

Greek Ethics and Moral Theory

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Greek ethics has had a kind of renaissance in the last few years. A number of authors, tired, perhaps, of debates about forms of utilitarianism or technicalities of metaethics, have pointed to the classical Greek theories as offering a wider perspective. Three points in particular have been singled out for praise. First, Greek authors were usually concerned to provide an account of the good life for man — what they called *eudaimonia*, happiness — as opposed to focusing narrowly on right or good action. Second, this wider scope led them to treat seriously and without philistine prejudices the question of motives for morality, or reasons for wanting to be good — a question that has been an embarrassment to both Kantians and utilitarians. Finally, the Greek philosophers tended to be concerned with virtues of character, the traits that underlie or explain a disposition to act in the right way, more than with principles of right action. This is an advantage for two reasons. First, it would seem that our evaluations of people as distinct from actions must be based on a consideration of their character — indeed, even actions can hardly be understood or evaluated without regard to the agent's motives, and motives have more to do with character than with theoretical justification. Second, it seems that if ethics is to have some beneficial effect, preaching the rules of morality would be a most unpromising way of trying to achieve this. As Aristotle said perhaps most clearly, what people are apt to do depends first and foremost upon their character, not on any knowledge of moral or legal rules that they might possess. Hence we should study ex-

This is a considerably revised version of the lecture I gave at Stanford University. I have learned much from my commentators, Julia Annas, John Cooper, and Tony Long, though I could not attempt to do justice to all their suggestions. I am particularly grateful to John Cooper for letting me use his notes. Mary Mothersill has helped me throughout with encouragement and advice, and, last but not least, by correcting my English.

cellence of character, try to find out what it is and how it comes about, and avoid entanglement in discussions of moral epistemology or ethical foundationalism. The emphasis on virtue of character over action is connected with the theme of the good life, since, as the Greeks realized, what counts as a satisfactory life for a person will depend to a large extent on what she desires, and desires are more closely tied to character than to reasoning.

Still, such praise of ancient theories does not mean that we should simply return to them. Closer inspection usually shows that there were drawbacks as well as advantages. In fact, the same authors who praise ancient ethics tend to tell us also that there is no chance of return. The conclusion can be quite pessimistic: modern moral theory is hardly any good; ancient ethics was better but built upon assumptions that we can no longer accept. So perhaps it is time to abandon the project as a serious philosophical enterprise.¹

Such radical skepticism, I think, is premature, and I propose to take a closer look at the development of Greek ethical theories in the hope of finding out how ancient and modern questions might hang together. It seems to me that an examination of ancient theories that goes beyond the two great classics Plato and Aristotle (usually, and wrongly, thought to represent all of Greek ethics) might help us to see a little more clearly what if anything we could learn from them. Obviously, I cannot do this in detail here. My remarks will be limited to a few fairly general points of strategy.

For a modern reader the classical Greek treatments of ethics are surprisingly reticent about what we have learned to consider as the most fundamental question — the justification of moral decisions or the foundation of moral rules. Saying that those philosophers started from a different perspective, asking questions about the good life, will not really help to explain why they seem

¹See, for example, the postscript in Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

to have paid so little attention to a central problem — one that must surely have been current in their time, given the fifth-century debates about, for example, the objectivity or relativity of moral and legal rules. Furthermore, modern ethics is after all a descendant of the same tradition, however complicated the historical development, and so one would expect there to be some connection. Hence we might ask, how could the question of the foundation of moral rules appear so unimportant at the beginning, and when and where did it arise? I am going to argue that our question did not get much attention in the early stages of Greek ethical thinking, partly because it was confused with other questions, and partly because morality was not considered to be a question of rules until the time of the Stoics. However, the question did arise — and it might be that the first explicit debate about the foundations of moral rules led to that split between questions about happiness and moral questions which is rightly deplored by modern writers.

I

First, a very general outline of the type of theory I shall call eudaimonist. I will look at the four best-documented versions of eudaimonism (Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics) and ask where and how questions about the foundations of morality did or should have come up.

Greek ethical theories are theories about the good life; their starting point is Socrates' question in the *Gorgias* (472C-D) — how should we live to be happy? Greek philosophers after Socrates assume that happiness or living well is an object of desire for everyone. This might be taken in a fairly trivial sense, meaning no more than that everybody would rather be satisfied with their lives than otherwise. But these philosophers also assume that happiness is a goal of action. This is no longer trivial, and not just because one might believe that it is a matter of luck, not of one's own efforts, whether one is living well. The main prob-

lem arises from the assumption that it makes sense to consider happiness as one thing that we might try to achieve.

Might not living well consist, not in achieving a single end, but rather in achieving or getting lots of different things, so that a desire for happiness should be understood simply as a second-order desire to get what one wants most of the time, with no implications about objects of first-order desires? If so, happiness can hardly play the role of ultimate aim of action that the Greeks ascribed to it — that for the sake of which everything in one's life ought to be done, as the Stoics put it (see v. Arnim, *Stoic. Vet. Fragm.* 3.2, p. 3). For then to say that one does something “for the sake of happiness” is just to say that one does it because one wants to, and that is hardly an explanation. If happiness is to play the role of ultimate aim of desire and action, it must be something more concrete — either a certain life-pattern or else a life lived in a certain sort of way.² To say that happiness is the ultimate end of action, then, seems to presuppose (*a*) that there is a general answer to the question What sort of life can count as a good life for humans? (*b*) that every human being desires to live a good life, and (*c*) that we do or should plan all our actions in such a way that they lead or contribute to such a life.

All of these assumptions may seem dubious. The first has sometimes been rejected on the ground that there can be no general answer to the question about a good life because individuals differ so much in character, talent, and inclinations that it makes no sense to look for a recipe that fits everyone. This seems to me to be a rather superficial point and easy to refute. We need only to think of the notion of welfare to realize that there is probably quite a long list of generally necessary conditions for a satisfactory human life. A description of the good life in general will no

²The first is suggested by classifications of kinds of lives (*bioi*), such as money making, politics, or philosophy (see, e.g., Plato, *Republic* 9 S81C-E; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [EN] 1, 1095b14-1096a5); the second by Prodikos's famous parable about Herakles' choice between the lives of virtue and vice (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1, 21-34).

doubt have to make room for many individual differences, but this does not show that we could not try to find out what will be needed by way of necessary conditions for everyone. A theory of the human good can apply to individuals only as members of the species, but that does not mean that such a theory is useless or impossible. (I do not mean to suggest that it is easy to determine what counts as common and what does not. Obviously, a “daily schedule for the happy person” would be ridiculous, but should we include such things as education, opportunities to enjoy music or theater, traveling, and so on?)

The second thesis — that every human being desires to live a good life — should probably be interpreted to mean that every person who knows what the good life is will desire it as his or her ultimate aim (cf. Plato, *Philebus* 11D). But is this true? Some people, to all appearances, do *not* wish to have a good life in the required sense, for example, ascetics who deliberately deprive themselves of things that ordinary people would find indispensable, or monomaniacs who devote their lives to a single pursuit, like painting pictures or solving mathematical problems. It seems question-begging to insist that such persons have a wrongheaded idea of what is good for them, and that if they had been brought up in more enlightened ways, they would have realized that they “really” wanted to be prosperous, sociable human beings like everybody else. This objection should be taken seriously, but it does not show that it makes no sense to assume that people *normally* desire to lead a good human life, and indeed we seem to assume just that when we try to decide about how to treat others. For certainly even if some people do not want the things most of us desire, we do not feel justified in depriving them of the opportunity to have them. Thus ascetics and monomaniacs must be treated as exceptions that will not disprove the thesis that human beings generally desire to lead a good human life.

The last point — that all our actions are or should be directed toward the good life — is more difficult. Aristotle raises the ques-

tion whether we should assume that there *is* a single ultimate end in the first chapter of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, but it is not clear whether he wishes to maintain, as a factual claim, that all deliberate human action aims at happiness as its ultimate goal or, rather, more modestly, that rational agents should try to organize their lives in such a way that they can be justified in terms of a true conception of the good life. Not all eudaimonist theorists are as cautious as Aristotle on this point. For Socrates, Epicurus, and the Stoics, the good for man is an end we pursue in all our actions, whether we know what it is or not, so that we will be unhappy or disappointed with our lives if we have a wrong conception of the good. If we find that claim difficult to accept, we may still study the Greek theories on the basis of the more limited interpretation suggested by Aristotle.

Given the basic assumption that there is an ultimate end of desire and action, to be called happiness or living well, the task of ethics will be to establish what this end is — what happiness consists in — and how we may best achieve it. I shall use the term “eudaimonism” to refer to theories that use this framework.

Philosophers vary in their views of how we determine the end. Aristotle relies on his natural teleology;³ Plato and the two Hellenistic schools seem to start from a conception of the good, from which they then derive a definition of the good life. That definition largely determines the rest of the theory, which will consist in an investigation of the constituents of the good life and a discussion of how we may achieve the good life through action.

³This is not the doctrine that the natural world is governed by a rational planner who has arranged it in such a way that each part contributes to the good order of the whole. The Stoics, but not Aristotle, held such a view. Aristotle’s teleology is the theory according to which natural things, and organisms in particular, have a specific form and activity that is their “end” (*telos*) in the sense that it is (a) the outcome of their normal development from seed to maturity and (b) the kind of life that their characteristic capacities, when fully developed, permit them to lead. The latter is what Aristotle calls the “function” (*ergon*) of an organism.

II

Now note that eudaimonism as described so far has as yet nothing to do with moral theory. The topic of virtue comes in by way of the question whether or not a good moral character is necessary for the best human life. Philosophers have tended to argue that it is indeed necessary—the Hellenistic schools even tried to defend the view that it is also sufficient. These arguments initially arose from a background of opposition or at least controversy: one of the earliest arguments in Greek ethics, that of Antiphon the sophist, purports to show that justice is a hindrance on the way to happiness. Hence from the time of Socrates on we find Greek philosophers defending justice and the other virtues as belonging to the good life — either as a means, or as a constituent, or even as identical with it.

It is important to notice at this point that a defense of virtue, or of justice in particular, need not have anything to do with questions about the foundations or principles of justice. In order to show that a person needs to be just to lead a happy life, one has to argue that the kind of character that makes one disposed to act in the right sort of way will be beneficial, or that lacking this virtue is apt to make one miserable. Such an argument may proceed on an implicit understanding of what right action is, because we need not appeal to specific principles of justice to show that one needs the virtue. Indeed such an appeal is unlikely to be of great help, since principles of justice, as we ordinarily think of them, are distinct from principles of self-interest. But some defenders of justice did try this line, by producing a quasi-historical account of the origin of legal systems as instruments of social peace and cooperation and then urging people to support these goals by obeying the law.⁴ Such an account, if convincing, might show

⁴See, for example, the so-called Anonymous lamblichii (Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* 2.89, 607, pp. 402-404), an author from the time of the sophists, or Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of this name, who argues (322D-323C) that every citizen must be minimally just for a city to survive.

that human communities need a legal order and hence some kind of justice, understood as obedience to law.

However, as Plato saw, this is not a good defense of justice as a requirement for an individual's happiness. Egoists who thought that they could be happier if they had more than their neighbors and were not restricted by legal rules could plausibly arrive at the conclusions of Antiphon, or Calicles, or Thrasymachus — the best situation for an individual is one where everybody else obeys the law, but you are free to break it. This is, I think, why Plato has nothing but contempt for the early version of a contract theory of justice cited by Glaucon in the *Republic* (2.358E-359B). Plato is right in pointing out that this theory is inadequate to answer the question Why should I be just? But it seems unfortunate that he did not pay more attention to the possibility of treating this theory, not as a defense of justice as a virtue, but rather as an explanation of the origin and principles of justice as represented by the legal order.⁵ It may have been easy to overlook this point because the contract theory, and similar ones, were probably introduced as a defense of *justice* in the famous nature-versus-convention debate of the fifth century. Instead of showing why individuals should try to become just persons, such theories set out to argue that human society needs rules to survive; and by appealing to this function of a legal system, they also provide at least a rudimentary account of what the principles of such a

⁵This does not mean that Plato might then have accepted it. As John Cooper points out to me, he does implicitly rely on earlier theories of the origin of justice in his account of the development of the city, but he probably thinks that they are not sufficient, because a good state should do more than provide for the economic necessities and the safety of its citizens. What Plato eventually describes as justice in the city is an order of government designed to ensure that the most competent citizens rule and everybody is assigned their proper place and role in society. He seems to think that the contract theory invites the sort of reasoning exemplified by Thrasymachus's argument in book 1, and the story of Gyges (*Rep.* 2.359A-360D). This is, I think, quite unfair, since it supposes that the contract theory goes with the assumption that human beings are by nature ruthless egoists. (Thomas Hobbes, who combined a version of contract theory with an egoistic psychology, had great difficulties — and failed, I think — in refuting the egoist's objection. See *Leviathan*, pt. 1, chap. 15. But clearly the combination is not necessary.)

system should be: they should protect the members of communities from mutual harm and perhaps provide a framework for cooperation that would benefit everyone, if so we may understand the phrase “common good” (*koine sumpheron*).

It is a separate question whether individuals in a society should wish to have the kind of character that makes them reliable and law-abiding members of the community. Plato’s arguments attempt to establish this second thesis by showing that the soul of a just person will possess the kind of internal order that is necessary for happiness, while an unjust person will be constantly plagued by fears and inner conflicts. Given the task he has set himself, Plato is right to concentrate on moral psychology and the role of virtue for happiness, and we can see why questions about the principles of just legislation or just action, as distinct from questions about a just form of government, play a minor role in the *Republic*. Not that there is no theory, but it is mostly implicit. A just society, according to Plato, will be one that exhibits the same internal order that he wishes to ascribe to the just soul — intellect will rule, and emotion and appetite will be so trained that they gladly follow reason’s guidance. The *Republic* starts from the dubious assumption that justice is the same in a city and in an individual (368D-E), and Plato’s just society, with its three classes, has the same structure as the just soul. This is, I think, the counterpart of what I take to be Plato’s misunderstanding of the theories about the origin of justice: Plato rejects them as a defense of justice because he seems to think that social justice must be the same as individual justice — a virtue of society. It is not so surprising that he has difficulties in accommodating traditional Greek conceptions of social justice, such as the idea of equality, in this picture. I believe, in short, that Plato’s assumption of univocity — that the same word must indicate the same sort of thing in each case — was wrong in the case of justice and that his neglect of the question of principles is due to his exclusive attention to justice as a virtue of character. If one wanted to extract a thesis about the

justification of moral decisions from Plato's theory, one would presumably have to say that right decisions are made by the rulers on the basis of their knowledge of the Form of the good — which has remained a mystery ever since Plato wrote the *Republic*.

III

Aristotle's ethical theory follows the eudaimonist pattern set out by Plato. He is concerned with virtue as a constituent of the good life and so concentrates on moral psychology, working out what seems still to be one of the most insightful accounts of character traits and their genesis. However, he defines virtue of character as a disposition to make decisions that are adequate as determined by reason — and surely this makes one expect an account of the reasoning that precedes virtuous decisions, and in particular, of the first principles and premises of such reasoning.

Aristotle's notion of adequacy (the mean) would seem to require him to state his standards of adequacy, since he has expressly rejected Plato's postulated general theory of the good and hence can no longer explain adequacy in terms of "adequate for reaching a good result." But Aristotle nowhere produces an account of the principles of practical reasoning — presumably for the good reason that he thinks no clear and general account can be given. In his discussion of practical wisdom (*EN* bk6) he emphasizes above all the intelligent person's capacity to grasp what needs to be done in a particular case. He thinks that particular decisions and value judgments will have to precede the formulation of general rules that are derived from them by induction and will be in constant need of revision in the light of new situations. Aristotle's emphasis on the intelligent person's intuitive grasp of a particular situation as opposed to his knowledge of general rules may be quite correct — he might be right in thinking that for practical purposes experience without theory is more important than theory without experience (which he thinks is no use at all, since it won't influence action).

Yet one begins to wonder what it would be like to engage in a moral argument with an Aristotelian person of practical wisdom. “We must attend to the undemonstrated remarks and beliefs of experienced and older people or of intelligent people, no less than to demonstrations,” Aristotle says (*EN* 1143b11-13).⁶ He thinks that a person who has practical wisdom will be able to correct the law if a rigid application of it would lead to an unacceptable result. This may be quite true, but what if several such people disagree about what would be the right or just thing to do, or we find that we cannot agree with them? What reasons will they invoke to explain and justify their decisions, if challenged? It seems to me that Aristotle vastly underestimates the possibilities of disagreement here. Perhaps his readiness to give up on the possibility of general principles may be due to the idea that one would have to face the hopeless task of giving rules for each of the individual virtues. Aristotle seems to think that the good man’s decisions will be guided by his correct conception of the end, and that, according to Aristotle, is an active life in accordance with virtue. Hence he says that a good legislator should prescribe action in accordance with all the virtues (see *EN* 5.1129b19-25 and 1130b22-24; *Politics* 7.1333b8-9). Any reader of Plato’s early dialogues would have learned to be pessimistic about such a project. For time and again Socrates’ interlocutors try to define one of the virtues in terms of a specific type of action, only to find themselves immediately refuted by counterexamples. The most famous of these is probably found in the *Republic* (1.331C-D): justice cannot consist in returning deposits, for who would find it just to return a weapon to a madman?⁷ But all this might show is that spelling out rules for virtues is not the right way for finding principles of moral reasoning; it is not a proof that a different method could not succeed.

⁶Trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

⁷See also *Laches* 190E-191D for courage as “standing one’s ground”; *Meno* 73C-D for virtue as “ruling over people.” It is interesting to note that “standing one’s ground” is one of Aristotle’s examples of good legislation at *EN* 5.1129b19.

Thus far I have tried to show that Plato's and Aristotle's apparent neglect of the central question of modern moral theory can indeed be explained but need not be seen as a repudiation of the whole problem nor as evidence of some deeper insight. On the other hand, it is wrong to suppose that eudaimonist theories leave no room for such questions. Although they do not arise at the very beginning, they are certainly invited by any account of human virtue that includes justice. Plato seems to have thought that he had or could find an answer if only he could fully explicate his theory of the good; Aristotle perhaps concluded that he had said as much as could be said, given the overwhelming complexity of the matter, but if he thought so, that is not really to his credit.

I will now try to show that later Hellenistic theories of happiness did address the question of justification in promising and illuminating ways. I hope that a consideration of the fate of the Stoic theory in particular might also indicate what went wrong when theories of happiness and theories of morality split up into the allegedly different fields of prudential and moral reasoning.

IV

Epicurus was perhaps the first philosopher who made a clear, if implicit, distinction between justice as the virtue of an individual and the justice of societies or legal order. With respect to legal justice, he adopted the old contract theory rejected by Plato. The nature of justice, he tells us, is "a guarantee of utility with a view to not harming one another and not being harmed" (*Principal Doctrine* 31).⁸ Laws will be just only if they contribute to these goals (*P.D.* 37). It follows that a justification of legal rules, or rules of justice, must appeal to the purpose of the original contract, which, though obviously related, is not the same as happiness for the individual. Hence a separate argument is needed to

⁸Translation from A. A. Long and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 125.

show not only why rules of justice are useful for a community but also why individuals should want to be just persons. Here Epicurus's argument is complicated, as one might expect, since he needs to show why a person whose ultimate aim is a pleasant life for himself should take an interest in something that does not immediately contribute to this goal. Epicurus can argue, of course, that an Epicurean will wish to live in a peaceful society and be protected from attacks by other members of the group. But this is not enough, because it might invite the old conclusion exposed by Plato — let others be just, and prey on them if you can. But Epicurus also holds that a rational hedonist — of the peculiar Epicurean brand — has no motive for wanting to harm others. He knows that he can get all that he needs without having to take it away from his neighbors and that this will be enough to make him happy. Also, he values friendship (though it may be hard to account for this within the Epicurean system) and knows that this depends upon mutual trust (cf. Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 34). And if he should ever be tempted, say, to take what is not his, he will reason that injustice is not worth its consequences — the nagging fear of discovery and punishment (*P.D.* 34).

Epicurus does not claim that just action will directly contribute to one's happiness, but he believes that being a just person will — his is not an attempt to derive rules of morality from an account of individual happiness. But this important point was not much emphasized by Epicureans, and so it tended to be overlooked by unsympathetic critics like, for example, Cicero (in *De finibus* 2), who treats Epicurean ethics as a straightforward version of egoist hedonism and sets out to show that it is incompatible with virtue as commonly understood. Cicero's counterexamples, used to this day to demonstrate the untenability of egoism as a foundation for morality, are, I think, misguided, because Epicurus never maintained that rules of justice are identical with rules for maximizing individual pleasure. In any case, whether because of misunderstanding or lack of attention, this first attempt to separate ques-

tions about virtue from questions about social justice did not lead to an extended debate about the foundations of morality.

V

The first installment of that debate, which continues to this day, seems to have occurred in the second century B.C., when the skeptic Carneades launched an attack on the Stoic theory of natural law. The Stoics, as is well known, tried to show that happiness is identical with virtue. They did this by arguing for a conception of the human good that makes it coincide with what they considered to be the fundamental principle of morality — conformity to the order of nature. The reasoning behind this thesis is too complicated to rehearse here, but I will need to state its main steps to show the force of Carneades' criticism.

Very briefly, the Stoics held that the good, universally speaking, was rational order, represented in its greatest perfection by the order of the universe. Humans, as rational animals, would lead the best possible life if they tried to follow that order, so that the good for man could be defined as "living in agreement with nature." We can discover nature's rules for human beings by studying the way nature has made us and finding out from this how she intends us to organize our lives.

According to the Stoics, nature has provided us with two primary impulses that determine our behavior long before we use reason to guide our actions; and if we use reason to follow up nature's intentions, the result will be virtuous conduct. The two primary impulses were said to be toward self-preservation on the one hand, toward sociability on the other. These instincts lead us to seek out what contributes to our physical welfare and normal development of capacities and also to care about and assist our neighbors; they also teach us to avoid what might lead to destruction or harm for ourselves and others. The natural law thus directs us, as the Stoics used to express it, to "select" what is natural, that is, an object of one of the primary impulses, and to

reject what is contrary to them; and “appropriate action” consists in this selection.⁹ Virtue and “right action” require, in addition, that selection should be exercised with the aim of conforming to the order of nature. So, for example, the virtue of justice, since it has to do with interactions among human agents, will be based on the impulse toward sociability and will be exercised in pursuing its objectives with the intention of living in agreement with nature.

Obviously, this *is* a theory about the foundation of moral rules, albeit a very general one, and it is interestingly close to what one might expect to find, but does not get, in Aristotle — an attempt to show that virtue is a perfection of human nature. But it is presented as a theory of happiness, not primarily as an explanation of the principles of morally good conduct. The Stoics expected that trying to achieve happiness by following the rules of nature would lead to virtuous conduct — and this is, I think, the doctrine that was attacked in what must have been one of the most spectacular and entertaining episodes in the history of ancient philosophy: two speeches, given on two consecutive days, first defending, then attacking justice, by the Academic skeptic Carneades in Rome, 155 B.C.

We do not have any contemporary records, let alone writings by Carneades or indeed the Stoics he was criticizing; what we have is a mutilated and no doubt altered version of the negative speech in the fragmentary remains of Cicero’s *De re publica* 3. Rather than try to reconstruct an outline of this speech, I will just state what I take to have been Carneades’ main line of attack.¹⁰ He

⁹The Stoics made a terminological distinction between “selection,” which aims at the objects of the natural impulses, and “choice,” which aims at virtue or agreement with nature, and a parallel distinction between “appropriate” and “right,” or virtuous, action. “Natural things” are said to be “preferred,” their opposites “dispreferred,” while the predicates “good” and “bad” are reserved for virtue and moral evil.

¹⁰I assume that Carneades was arguing against the Stoics, not Plato or Aristotle, though these are cited as the main defenders of justice whom Carneades refuted, because the theory that is attacked is in fact Stoic. Cicero tends to believe, following his teacher Antiochus, that most of what the Stoics said was derived from, and in agreement with, the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle.

argued that the method of “selecting what is natural and rejecting what goes against nature,” far from resulting in virtuous conduct, would lead to cunning and ruthless egoism, if not of individuals, then of groups — exemplified, if Cicero’s report is correct, by the imperialism of Rome’s successful and highly admired generals. Since the Stoics had identified rational selection with practical wisdom, Carneades ironically agreed with them that wisdom will lead the way to happiness — understood, however, as success in getting the objects of the natural impulses, rather than as trying to live in agreement with nature. On the other hand, just and virtuous conduct in the ordinary sense, since it is not likely to lead to material success, would have to be considered as the utmost folly. Carneades concluded that rules of justice could not be derived from natural human impulses; on the contrary, the existence of legal rules must be explained as an attempt to restrain our natural selfishness, keeping people from harming one another by the threat of punishment.

Carneades’ devastating critique seems to have gone to the heart of Stoic theory and to have opened up a whole new field of inquiry and debate. What Carneades had pointed out was not only that it was doubtful, to say the least, whether the perfection of human nature would turn out to be virtue; what would have been more disturbing for the Stoics was the suggestion that the advantageous and the morally right, happiness and virtue, far from coinciding in the rational pursuit of objects of natural impulse, might actually be opposed to one another. Carneades’ argument seemed to show that there was no preestablished harmony between self-preservation and sociability such that following one’s natural impulses would always produce the right result, and it was unclear how one could possibly show that altruism would always take precedent over egoism in cases of conflict.

The effects of this new challenge to Stoic theory can be seen, I think, in Cicero’s *De officiis*, a book that became very influential in the history of later moral thought. Cicero tells us that his model for this book was a treatise by the Stoic Panaetius, one

generation after Carneades. Panaetius, according to Cicero, divided the topics of deliberation about appropriate action into three: first, we should ask whether an action is morally good or bad (*honestum, turpe*): second, whether it is advantageous or otherwise (*utile, inutile*); third, we must consider cases where the morally good appears to conflict with what appears to be advantageous (*De off.* 1.9; 3.7). The word “appears” is probably important here, because Panaetius no doubt intended to argue that these conflicts were *only* apparent, since what is morally bad can never be advantageous. However, Panaetius never wrote the book that was to deal with this problem (*De off.* 3.8), and one wonders, indeed, how he could have done so. For the way in which the problem is set up seems to condemn any attempt at a solution to failure: Panaetius had to all appearances identified the morally good with altruistic values, the advantageous with egoistic ones, and so he would have had to argue, in effect, that altruistic action is never an unprofitable course to take for an egoist. One understands why other philosophers — one would suppose Stoics — protested that the proposed topic should not be treated at all, because the advantageous could not possibly conflict with the morally good, being identical with it (*De off.* 3.9–11). This follows, indeed, from the Stoic thesis that only the morally good (Greek *kalon*, Lat. *honestum*) is good at all — clearly nothing that is not good can be advantageous, and every good will be an advantage. The problem that Carneades had pointed out, and that Panaetius misdescribed, should be described in terms of conflicts between two sets of values that are the objects of our natural impulses. None of these objects counted as good or morally valuable for the Stoics, because goodness was to be found only in rational selection itself, not in obtaining the “natural things.” If the Stoics wanted to defend their thesis that following nature results in virtue, they had to show somehow that nature’ also directs us to set the right priorities when we have to make a choice between things pertaining to self-preservation and to sociability.

Cicero, who bravely undertook to fill the gap left by Panaetius, succeeded only in giving a very clear statement of the problem, not in providing a solution. He offers a “formula” to deal with those “apparent conflicts,” which runs: “To take away something from another, or for a man to promote his own advantage through the disadvantage of some other man, is more against nature than death or poverty or pain, or anything else that could happen either to the body or to external things” (*De off.* 3.21). That is indeed what the Stoics should have tried to prove, but the supporting argument is missing. It appears that this is where the debate remained. Instead of working out a theoretical justification, later Stoics seem to have been content to repeat claims like Cicero’s about naturalness. And one might be inclined to think that the missing solution could hardly be found, because it might just not be true that nature, who gave us our basic impulses, also provided us with a natural way of bringing them into harmony, so that virtue can be seen as the rational perfection of a natural development of human impulses. In this respect, Carneades’ criticism seems to me to have been well founded.

VI

Still, it appears that the discovery of those apparent conflicts between utility and virtue had the unfortunate effect of suggesting that the pursuit of happiness and the path of virtue are two distinct and separate things, to be dealt with independently of one another. For in those conflicts, it seemed that happiness was squarely on the side of utility. But this is in fact merely a consequence of another anti-Stoic argument by Carneades, to the effect that happiness must be success in getting the objects of natural impulse, and wisdom — *prudentia*, in Cicero’s Latin — the art of being successful. There is no need, however, to conceive of happiness in this way, even if one grants the occurrence of real conflicts of values. Instead of describing these as conflicts between the goals of happiness and morality, one should describe them as

situations in which one has to choose between goods of different kinds, both of which are required for happiness. It seems unproblematic to say that a person who values both her own and other people's well-being would not want to obtain an advantage by harming others. But even if a real sacrifice is needed for the sake of helping or not harming others, this need not be seen as a sacrifice of happiness for the sake of morality— rather, it is the choice of a lesser over a greater evil. It may well be the case, depending on the seriousness of the loss, that happiness is thereby ruled out (as when one has to sacrifice one's life) — but it is still not obviously true that happiness could have been preserved or gained by harming or omitting to help others. The choice will be justified by the consideration that one would become more unhappy by committing a crime, say, or abandoning a friend in need of help, than by giving up some material advantage.

Instead of this sort of account, however, we seem to have inherited a view which distinguishes sharply between prudence (the Latin translation of *phronesis*, wisdom), as concerned only with nonmoral utility, and moral considerations, concerned with a different sort of value not related to one's happiness. No wonder it has become a mystery how anyone whose aim is his own good, happiness, could ever be argued into wanting to be virtuous.

It might be salutary to realize that the distinction between prudence and morality, which appears so natural or even self-evident to us, quite possibly goes back to a very specific argument, and a very dubious conception of happiness, that we have no more reason to accept than its author did.

Whether or not Carneades — through Panaetius and Cicero — was behind the bifurcation of prudential and moral reasoning, it seems to have led to the misconception that eudaimonism and moral theory are rivals when in fact we should probably see them as complementing one another. If we take seriously the broader conceptions of happiness advocated by Plato and Aristotle, we

may follow their lead in trying to find a motive for morality in moral psychology. Obviously, though, we cannot use such a conception of happiness as a starting point for the derivation of moral rules, since this would involve us in a circle: if happiness includes virtue, then we would be saying that in order to act virtuously, we should try to be virtuous. For the justification of moral rules we should perhaps, like Epicurus, look to the role they play in society, appealing to the functions of a social order — for example, protection from harm and promotion of mutually beneficial cooperation. The distinction we ought to preserve is not the contrast between prudence and morality but rather that between planning one's own life and setting up rules for the life of a community. Then if it is true, as it seems to be, that man is an eminently social animal, it should not be difficult to argue that we have good reasons to plan our lives within an acceptable social order. And that should mean, not that considerations of morality must override considerations of happiness, but that we can hardly hope for a truly happy human life unless we have the virtues that make us inclined to act in the ways we think we should.