that we could not yet specify because it purportedly lay just at the horizon of our understanding, but we hadn't yet been given the mark).

Imagine a courageous person who had not yet engaged in much ethical reflection—that is, an ideal member of Aristotle's audience. Such a person, when asked why he did something, would say, "because it was the right thing to do." He may, of course, be able to say more about what bravery is, what are the pleasures and dangers involved, but he wouldn't be trying to justify or explain his bravery by referring to some desire outside of his bravery. In other words, he would be lacking that distant mark that Aristotle's ethical reflection purports to be about to introduce. But then it would seem that the effect of introducing this distant, important, but as-yet-unknown mark is to open the virtuous person to the possibility of anxiety. For he is now being invited to understand his action in terms of *the* good—the archer's mark that has thus far only been mentioned, not yet shown. Of course, being virtuous, he will not *feel* anxious: anxiety is not a possibility he will take up. But to see that the impact of the argument is to introduce anxiety as a possibility, imagine Woody Allen getting this far in the argument, and then being left by his teacher to his own devices: "Wait a minute, you're telling me there's some distant mark in terms of which all of my actions will or will not make sense—and now you want to leave?!" On the surface it looks as though Aristotle is about to provide us, the virtuous, with some ultimate reassurance for the lives we are already living. But if he is about to give us that, the fact that we don't yet have it must mean that, at the moment, we are lacking something important.

Aristotle thinks he can turn to politics to give us a glimpse of the archer's mark. To complete the passage begun above:

Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Should we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should? If so, we must try, in outline at least, to determine what it is and of which of the sciences or capacity it is the object. It would seem to belong to the most authoritative art and that which is most truly the master art. And politics appears to be of this nature; for it is this that ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even the most highly esteemed capacities to fall under this; e.g. strategy, economics, rhetoric; now politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, for the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good of man. For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete both to attain and to preserve; for though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states. These, then, are the ends at which our inquiry, being concerned with politics, aims. (*E.N.* I.2, 1094a22–b11)

This passage is more problematic than it appears. First, this is the only case in which Aristotle tries to cite the end via the art, science, or capacity that is directed toward it. In every other case, it is the other way around. Architecture, for example, is the craft directed toward building houses, buildings, monuments. In politics, by contrast, we do not know what the good is ahead of time. Rather, Aristotle points to the inclusiveness of politics to suggest that *the* good, whatever it is, must be in its purview. Is this reversal a symptom?

Second, Aristotle is trying to reassure us that we have some *actual* grounds that there really is such a good. After all, we do have politicians legislating; the polis is the arena in which meaningful human activity occurs, and legislation does help shape that activity.¹³ But if we look to actual activity, politics gives us little grounds for hope, and strong grounds for pessimism. Isn't Aristotle writing in the wake of the Peloponnesian War? In the aftermath of Socrates' death? It seems hardly likely that Aristotle was unaware of Plato's claim, put in Socrates' mouth in the *Gorgias*, that if the good is the end of politics then Socrates is the only true politician.¹⁴ But if that is so, the claim "we'll know what the good looks like when we watch the activities of real politicians"

¹³ See Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁴ See Plato, *Gorgias*, pp. 515–21.

turns into “we’ll know what the good looks like when Socrates runs the state.” We might as well wait for pigs to fly. The seeming appeal to the actual to justify the claim loses its force.

Third, the question of the political is deferred. I do not believe that any previous scholar has noticed that, if translated properly, the last line of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is identical with the last line of *Portnoy’s Complaint*: “So [said the doctor]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?”¹⁵ Here is the revised Oxford Translation:

Now our predecessors have left the subject of legislation to us unexamined; it is perhaps best, therefore, that we should ourselves study it, and in general study the question of the constitution, in order to complete to the best of our ability the philosophy of human nature Let us make a beginning of our discussion. (*E.N.* X.9, 1181b12–23)

In other words, in the closing lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle admits that any serious political study of the good has gone unexamined by his predecessors and it is only now time for him to begin. But at the beginning of the *Ethics* it was precisely political activity that was supposed to reassure us that there was a supreme good at which one might aim.

Even in the opening paragraphs of the *Ethics*, Aristotle seems implicitly to recognize that it is hard to tie his subject-matter down. “Let us resume our inquiry and state . . .” (I.4, 1095a14); “Let us, however, resume our discussion from the point at which we digressed” (I.5, 1095b14); “Let us again return to the good we are seeking, and ask what it can be” (I.7, 1097a15); “but we must try to state this even more clearly . . .” (1097a25). From a psychoanalytic point of view, there is always a question: why does a person keep coming *back* to something? What is it about the previous attempts that, for Aristotle, remains unsatisfying? Why does he feel the need to try again? Why can’t he just say what he means, be done with it, and move on?¹⁶

¹⁵ Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1967).

¹⁶ I do not want to hang anything in the argument on this, but one might note in passing that it is precisely here that Aristotle launches an explicit attack on his philosophical father: “We had better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although *such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own*. Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth *even to destroy what touches us closely*, especially as we are philosophers; for while both are dear, *piety requires us to honor truth above our friends*” (*E.N.* I.6, 1096a11–16; my emphasis). One might wonder: why the need to appeal to truth and piety to justify an aggressive attack?

3.

Aristotle seems confident that he can fill in the gap:

Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and choice aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of goods achievable by action. *Verbally there is very general agreement*; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy; but *with regard to what happiness is they differ*, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor; they differ, however, from one another—and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, *they admire those who proclaim some great thing that is above their comprehension*. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another which is good in itself and causes the goodness of all these as well. To examine all the opinions that have been held would no doubt be somewhat fruitless: it is enough to examine those that are most prevalent or that seem to have some reason in their favor. (*E.N.* I.4, 1095a14–30; my emphasis)

Aristotle, following Socrates and Plato, wants to argue that the value of our values is that they lead to and constitute a happy life. Of course, there is much to be said about this conception of happiness, but rather than follow Aristotle down that interpretive path, I should like to ask a tangential question: what is he doing when he introduces happiness at this point? I shall explore this question at length. But let me say right away that I think that Aristotle is performing a seduction in the psychoanalytic sense of the term.

Obviously, this needs explanation. To understand this claim I need to distinguish, first, a vulgar from a sophisticated sense of seduction; and, second, within the sophisticated sense of seduction, I need to distinguish a manifest from a latent content. By a seduction in the vulgar sense I mean the blatant sexual intrusions that Freud, before 1897, thought neurotics had been subjected to in childhood and had repressed.¹⁷ Although Freud abandoned the so-called seduction theory, a number of psychoanalytic thinkers have tried to refine that theory rather than abandon it, in the hope of holding on to a more sophisti-

¹⁷ See, for example, the *Studies on Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (S.E.)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), vol. 2.

cated truth.¹⁸ In this more properly psychoanalytic account of seduction, there is recognition that even in healthy relationships between parents and child there are transmissions of unconscious messages. These are experienced as messages, but they are necessarily enigmatic. Precisely because these messages escape our understanding, they captivate us: and this moment of captivation is, from a psychoanalytic point of view, inevitable. In this sophisticated sense, seduction is constitutive of our entry into language.

Basically, we have just seen the manifest content of seduction. We are by our natures susceptible to enigmatic signifiers—oracular utterances, if you will, which we can recognize as having a meaning—indeed, as having a special meaning *for us*—but whose content we do not understand. But the latent content of seduction is the idea that there is an explanatory end-of-the-line, an Archimedian point of explanation beyond which one does not need to go. Freud originally thought that he could stop his explanatory-analytic quest when he traced a neurotic's story back to a real-life seduction. It was as though the simple appeal to reality—*this* reality—could be the explanatory end-of-the-line. It was here, Freud thought, that the restless mind that searches for explanations can come to rest.

In abandoning the seduction hypothesis, Freud did not abandon the idea that children were often seduced or abused; nor did he abandon the hypothesis that such seduction caused serious psychological harm. What he abandoned—at least, according to his own conscious understanding—was the idea that this happened always and everywhere in the causation of neurosis. The deeper idea, though, is the recognition that the mind is always active. In particular, it is always active in the creation of fantasies. Thus even when there is a real-life, blatant seduction, there is still a further question: what did the mind do with it? The recognition that the mind is active in producing fantasies of seduction is tantamount to the admission that there is no Archimedian point, no explanatory end-of-the-line in a brute appeal to reality.¹⁹

We are now in a position to call Aristotle a seducer. He injects a special use of an enigmatic signifier into our lives and he puts it forward as something that ought to be an explanatory end-of-the-line. *Verbally,*

¹⁸ Most notably Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, and “The Unfinished Copernican Revolution.” Compare Hans Loewald, “Primary Process, Secondary Process and Language,” in *Papers on Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 184–91.

¹⁹ I discuss this interpretation of the seduction hypothesis in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 2.

Aristotle says, there is very general agreement that *the* good is “happiness,” but there is widespread disagreement about what happiness is. The agreement, then, seems only about a word—and about the place such a concept would hold in our lives, if only we could give it content. There is thus also general agreement that this would be a justificatory end-of-the-line, but there is at the same time a recognition that no one can say with confidence what this valuable condition consists in.

This seems to be the point of ethical reflection. The injection of “happiness” here does capture our attention. We seem to be seeking “*the* good,” and we are on a path of inquiry that we already recognize as attractive to us, but we do not yet have a clear idea of what this attraction is. Aristotle has already said that *if* we had knowledge of the good, that knowledge would have a great influence on our lives. We can recognize now, before we have it, that we would be much better off with this knowledge than without it. He now identifies this good with our happiness: something we can recognize as an ultimate good before we really know what it is. Doesn’t this heighten anticipation, exert *some pressure* on us to know? If we are creatures who desire our own happiness, and if happiness is attainable only through rational action (that is why animals cannot be said to be happy), then the injection of the idea that we can consider the happiness of our lives *taken as a whole* must serve to make us discontent. Even the virtuous person will feel, as Aristotle would put it, the “right amount” of discontent. For once this idea of happiness has been introduced, it must, as Aristotle himself recognizes, instill a longing to find out what it is.

Aristotle distinguishes the judgment of the many from the judgment of the wise. Now if we again remember the gift of the twentieth century to philosophy—the insight that there can be no fundamental gap between the content of our concepts and the life we live with them—it becomes clear that the use of “the many” cannot simply be a mistake about happiness. It must reveal something about the content of the concept of happiness. The use of “the many” reveals, first, that “happiness” is systematically inconstant. People use it to designate what they don’t yet have, what they are longing for, that which they have just lost and would like again. People tend to fantasize that if they just had this missing thing, it would make them happy. Thus, as Aristotle points out, the sick man longs for health and thinks that if only he can be healthy again he would be happy. In his sickness, he is oblivious to the thought that it would be a sign of his regaining health that he turns

his attention to something else that is missing and begins to fantasize that it would give him happiness.

Now there is supposedly a perspective—the perspective of “the wise”—from which once can see the fantastic nature of this longing. Nevertheless, the use of “happiness” is irretrievably entangled in that fantasy. Happiness is that which we would attain if our deepest longings (of the moment) were satisfied.

Second, the use of “the many” reveals that they are to some extent aware of their ignorance. “They admire those who proclaim some great things above their comprehension.” The many are ready to fall in love with a pronouncement they do not understand. It seems to be intrinsic to our use of the concept of happiness that we are especially vulnerable to seductions invoking it.

But these features of the use of “the many” suggest that “happiness” is a perfect transference concept. It is a blank that holds a place for “that which would satisfy our deepest longings” (whatever they happen to be). Thus, in retrospect, one can see how Aristotle could use the concept to carry out a seduction. Aristotle asks, what is *the* good of all our actions? It seems that we have somehow to take our lives as a whole into account, to do so while we are still in the midst of living and somehow to answer what to do next on the basis of that consideration. There is no obvious way to do this. In effect, Aristotle takes the concept of “happiness” from its unreflective home—where, for instance, we call the rich happy when we are poor, and in general fantasize that if only we could get . . . , we would be happy—and places it in a reflective context in which it is not yet clear how it is to be deployed.

This claim requires explanation. Obviously, there had long been speculation and comment on what made for a happy life.²⁰ What Aristotle is injecting is the idea that we can somehow be sensitive to *the* good—the happiness of our whole lives—in every decision, every action, every practical deliberation. The problem is that we don’t yet know what this sensitivity is, nor what it is that we are supposed to be sensitive to. In effect, there is an enigmatic signifier already circulating in the population—our “happiness”—and Aristotle, following Socrates and Plato, tries to inject a new use. The idea that there is a special use of “the wise” promotes the fantasy that there is already content to the concept, but that it is only perceivable by those who are in the know.

²⁰See, for example, the account of Solon’s visit to Croesus in Herodotus, *The Histories*, book I (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).

The seductive suggestion is that a very special, esoteric knowledge is needed. This is just how it looks when an enigmatic signifier is introduced: it will look like there is something mysterious and enticing and, if only we could get behind the veil, our lives would be, well, . . . happy!

4.

Aristotle now purports to fill in the blank. The good of each activity, he says, is “that for whose sake everything else is done.” So “if there is an end *for all that we do*, this will be the good achievable by action.”²¹ Aristotle says that he is going to state “even more clearly” what this good is—and he does go through the motions of giving its marks and features—but there is an important sense in which he says nothing. Consider, first, Aristotle’s claim that the good is complete.

Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are complete ends; but *the chief good is evidently something complete*. Therefore if there is only one complete end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most complete of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more complete than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more complete than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call *complete without qualification* {*ἄπλωσ δὴ τελειον*} *that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else*. (E.N. I.7, 1097a25–34; my emphasis)

Aristotle does not here tell us anything about what happiness is actually like. To say that the chief good is complete is basically to utter a tautology. It secures a logical space of an enigmatic signifier: something that holds the place for “the end of desire as such.” But this laying out of the logic of an enigmatic signifier tends to obscure the fact that this space is itself created. For there is some sense in which Aristotle’s fundamental claim is false: we do “choose” happiness for the sake of being able to live a life in which we conceive of it as forming a coherent whole. This

²¹E.N. I.7, 1097a18–23; my emphasis.

“choice” isn’t made, so to speak, inside life: it is, rather, the kind of inaugurating instantiation that gives life an inside. Once we have installed the idea of there being an end of all the things we do, life will thereby be so transformed that it will appear that there is (and always has been) such thing as *a life* having its own possible coherence and end. It will then appear that all possible choices occur in this field: within the context of a life. This is an indication that we have already been seduced into a certain way of life, a way of life that has been structured by the introduction of an enigmatic signifier into it.

Aristotle makes a similar move with the idea that happiness is self-sufficient:

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the complete good is thought to be self-sufficient *the self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing*; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, *without being counted as one good among others*— (E.N. 1.7, 1097b5–17; my emphasis)

One should read this, I think, as the utterance of a fantastic tautology: the imagining of the logical space that happiness would have to occupy. Happiness is that—whatever it is—which makes life desirable and lacking in nothing. That is, happiness is that, whatever it is, which makes us happy.²² Now, why do I call this tautology fantastic? Because although it is possible to make perfectly good sense of this claim, one can also see, just below the surface, the stirrings of a wish. After all, why formulate the condition of self-sufficiency in terms of a life *lacking in nothing*? It is a condition of life that we live with desires—and the experience of desire is the experience of a certain kind of lack. In a happy life, presumably, we have the right sorts of lacks and are able to satisfy them in the right sorts of way. But to characterize such a condition as a life lacking in nothing hints at the idea that the truly happy life is somehow beyond lacks—that is, beyond desire. The hint is of a life that is beyond the exigencies and pressures of life itself. The fantasy of a happy life becomes tinged with the suggestion of a life beyond life—a certain kind of living death. I shall return to this.

Aristotle himself seems to recognize that he has not yet said anything substantial:

²²I owe this happy turn of phrase to Gabriel Richardson.

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude and a clearer account of what it is still desired. This might perhaps be given if we could first ascertain the function of man. (*E.N.* I.7, 1097b22–25)

What the translator calls a “platitude” is *ομολογουμενον τι*: strictly, “a certain same-saying.” I do not think it a stretch to translate Aristotle thus: “to say that happiness is the chief good seems a tautology.” (“Tautology” literally means a same-saying.) Aristotle himself recognizes that he is not making substantial claims about either happiness or the good but is rather laying out the structure of a certain kind of concern. This isn’t simply a platitude, nor is it simply something that is agreed upon (another possible translation): it is rather the delineation of the logical space that any candidate for the title “happiness” would have to occupy. But he has not yet said anything about the occupant.

Now when Aristotle at last comes to his famous argument about the function of man, it looks as though he might at last be adding some content to the idea of happiness. But appearances can be deceiving.

There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle Now if the function of man is an activity of soul in accordance with, or not without, rational principle . . . the human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete. (*E.N.* I.7, 1098a3–17)

Hasn’t Aristotle at last given us the content of happiness? I don’t think so. Nothing of substance is added by bringing in the idea of rational activity. “Happiness” is the placeholder for the object of our concern when we take our whole lives into account (whatever it might be to do that). The rational principle here is nothing other than the intelligent, mind-directed approach to happiness (whatever that might be). But that is only to stake out the conceptual field in which happiness is placed. Aristotle himself says that we do not consider any of the other animals happy.²³ This is not because they are psychologically incapable of it, but because the concept has been introduced as the goal of a thoughtful approach to living well, taken as a whole. Again, Aristotle is doing nothing more than locating the place in which the enigmatic signifier must operate.

²³*E.N.* I.9, 1099b32–1100a1.

“But we must add,” says Aristotle, “‘*in a complete life.*’ For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy.”²⁴ This is the real transformation: the injecting of a concept into life that purportedly stands to our whole life as the good stands to any activity within that life. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the introduction of this concept raises conceptual problems that Aristotle has difficulty in resolving.²⁵ Can we call no man happy while he is alive? This is not just a matter of clearing up confusions, or brushing away sophistries. The injection of an enigmatic signifier carries with it the possibilities of contradictions, unworked-out problems.

Is it only the dead we can call happy, Aristotle asks, as being beyond misfortunes and reversals? But, he goes on, that would be absurd because we consider happiness to be an activity. And yet, he continues, “it is odd that when he is happy the attribute that belongs to him is not to be truly predicated of him because we do not wish to call living men happy, on account of the changes that might befall them”²⁶ This is a serious problem for Aristotle—and he has no real answer. He does offer certain empirical consolations: that the virtues are the best way to keep one’s balance when misfortune threatens and that, even in misfortune, one can never become base. But there is no conceptual clarification. And this would suggest that there is no answer: it would suggest, that is, that we are not here dealing with an articulated concept known only to “the wise” but with an enigmatic signifier.

Aristotle even manages to get himself puzzled about how far the “concept” of happiness extends: can a person’s happiness be affected after he is dead? The familiar point made by commentators is that the Greek conception of happiness is not coincident with our own. The less familiar point is that this “concept” is not tied down. Notice how tentative Aristotle is:

That the fortunes of descendants and of all a man’s friends should not affect his happiness at all seems a very unfriendly doctrine, and one opposed to the opinions men hold . . . and it makes a difference whether the various sufferings befall the living or the dead . . . or rather, perhaps, the fact that doubt is felt whether the dead share in any good or evil. For it seems, from these considerations, that even if

²⁴ *E.N.* I.7, 1098a18–20.

²⁵ See *E.N.* I.10.

²⁶ *E.N.* I.10, 1100a34–b1.

anything whether good or evil penetrates to them, it must be something weak and negligible . . . at least it must be such in degree and kind as not to make happy those who are not happy nor take away their blessedness from those who are. The good and bad fortunes of friends, then, seems to have some effects on the dead, but effects of such a kind and degree as neither to make the happy unhappy nor to produce any other change of kind. (*E.N.* I.11, 1101a22–b9)

Now it may seem “unfriendly” to hold that the misfortunes of loved ones will in now way affect the recently dead, but who says death is friendly to our wishes? Again, this may run counter to the opinions of most people, but is there any topic about which one should have less confidence in “the many” than in their beliefs about what happens after death? Aristotle cannot here be trying to get to the truth about happiness. At best, he can be working out the content of common belief. Aristotle does in general think one should consult common opinion—for *about features in this world* people do tend to grab onto some aspect of reality, even if they do so in a distorted form.²⁷ But it is obvious that about life after death, “the many” know nothing. In consulting common opinion on this subject one learns about cultural myths and fantasies; one learns nothing about the happiness of the dead. But this is all right if Aristotle is not trying to find out the truth about happiness, but is facilitating a seduction. For he is taking powerful and widely held wishes about happiness and claiming that these wishes can legitimately attach to the enigmatic signifier he is introducing.

Aristotle goes through the motions of “testing” his argument against common beliefs:

We must consider it, however, in the light not only of our conclusion and our premises, but also of what is commonly said about it: for with a true view all the facts harmonize, but with a false one they soon clash. (*E.N.* I.8, 1098b9–12)

On the surface this look like a kind of empirical confirmation, testing one’s position in the light of hypotheses that others hold. However, when it comes to popular beliefs, we have seen that Aristotle has already cut his cloth to fit current fashion. For the rest, he does no more than locate the logical space in which this enigmatic signifier is placed. Aristotle admits as much himself: “we have *practically defined* happiness as a sort of living and faring well.”²⁸ Similarly with the claims that it is a

²⁷ See, e.g., *E.N.* I.8, 1098b9–12.

²⁸ *E.N.* I.8, 1098b20–22.

kind of excellence, that it is itself pleasant and among the most godlike things.²⁹ Thus far we know practically nothing about happiness. But, ironically, knowing practically nothing is essential to seduction.³⁰

5.

Note that Aristotle's remarks thus far have all the hallmarks of an interpretation—at least, according to one understanding of that term. It looks as though Aristotle is saying to his audience, "Look, this is what your life was already about. You might not have consciously understood that you were aiming toward happiness, but now that I've given you this interpretation you can take better practical hold of your lives." Thus it looks as though Aristotle is just passing onto us a piece of knowledge—something that was already true but about which we were ignorant. That is precisely what an inaugurating instantiation will look like—if it is successful. Aristotle has already said that reflective understanding of *the good* will change our lives in important ways. But, from the perspective of the later Wittgenstein and Heidegger, there is no coherent way to understand the idea of changing our lives with a concept in fundamental ways while holding the content of that concept constant.

In fact, it is arguable that Aristotle is striving for nothing less than

²⁹E.N. I.8–9, 1098b30–99b17.

³⁰In this context, note the way that Plato chooses to end the *Symposium*:

At that point, Aristodemus said, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and some others among the original guests made their excuses and left. He himself fell asleep and slept for a long time (it was winter, and the nights were quite long). He woke up just as dawn was about to break; the roosters were crowing already. He saw that the others had either left or were asleep on their couches and that only Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates were still awake, drinking out of a large cup which they were passing around from left to right. Socrates was talking to them. Aristodemus couldn't remember exactly what they were saying—*he'd missed the first part of their discussion, and he was half-asleep anyway—but the main point was that Socrates was trying to prove to them that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy: the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet. He was about to clinch his argument, though to tell the truth, sleepy as they were, they were hardly able to follow his reasoning. In fact, Aristophanes fell asleep in the middle of the discussion, and very soon thereafter, as day was breaking, Agathon also drifted off.* (Plato, *Symposium* 223b–d, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989])

In other words, Socrates dramatizes a scene in which there is nothing left but an enigmatic message. Everyone has left or fallen asleep, there is no one left who can reconstruct the argument—and yet we feel that the message is crucial and somehow matters *to us*. Is there any choice but to create an interpretation? To understand the torrent of writing, thinking, interpretation that this seduction brought forth is to understand much of the history of Western literary criticism.

an ontological transformation of human being. To see this, let us start with Heidegger's idea that we are ontologically constituted by care. To see that this is more than a deep psychological fact about us, consider the following counterfactual schema:

If we were to cease to care, then . . .

The point is not that all counterfactuals of such form are false, but that they are all nonsensical.³¹ We see this when we recognize that the antecedent is not specifying any coherent condition. In the closest condition in which we cease to care, "we" cease to be. No doubt, one can find human beings in psychiatric institutions in severe catatonic states, in massive autistic enclosedness, where it does make sense to say that they have ceased to care. But precisely in looking at this allegedly limiting case we can see what is at stake: in ceasing to care, they have ceased to be one of us. This is not to draw a line between one tribe and another, one culture and another: it is to gesture in the direction of what it is to fall out of human being. The "fact" that we care, then, is not simply an important fact about what we are like, it is a structuring condition of the universe of our possibilities.

Now it seems that Aristotle is trying to get us to recognize that we are in a similar position with respect to:

If we were to cease to care-about-our-happiness, then . . .

First, Aristotle insists that humans are the only animals capable of happiness. Other creatures may flourish in their distinctive ways, but only humans can be concerned about their happiness—and this concern seems to be a constitutive condition of happiness itself.³² It seems that Aristotle is here trying to make an ontological distinction: he is mapping out the realm of human being. Second, Aristotle explicitly sees *all* forms of human being as various types of carings-about-happiness. Indeed, for Aristotle, one differentiates among these forms of being not by whether there is a concern for happiness or not, but over what form that concern takes. The virtuous person, for example, is harmoniously motivated in ways that accurately express and promote his happiness. Among people who suffered conflicts, Aristotle recognizes two types.

³¹ I discuss a related point about our mindedness in "Transcendental Anthropology," in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*.

³² *E.N.* I.9, 1099b33–1100a1; see also *X.8*, 1178b24–2.

First, there is the “continent” person who feels a conflict but in the end manages to do the right thing. Second, there is the “incontinent” (or *akratic*) who decides to do one thing, but then acts against his best judgment. This is Aristotle’s model of an irrational act. But both the “continent” and “incontinent” persons have it in common that their conflicts are among things they take to be goods. Temptation is the paradigm occasion for conflict, but whether or not one gives in, both sides of the conflict are directed toward some image of happiness. The wicked or intemperate person is the mirror image of virtue: he is pursuing some bad end—but only because he (mistakenly) believes it will promote his happiness. In short, for Aristotle, all forms of human being are structured by this concern.

This apparent universality of this concern helps Aristotle remain unaware of his ontological sleight of hand. For by introducing the idea that we are ontologically constituted by a concern for our happiness, he in effect slips in the idea that we are ontologically constituted by a concern for our lives *as a whole*. This does seem an unconscious attempt at making-true. For it is precisely the concern for our lives as a whole that serves to make our lives whole. And it is by introducing “happiness” as a way we might evaluate our lives as a whole, as a purported evaluative frame for our current understanding of what we are doing here and now, that life gets to be constituted as a whole. And insofar as Aristotle takes concern-for-our-happiness to structure all the possibilities of human being, he has endeavored to change our ontological constitution without noticing that this is what he is doing.

That, it seems to me, is the unconscious aim of Greek ethical reflection: to change our ontology without our noticing it. Thus we see the power of a certain form of interpretation: not just to change life, but to change the structure of possibilities in which life can be lived.

6.

In analysis, we are always interested when the analysand makes a sudden shift. And there is no doubt but that there is an abrupt shift in the last few pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—a shift that changes the meaning of the book as a whole. Had those pages not been there, the obvious lesson of the book would be that the happy life is the active life of the traditional ethical virtues informed by practical wisdom. But Aristotle famously closes the *Ethics* by claiming that, in fact, such a life would

only provide “second-rate happiness.”³³ The truly happy life is contemplative.

Generations of scholars have reacted in one of two ways. First, they have tried to show that the appearance of a shift is only an appearance. They point to hints earlier in the text and argue that contemplation is the direction in which Aristotle has been moving all along.³⁴ Second, philosophers who are interested in the contemporary value of an Aristotelian approach to ethics will tend to split off the end of the book and discount it. It is treated as part of Aristotle’s theology: of historical interest but not relevant to the central ethical approach of the book. These philosophers focus on Aristotle’s account of how virtues are instilled by habit and how they bestow their own distinctive ways of seeing and reacting to situations.

I don’t want to move in either direction, for both seem to me to be the work of philosophy’s ego. Not that I have anything against the ego per se. It *is* of value to show an underlying unity to the *Nicomachean Ethics* taken as a whole. But it is precisely the ingenuity of displaying this underlying unity that covers over the strain in doing so. Similarly, it is of course of value to use Aristotle as inspiration for contemporary approaches to ethics, but the beauty and excitement of that activity covers over the violence involved in lopping off a significant section of the book.

I should therefore like to try a change of tack. Leaving aside the question of the ultimate coherence or incoherence, I want to stay closer to the surface of the text and ask: what is the effect of this *apparent* disruption? What is involved in this last-minute recognition that the truly happy life is the contemplative one? The answer seems to me surprising. Just below the surface of the familiar arguments, the text serves to promote discontent and to valorize death.

7.

If the *Nicomachean Ethics* had ended at book X, chapter 6, the opening lines of the text would, in retrospect, have looked like a come-on. Why, after all, would we need an image of archers given a distant mark to aim at if the upshot of ethical reflection is that the life that we are already living is the happy one? The metaphor would be wildly off. A more appro-

³³“Δευτερος,” *E.N.* X.8, 1178a9.

³⁴See, e.g., *E.N.* I.5, 1095b14–96a5; I.9, 1099b11–18; I.12, 1101b21–31.

prate metaphor would be the adding of a bit of mortar between the already-secure bricks of the solid edifice. But the introduction of the ideal of a contemplative life does at last give us a mark to aim at, for it does involve a shifting of sights onto that mark. At the last minute, we are encouraged to think differently about the lives we are already leading. We are now encouraged to see them as pointing elsewhere.

The shift is in our conception of what it is about our life that really gives it value. And this will lead to a restructuring of our lives. Not that the contemplative life is altogether different from the practical life, but now that large part of life that is engaged in practical activity will be understood from inside that life as aiming toward the contemplative life.³⁵ That is, such a practical life, *when it succeeds in its project*, will be a contemplative life. For a contemplative life is not one in which we are always contemplating. Rather, what makes the life contemplative is, first, that practical life itself is understood as organized for the sake of providing time and space for contemplative activity; second, the practical activity of life is actually successful in securing room for contemplation; third, it is understood that it is this contemplative activity that gives this life its deepest value. The move from a practical to a contemplative life will involve a rethinking of the value and organization of practical life.

It is crucial to Aristotle's restructuring of ethical life that "happiness" has been functioning for him as an enigmatic signifier. He begins:

If happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest excellence; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be intellect or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper excellence will be complete happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said. (*E.N.* X.7, 1177a12–18)

Aristotle seems to be pursuing a thought to its logical conclusion, but note that this is possible because we do not yet know what happiness is. It has been introduced as a standard, yet because it is enigmatic we are susceptible to a last-minute shift in understanding what the point of our lives might be. It is the ethical equivalent of receiving an oracle and only at the last minute coming to understand its meaning *for us*. Aristotle, of course, relies here on an overall teleological framework, and he appeals

³⁵ See Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, on the central good; pp. 26–27.

to “the best thing in us.” The effect, though, must be to set us at a distance from happiness. For let us just suppose that we are the intended audience for these lectures: we are already well brought up, mature, more or less leading an ethically virtuous life and are now following Aristotle in a reflection on that life. Until this moment we ought to have been thinking that we are already living happy lives; but now comes the moment of separation. We begin to realize that the lives we have been living are not *completely* happy. So, although we are at this moment the furthest away from “the many’s” conception of happiness, this highest conception of happiness does have something in common with the lowest: we are again conceiving happiness as what we don’t at the moment have. Aristotle will achieve this distance by retrospectively giving new content to what is meant by “complete happiness.” And because we have already been seduced by the enigmatic nature of this signifier, there is pressure to go along.

Aristotle now argues that whatever the hallmarks of happiness are, one gets more of them in a contemplative life. Contemplative activity is, he says, more “continuous” and “self-sufficient” than ordinary practical activity.

And the self-sufficiency spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a wise man, as well as a just man and the rest, needs the necessities of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man and the brave man and each of the others is in the same case, but the wise man, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. *And this activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action. And happiness is thought to depend on leisure; for we are busy that we may have leisure, and make war that we may live in peace.* Now the activity of the practical excellences is exhibited in political or military affairs, but the actions concerned with these seem to be un leisurly. Warlike actions are completely so (for no one chooses to be at war, or provokes war for the sake of being at war; *any one would seem absolutely murderous if he were to make enemies of his friends in order to bring about battle and slaughter*); but *the action of the statesman is also un leisurly*, and—apart from the political action itself—aims at despotic power and honors, or at all events happiness, for him and his fellow citi-

zens—a happiness different from political action and evidently sought as being different. So if among excellent actions political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are unpleasurable and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but the activity of intellect, which is contemplative, seems both to be superior in worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure proper to itself (and this augments the activity), and the self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to the blessed man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this will be the complete happiness of man, if it be allowed a complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is incomplete). (E.N. X.7, 1177a27–b26; my emphasis)

As an empirical claim, it is dubious that the contemplative man needs others less, for he needs society to make possible the leisure conditions in which he can contemplate. But as a logical point, the just man necessarily acts in relation to others; the contemplative man acts on his own. What matters for us is the shift in value toward this solitary activity, for it represents a shift away from the idea that the ethical virtues are their own reward. The practical virtues are now said to offer some level of gain apart from themselves. And this, in effect, opens up a possibility for discontent within an ethically virtuous life. Had Aristotle not formulated the theoretical difference between practical and impractical activity, there would be no room for this discontent. But once contemplation is isolated from other forms of mental activity, the thought becomes available that only it is loved for its own sake, for nothing arises from it other than itself. Aristotle is now filling in a meaning for the enigmatic “self-sufficient.” If we have been following Aristotle step by step, we already committed ourselves at the beginning of the inquiry to the idea that “happiness” is “self-sufficient.” This is, as it were, our ethical oracle. Now in the closing pages of the *Ethics*, we purportedly find out what we have all along been committed to. Quite literally, we find out what the meaning of our life ought to be. And, at the same moment, most of us will discover that our lives fall short.

In this way, valorizing the contemplative ideal is tantamount to introducing a source of discontent within ethical life. We were lured into ethical reflection by the promise of a distant mark that, as archers, we could aim at. And, true to his word, Aristotle does give us a mark by

which we might reorient our sense of an excellent life. But this suggests that the practical virtues themselves encourage a reflection that ultimately leads to the conclusion that they are there for the sake of something beyond themselves. In other words, the life of practical virtue has within itself the possibility for generating its own sense of discontent.

For this reason, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not as complacent a document as it is often taken to be. It is by now a familiar claim that Aristotle's ethics articulates the values of an aristocratic class; and while this may be true, it overlooks the discontent that is being built into the outlook. So, for example, the point is often made that the theorist of masters will of course valorize leisure—and the activities that can only be carried out in leisure time. This may be an accurate political criticism, but, from a psychoanalytic point of view, life itself tends to be experienced in terms of various forms of pressure. According to Freud, the very first forms of mental activity—the hallucination of the absent breast under conditions of rising tension—is a fantasy of what it would take to be released from this pressure. Human-mindedness, at its heart, is constituted by various fantasies of release from the pressure of life. In effect, Aristotle takes up this longing and tries to incorporate it into a teleological framework. Nonleisured, busy activity is now interpreted as for the sake of leisure. This introduces a source of discontent for the nonleisured life—and it does so by structuring a fantasy. What had hitherto been experienced as the contentless pressure of practical life is now explained as that from which we would be released if only we could attain a contemplative state.

To be sure, Aristotle does say that the life of practical virtue is a happy one. But one does not understand that life properly, nor does one live it properly, unless one experiences it as pointed toward contemplation. That is, if one does not understand one's life as so oriented, one cannot attain the highest form of happiness—at best, there is second-rate happiness. But as soon as one does understand one's life in this way, there is also the recognition that, most likely, this second-rate happiness is as good as it gets. The political life at its highest does have a certain nobility, but once this higher form of happiness has been introduced, the political life is now seen as aiming beyond itself. This is an example of how one can become ensnared in enigmatic signifiers. At the beginning of the inquiry we were invited to agree that "happiness" was "complete" and "self-sufficient" though we had little understanding of what any of these terms might mean. They seemed together to articulate a

logical structure of teleological striving. But now a new conception of happiness is introduced in relation to which the political life, even at its best, is now revealed as “incomplete,” as not *really* “self-sufficient.”

Aristotle is explicit that now that the vista of a contemplative life has opened up, the life of practical virtue appears “second rate”:

*But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of excellence is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate. Just and brave acts, and other excellent acts, we do in relation to each other, observing what is proper to each with regard to contracts and services and all manner of actions with regard to passions; and all of these seem to be human. . . . The excellence of the intellect is a thing apart; we must be content to say this much about it, for to describe it precisely is a task greater than our purpose requires. It would seem, however, also to need external equipment but little, or less than moral excellence does. Grant that both need the necessaries, and do so equally, even if the statesman’s work is the more concerned with the body and things of that sort; for there will be little difference there; but in what they need for the exercise of their activities there will be much difference. The liberal man will need money for the doing of his liberal deeds, and the just man too will need it for the returning of services (for wishes are hard to discern, and even people who are not just pretend to wish to act justly); and the brave man will need power if he is to accomplish any of the acts that correspond to his excellence, and the temperate man will need opportunity; for how else is either he or any of the others to be recognized? It is debated, too, whether the choice or the deed is more essential to excellence, which is assumed to involve both; it is surely clear that its completion involves both; *but for deeds many things are needed, and more the greater and nobler the deeds are. But the man who is contemplating the truth needs no such thing, at least with a view to the exercise of his activity*; indeed they are, one may say, even hindrances, at all events to his contemplation; but in so far as he is a man and lives with a number of people, he chooses to do excellent acts; he will therefore need such aids to living a human life.*

But that *complete happiness is a contemplative activity* will appear from the following consideration as well. We assume the gods to be above all other beings blessed and happy; but what sort of actions must we assign to them? Acts of justice? Will not the gods seem absurd if they make contracts and return deposits, and so on? Acts of a brave man, then, confronting dangers and running risks because it is noble to do so? Or liberal acts? To whom will they give? It will be strange if they are really to have money or anything of the kind. And what would their temperate acts be? Is not such praise tasteless, since they have no bad appetites? If we were to run through them all,

the circumstances of action would be found trivial and unworthy of gods. Still every one supposes that they *live* and therefore that they are active; we cannot suppose them to sleep like Endymion. Now *if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, what is left but contemplation?* Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative, therefore that which is most akin to this must be most the nature of happiness. (*E.N.* X.8, 1178a9–b22; my emphasis)

If one looks at the overall movement of thought (and emotion) from the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* up until this moment, one can see the structure of a trauma. According to Freud, trauma has a retrospective structure.³⁶ In the typical scenario that Freud first envisaged, a child has an experience—a seduction—that at the time she cannot understand. Nevertheless, a trace of the event is laid down in memory. Only later, as the child develops, is there another experience that triggers a retrospective understanding of the meaning of the earlier experience. But this new understanding cannot be assimilated: it wounds the mind that was on the verge of understanding it. On this model, neither of the two experiences is traumatic in and of itself. The earlier experience need not have been traumatic when it occurred because it was registered, but not understood. The later experience, for its part, can be innocent in itself—as, for instance, the experience of mild sexual arousal in a situation that triggers a reminiscence of the earlier occasion. What becomes explosive is the cocktail of both those experiences.

Now the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is like the stage of childhood seduction. Ethically speaking, we are children when we begin. As the intended audience, we have been well brought up and are, so to speak, well disposed toward virtue. But we do not yet understand the meaning of our ethical habits and dispositions. We do not yet really understand our own character. In this sense, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the beginning of an ethical reflection on who we are. It is at this point that Aristotle installs a number of enigmatic messages to us: that our lives as a whole are directed toward “happiness,” that there is “*the good*,” “the end of all the things we do,” and that happiness is “complete” and “self-sufficient.” There is no way at the beginning of inquiry that we can understand what these messages mean. And thus they must have a cer-

³⁶See the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (*S.E.* I.350–59); Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, ch. 2. See also J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1983): “Deferred Action,” pp. 111–14.

tain oracular appeal for us: drawing us into this inquiry, yet puzzling and intriguing us.

The bulk of the book is then taken up with an exploration of the ethical life—the life organized around and giving expression to the traditional ethical virtues. Aristotle sometimes calls this the “political life” because the highest expression of such a life would be that of the statesman organizing, legislating, and running the polis. This is our ethical adolescence. And it is here that the trauma occurs. Aristotle said in book I that the proper statesman would have to have his eye on *the* good, for it is his job to organize the polis so as to promote it. Indeed, as we have seen, Aristotle rather preposterously claims that we should look to the actual activities of statesmen to get some idea what he means by “*the* good.” But if the highest expression of ethical life is the statesman actually legislating for *the* good, he has to know what he is legislating for. And it is at this point of reflection that ethical life suffers a trauma. For we find that the “meanings” laid down in ethical childhood come to acquire meaning in the course of ethical development that the ethical life can no longer contain.

Aristotle has seduced us into discontent with the ethical life as such. It is now seen as yielding, at best, a kind of “second-rate” happiness. This is what Freud would call a compromise-formation. We are told that the ethical life is still a happy one, but there is now a discontent-inducing qualification. At the beginning of the *Ethics*, as he delineates the marks and features of “happiness,” Aristotle says, “but we must add: in a complete life”—and he takes up the problem of reversals and misfortunes in life. The consolation he offered was that the virtuous person was the best equipped to keep his balance—he better than anyone else would be able to tolerate the reversal without losing his happiness. But now what we have at the end of the *Ethics* is a kind of intellectual reversal. If the ethically virtuous person really is good at keeping his balance, then he ought to take this occasion to shift his life from an ethical life to a contemplative one. If he cannot do so, he will be able to retain his happiness, but he cannot help but realize that it is second-rate.

In effect, Aristotle is recommending a different level of homeostasis for the best human life. That is, instead of living one’s entire life at the level of a practical engagement with the world, that engagement should now be seen as aiming at producing a surplus that makes leisure possible—and thus makes possible the activities appropriate to leisure. This transformation, in which practical activity is now seen as aiming

beyond itself, turns practical activity into busyness. Again, it is familiar to give a political critique of this move: a theorist of the master-class will try to valorize leisure activity. But from a psychoanalytic point of view, there is a deeper, inchoate urge that is getting expressed in a specific formulation. Psychoanalytically speaking, any form of life will tend to generate a fantasy of what it is to get outside that life. This is because life is experienced, consciously and unconsciously, as being lived under pressure—and it is correlative to that experience that there is a fantasy of release. Thus it is to be expected that as soon as ethical life gets conceptualized as such—as soon as we can experience such a life as forming *a life*—there will tend to be fantasies about what it would be like *to get outside*. Aristotle formulates a specific instance of such a fantasy—filling it out in teleological and aristocratic terms—but the fantasy has the general structure of promising true happiness just outside the “confines” in which we ordinarily live. In this sense, “the wise” have returned at a theoretical level to the view of “the many.” The many, you will recall, thought, when they were sick, that happiness lay in health, when they were poor, that happiness lay in wealth. Now we find that the ethically virtuous think that *real* happiness lies in contemplation.

The idea of a contemplative life is a powerful organizing fantasy—one that tends to hide its fantastic status. After all, one might think, the contemplative life is a real possibility—indeed, Aristotle must have thought that he was living such a life. Why, then, call this a fantasy? This is an important question, and it deserves a layered response. But, in the first instance, I want to claim that this question itself helps to cover over the fantastic nature of the contemplative life. That is, the very fact that a contemplative life could actually be lived makes it seem like it is not a fantasy. But the question of whether or not something is a fantasy is not answered by whether one can act on it. Some fantasies one can act on, others not. The real issue is what motivations get organized and expressed by the fantasy. What we need to look at is how life gets reorganized by the insertion into it of the ideal of a contemplative life.

The ideal of a contemplative life involves, as we have already seen, a reorientation of the meaning of that life. Consider an ethically virtuous person, in the midst of his life, who has just sat through Aristotle’s lectures. That is, someone who has just gotten to the point where we are now. What he must realize at the end of the semester that he could not realize at the beginning is that there is now a completely transformed meaning to “. . . in a complete life.” At the beginning of the semester he

could think: "I am already living a virtuous life. If I can *just* keep this up throughout my life I will have led a complete, happy life. And there is no better guarantee that I will be able to continue to lead such a life than that I already am leading such a life. Already being virtuous is the best guarantee I could have that I will be able to go on in the same way." But by the end of the semester, he has to think: "If I *only* go on living in this way, I will have achieved at most second-rate happiness." So a source of discontent has been injected into the ethical life. He now will reorient his life so as to aim for contemplation. Before he achieves the leisure time in which to contemplate, he cannot know for sure that the occasion will ever arise. Thus his ethically virtuous life must be lived with a certain amount of hope, expectation, and uncertainty. Of course, being virtuous, he will experience these emotions in moderation, but they will be there. And even when he achieves the leisured occasion for contemplation—and experiences the highest form of pleasure and happiness—he must recognize that such occasions as these will be short-lived compared to the rest of his life.

To be sure, Aristotle is talking about the happy life. And a contemplative life is a contemplative life even during the stretches within it that one is not contemplating. It is the entire life that is the happiest life. Fine. The real issue, though, is the lived content of this happiest life. Aristotle explicitly says that the lived moments of contemplation are both more pleasant and overall better than the noncontemplative moments of a contemplative life. So even in the best and happiest human life, most of the moments of that life will be lived with the realization that what ultimately makes that life the happiest and the best are passing moments within that life. And even in those best and happiest moments of the best and happiest life there is room for the thought that this is a fleeting part of one's life.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, this is all just as well. If contemplation were a state that one could achieve and just stay there indefinitely and unproblematically, then Aristotle would have been led to feel discontent within it—and he would start to fantasize a *real* happiness that lies just outside. The beauty of contemplation as a candidate for occupying a special place of longing is, first, that, for Aristotle, it is the teleologically highest form of activity. Second, it is all but inaccessible for most people, even the ethically virtuous. Third, those few who do manage to find time to contemplate will experience that time as precious and short-lived. As if to drive the point home, Aristotle

emphasizes that even if one is living the best and happiest human life it falls short of the gods, who get to contemplate endlessly and eternally.

But [the contemplative] life would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of excellence. If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal and *strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us*, for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything. This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the life of himself but that of something else. And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, *the life according to intellect is best and pleasantest, since intellect more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest.* (E.N. X.7, 1177b26–78a8; my emphasis)

I don't think it takes much imagination to see Aristotle saying that the happiest life has a smidge of disappointment built into it. Again there are the two sides of the same message. In contemplating we join in the activity of the gods; in contemplating we fall short of their activity.³⁷ That we must "strain every nerve" suggests it is a real effort to get outside the ordinary conditions of life—even the ethically virtuous life. And in the very process we are reminded of our own mortality. In relation to the gods, we do not have a sense of glorified participation with them (or: do not only have a sense of that) but also of the overwhelming distance that separates our contemplative activities from theirs. In achieving the ultimate human happiness we thereby become aware of the finite and limited nature of that happiness.

There is, though, at least the guarantee that within life we will always have something to strive for. In this way, the contemplative ideal gives meaning and shape to our experiences of discontent. It gives a shape to desire: and a guarantee that we will always stay at a certain distance from the ultimate object of our desire. Thus the basic experience of pressure in being alive is given a certain kind of shape and meaning.

³⁷ See also E.N. X.8. 1179a22–32: the double-edged message continues.

It has a shape that promises some escape from the pressure of life, while at the same time ensuring that the fantasy will always be in place to explain the continuing experience of discontent that is life itself.

All this would suggest that Aristotle implicitly recognizes that the true human happiness involves keeping happiness at a safe distance. It shouldn't be too far away or we'll get discouraged, but if it gets too close we'll start to feel some discontent with it and fantasize another happiness, lying just beyond the current horizon. And in placing true happiness just beyond the horizon of the ethical life, Aristotle introduces a lack into that life. Something is now experienced as missing from it. So the function of the idea of a contemplative life, from a psychoanalytic point of view, is not, as presented, to give us an end state that when achieved will finally give us true happiness. Rather it is to give us a fantasy for our present use: something we can aim for from a distance. Notice that we began the *Ethics* with Aristotle introducing a gap into ethical life. Ethical reflection is inaugurated with Aristotle's injection of the enigmatic signifier "happiness." An inquiry was then launched into what that "happiness" could be. By the end of the inquiry, though, we close that gap with a gap. The answer to the question "what is happiness?" is that it is a "something" that lies outside the ethical life itself. Now the point of the ethical life is to get outside it. And given that contemplation is praised for being the most solitary and ultimate self-sufficient human activity, it is hard to resist the conclusion that, for Aristotle, *the fundamental good of ethics is to get as far away from one's neighbors as possible*. The less one has to do with them the better! Even in the midst of ethical life, its real value, when correctly understood, is that someday it will allow one to get away from it.

8.

But what is this getting away from it all? Looked at from a certain angle, it looks as though Aristotle is valorizing death. At least, among the activities of life, he valorizes the one that comes closest to a fantasy of being in a deathlike state. First, it is an image of an escape from the pressures of ordinary practical life. It is what we would do in our best leisure time, and as such it is the ideal of what one does in a kind of existential Sabbath.³⁸ It is a higher form of activity than that of the

³⁸Cp. *E.N.* X.7, 1177b5.

nonleisurely practical life—and thus it is what we would do when we have gotten beyond life (as it is ordinarily lived). Second, contemplation is the activity of the gods: thus it is in itself a deathless activity. But deathless activity is precisely what the dead do: only the living engage in activities that come to an end. When Aristotle tries to think through what the gods do, he immediately eliminates all practical activities: all the fulfilling of needs or desires, all busywork. But for gods to be gods they must be active: so Aristotle needs to focus on an activity that isn't itself the practical filling of a need. In other words, if one wants to hold onto the bare idea of liveliness and activity but take away from that idea as many marks and features of actual life as lived, one ends up with contemplation.³⁹ Contemplation is the most deathlike form of life. Thus it is that, imaginatively speaking, immortality is a form of death: it is what death would be like if death were a form of life. For death is our immortal condition. Note that Aristotle stresses that contemplation is our most “continuous” activity, allowing the least interruption, that it is our most solitary and self-sufficient activity, and that it is complete in and of itself. If death were an activity, it would be like that.

At just this point in the argument, Aristotle reiterates a point he has made earlier: that other animals cannot be happy.⁴⁰ These are creatures who cannot take their lives as a whole into account, and thus cannot reason practically about the happiness of their lives. In other words, they cannot take their deaths into account: and their inability to take their death into account is intimately tied to their inability to be happy.

This, I think, sheds light on the value of our values. By this stage of reflection, it seems that, for Aristotle, the value of our reflection on the best life is that it induces a kind of being-unto-death. It creates a fantasy of a release from the ordinary pressures of ethical life, a fantasy of sharing with the gods the greatest, stressless pleasure. This is a fantasy that carries within it an experience of lack, an experience of being at a distance from this wonderful goal. It is a fantasy of release that helps us organize and direct our ordinary practical lives. Those who know most about human life know that what is best is to organize life so as to escape its ordinary conditions—even the conditions of excellence within it. What is best about being human is the opportunity to break out of being human. Or: to be most human is to break out of the ordinary conditions of human life.

³⁹ See, e.g., *E.N.* X.8, 1178b20ff.

⁴⁰ *E.N.* X.8, 1178b24.

9.

If Aristotle were the Aristotle with whom we think we are familiar, we would expect the *Ethics* to end with a summing up of all that has been accomplished in the text. We find no such thing: “are we to suppose that our program has reached its end? Surely, as is said, where there are things to be done, the end is not to survey and recognize the various things, but rather to do them”⁴¹ In fact, we find an Aristotle who seems somewhat irritated, saying that the real work is only about to begin.

As book X, chapter 8, ends, we are in a position to draw the following conclusions. First, most people are not and will never be happy; second, even the elite who lead an ethically virtuous life achieve only second-rate happiness; third, those few who are able to lead a contemplative life will at best be able to contemplate for relatively short periods of their lives. In brief, happiness by and large eludes the human condition. Humans may long for it in the way they long to win the lottery—and, in fact, the mass of humankind has a better chance of winning the lottery. At least with the lottery every ticket has an equal chance; for the mass of humankind the very possibility of happiness is ruled out at birth (or shortly thereafter). Those who are not lucky enough to be born into a situation in which they can be well brought up have no chance.

All the rest of animal nature is basically able to fulfill its nature unproblematically. There will be occasional mutants and occasions when the environment doesn’t cooperate, but, for the most part, each species is able to flourish in its distinctive way. It is only humans who have a characteristic problem of failing to thrive. For humans, happiness *is* human flourishing, yet happiness by and large eludes them. Thus by injecting “happiness” as the organizing goal of human teleology Aristotle manages to disrupt the teleological structure itself. For he has made it virtually impossible for humans to fulfill their nature. Although the teleological worldview is used to give content to what happiness consists in, once the picture is filled out it puts pressure on the teleological worldview itself.

Aristotle tries to save his teleology by a flight to aristocracy. “The many,” he says, are not swayed by good arguments⁴²—this is to be expected by now—but Aristotle now suggests that even if they had

⁴¹ *E.N.* X.9, 1179a34–b2.

⁴² *E.N.* X.9, 1179b10–80a5.

been brought up under good laws, they would still need to be tightly controlled by law throughout their lives. In other words, it is not simply a matter of their not having been well brought up to begin with.

But it is surely not enough that when they are young they should get the right nurture and attention; since they must, even when they are grown up, practice and be habituated to them, we shall need laws for this as well, and generally speaking to cover the whole of life; for most people obey necessity rather than argument, and punishments rather than what is noble. (*E.N.* X.9, 1180a1–5)

This is the teleological irony of aristocracy. On the surface it looks like the expression of a teleological worldview that only the best should live in the best way. Yet this position also expresses, as it covers over, an anomaly in the system: namely, that the human race is the only species in nature where almost all of its members are failing to flourish. This disruption of the harmonious order is caused precisely by the introduction of “happiness” as the purported concept by which we should evaluate our lives. It is usually assumed that it is because Aristotle was an aristocrat that he was attracted to such a teleological worldview. The question now arises whether to hold onto his teleology he had to be an aristocrat.

But even the aristocratic ploy no longer seems to be able to contain his doubts.

... if (as we have said) *the man who is to be good* must be well trained and habituated, and go on to spend his time in worthy occupations and neither willingly nor unwillingly do bad actions, and if this can be brought about if men live in accordance with a sort of intellect and right order, *provided this has force—if this be so, the paternal command indeed has not the required force or compulsive power* (nor in general has the command of one man, unless he be a king or something similar), but the law *has* compulsive power, while it is at the same time an account proceeding from a sort of practical wisdom and intellect. And while people *hate* men who oppose their impulses, even if they oppose them rightly, *the law in its ordaining of what is good is not burdensome*. (*E.N.* X.9, 1180a14–24; my emphasis)

The suggestion here seems to be that the compulsive power of law is needed *even for the good*. One reason is to contain the hatred a son would otherwise feel for his father. According to Aristotle, if a son's impulses were not inhibited by an impersonal law, but by his father's prohibition,

the son would come to hate the father. It no longer seems like happiness is unproblematically available even for those who already are good.

So even those who are constitutionally prepared for happiness, those who have been born into the right circumstances and well brought up—even they would have problems without the law. And yet, the law doesn't yet exist!

In the Spartan state alone, or almost alone, the legislator seems to have paid attention to questions of nurture and occupations; in most states such matters have been neglected, and each man lives as he pleases, Cyclops-fashion, "to his own wife and children dealing law."⁴³ Now it is best that there should be a public and proper care for such matters; but if they are neglected by the community it would seem right for each man to help his children and friends towards excellence, and that they should be able or at least choose to do this. (*E.N.* X.9, 1180a24–32)

And surely he who wants to make men, whether many or few, better by his care must try to become capable of legislating, if it is through laws that we can become good

Must we not, then, next examine whence or how one can learn how to legislate? Is it, as in all other cases, from statesmen? Certainly it was thought to be a part of statesmanship. Or is a difference apparent between statesmanship and the other sciences and faculties? In the others the same people are found offering to teach the faculties and practicing them, e.g. doctors and painters; but while the sophists profess to teach politics, it is practiced not by any of them but by the politicians, who would seem to do so by dint of a certain faculty and experience rather than of thought; for they are not found either writing or speaking about such matters (though it were a nobler occupation perhaps than composing speeches for the law-courts and the assembly), nor again are they found to have made statesmen of their own sons or any other of their friends. But it was to be expected that they should if they could; for there is nothing better than such a skill that they could have left to their cities, or could choose to have for themselves, or therefore, for those dearest to them. Still, experience seems to contribute not a little; else they could not have become politicians by familiarity with politics; and so it seems that those who aim at knowing about the art of politics need experience as well.

But those of the sophists who profess the art seem to be very far from teaching it. For, to put the matter generally, they do not even

⁴³ The reference is to *Odyssey* IX.114.

know what kind of thing it is nor what kinds of thing it is about
(*E.N.* X.9, 1180b23–81a14)

Now our predecessors have left the subject of legislation to us unexamined; it is perhaps best, therefore, that we should ourselves study it, and in general study the question of the constitution, in order to complete to the best of our ability the philosophy of human nature Let us make a beginning of our discussion. (*E.N.* X.9, 1181b12–23)

In other words: we need proper laws to be good and become happy, but such laws do not exist. No one has really thought about this seriously; and neither politicians nor sophists know what they are talking about. At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* we were given confidence that *the* good existed by pointing to political science. The good was purportedly that which legislators legislate. But at the very end of the book this reassurance is taken away. The original appeal was to the actual practice of statesmen in the actual world, but now there is the admission that no one in the actual world knows what he is doing.

From this perspective the beginning of the *Ethics* looks especially seductive. We were lured into a false sense of confidence about *the* good: even if we didn't know what it was, there were purportedly experts—those in the know—and they were the masters of political science. But now that the argument has already secured the conclusion that the truly happy life is contemplative not political, Aristotle can kick away the ladder. For him the question now becomes how to formulate legislation for a polis in ways that will keep most people on the right track practically speaking while making room for philosophy among the few.

At this point, a certain question becomes irresistible: does Aristotle's entire ethical system as it reaches this closing moment finally show itself to be an expression of mourning for Socrates? For in this pessimistic-hopeful vision, society is to be legislated in a way that preserves traditional values but makes room for philosophy instead of killing it off.

For the moment, I should like to take stock of where we have been. We began with a hope—and an approach to an ethical system that is at once attractive and self-satisfied. The original hope was that we might expand this character- and psychology-based ethics to include an understanding of the unconscious. But as we start to look at the system from a psychoanalytic point of view, we find that instead of being able to add to it, the system itself starts to fall apart. The *Ethics* presents itself as part of

a larger teleological system in which everything has its place and everything is in its place. What could be more existentially reassuring than to learn that the ethically virtuous life is the happiest? But now it appears that, for humans to be placed in the teleological order, Aristotle had to disturb the order in which they had been living. Following Socrates and Plato, Aristotle disturbs the universe by injecting “happiness” as a purported concept in terms of which one’s entire life can and should be evaluated. It is only when “happiness” is in place that humans can be said to occupy a place in the teleological order—but the teleological order cannot account for its own inauguration. The establishment of a teleological principle—“happiness”—by which to evaluate human life itself lies beyond the teleological principle.

And while it appears on the surface that “happiness” is a profound organizing principle for human life, just under the surface we begin to see that its injection into life has a profoundly disturbing effect. For although it was originally deployed to show that the ethical life was a happy one, by encouraging us to think about the value of our lives taken as a whole, Aristotle creates the conditions in which it is possible to formulate the fantasy of real happiness lying just outside. In this way, “happiness” creates its own discontent. Now Aristotle is too deep and honest a thinker simply to ignore this pressure, and he tries to contain it within the overall framework of his teleological system. But, as I think I have shown, it just doesn’t work. The teleological system cannot contain the expression of discontent and breaking-out that it itself generates. The question then becomes: how should we understand this discontent?