

# Happiness and External Goods in *Nicomachean Ethics*



# Happiness and External Goods in *Nicomachean Ethics*

**Sorin Sabou**

## HAPPINESS AND EXTERNAL GOODS IN *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

Copyright © 2019 Sorin Sabou. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Pickwick Publications  
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3  
Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9362-5

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-9363-2

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-9364-9

### *Cataloguing-in-Publication data:*

---

Names: Sabou, Sorin.

Title: Happiness and external goods in Nicomachean ethics / Sorin Sabou.

Description: Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-5326-9362-5 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-5326-9363-2 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-5326-9364-9 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Aristotle—Nicomachean ethics | Aristotle—Contribution to the concept of happiness | Ethics, Ancient | Happiness—History

Classification: B430.A5 S23 2019 (paperback) | B430.A5 (ebook)

---

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

09/05/19

*for Simona, Andra, and Dora*



# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION | 1

## CHAPTER 2

### HAPPINESS AND EXTERNAL GOODS—AN INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP | 5

## CHAPTER 3

### SCHOLARLY SOLUTIONS | 20

## CHAPTER 4

### THE POLITICAL SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF HAPPINESS | 45

## CHAPTER 5

### AN ENHANCING INSTRUMENTAL DEPENDENCY | 60

## CHAPTER 6

### A CONSTITUTIVE DEPENDENCY | 72

## CHAPTER 7

### PRIAM'S LOSSES AND HAPPINESS | 103

## CHAPTER 8

### AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEPENDENCY | 113

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION | 129

### *Bibliography* | 135





## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

THIS PROJECT EXPLORES THE topic of dependency of happiness on external goods in *Nicomachean Ethics* (from now on, *EN*). Happiness, as understood by Aristotle in *EN*, is a complex and debated topic, being developed across several books. Happiness is defined by Aristotle as the ultimate good of man, as the self-sufficient good of the ruling science of Politics, as the activity of the soul according to virtue (*EN* I.7). And this ultimate political good is in need of external goods, such as friends, wealth, political power, etc. This dependency of happiness upon goods external to the soul is the topic of this project.

### 1.1 THESIS

In this project, my thesis to defend is this: the dependency of happiness on external goods, in *EN*, is interpreted in the light of the political self-sufficiency of happiness. The political self-sufficiency of happiness means that, the ultimate good of man, the good of the ruling science of Politics, is self-sufficient based on the self-sufficiency of the city. According to Aristotle, every human being, by nature, is political. The nature of every human being is fundamentally relational. We are what we are, among and with others in the city/πόλις. This constitutive political human nature functions best only in the city. Based on this political anthropology I interpret the dependency of the human political good on external goods in *EN*.

This dependency, I argue, is mainly of three types: (1) enhancing-instrumental, (2) constitutive, and (3) subsistent.

(1) The political good, happiness, depends on external goods of friends, wealth, and political power, both for performing virtuous activities and for self-enhancing. With the help of these political and material goods, happiness performs various virtuous activities in the city and self-enhances its character. These external goods are political external goods needed for promoting the well-being of the city and at the same time for enhancing the virtuous character of the virtuous happy man.

(2) The political good, happiness, depends on external goods of good birth, good children, and beauty because these external goods are constitutive of the political human nature. The political nature of every human being is constituted by our relationships with our prestigious honorable lineage, by our relationships with our good children, and by our enduring beauty at every stage of life. Only when such constitutive elements of our good political nature are absent, our blessedness is ruined. Our blessedness is marred because our political humanity is lacking fundamental relational constituents. The chances for the political good to be possible in human life diminish considerably when someone is utterly ugly, of low-birth, childless, and alone in the world, or even less so when he has bad children or friends, or his children and friends were good, but have died. When these political external goods are absent or lost, the political good, happiness, is not possible. This is so, mainly because our political humanity is dismantled; we have lost constitutive fundamental items of what we are.

(3) The political good, happiness of the intellect, which is separate from the body, still depends on the external goods of a healthy body and food, because our human nature, which is political and composite (body and soul), is not self-sufficient. We are, at the same time, human beings able to contemplate, and in need of a healthy body, food, and other services, to stay alive.

## 1.2 ROAD MAP

This thesis is defended by following the road map of a detailed argument. So, in chapter 2, I present the three main sets of texts which constitute the textual data for my study. These texts offer the elements of the inquiry, the tensions between various elements within it, and how I am going to analyze them. This textual data needs to be interpreted against the overall picture

of the two main topics: happiness and external goods. That is why, I present an overall understanding of how Aristotle explains and refines his interpretation of happiness, the political good, in *EN*, and then, how he explains the external goods as mainly goods external to the soul. I close chapter 2 by discussing important questions that needs to be addressed in order to understand how happiness depends on external goods in *EN*.

In chapter 3, I present various solutions proposed by the main experts in the field. I organize their interpretations in two main groups where their understanding of what kind of ultimate good happiness is, is decisive for how they interpret the role of the external goods. The scholars who interpret happiness as a monistic good come first and their work is presented in historical order, and then I offer a synthesis of this “monistic interpretation.” Then, I present, in historical order, the second group of scholars who interpret happiness as an inclusive good, and how they interpret the role of the external goods. I offer then, a synthesis of this “inclusivist interpretation.” I close chapter 3 by presenting the thesis of my project in the light of the present state of representative research.

In chapter 4, I present my interpretation of the meaning of self-sufficiency of happiness. I argue for a political understanding of the self-sufficiency of happiness. This means that the self-sufficiency of happiness is based on the self-sufficiency of the city. This political interpretation of the self-sufficiency of happiness has at its core a political anthropology. According to Aristotle, by nature every human being is a political being. When it comes to self-sufficiency, Aristotle argues that a family, a group, or a city are more self-sufficient than a single individual. The best place for a human being to thrive is the city. This political self-sufficiency of happiness is fundamental for the way in which I interpret the meaning of its dependency on external goods.

In chapter 5, I present my interpretation of the instrumental dependency of happiness on external goods. Friends, wealth, and the political power are mainly political goods. They are the necessary equipment or conditions for practicing political virtues or performing fine acts for the well-being of the city. At the same time, this performing of the noble actions enhances the character of the happy person who does them. For example, the performance of just actions will enhance the virtue of justice in the character of the person who does them.

In chapter 6, I present my interpretation of the constitutive dependency of happiness on external goods. The external goods of good birth/

low birth, good children/bad children, beauty/utterly ugly, good friends/bad friends are ultimately constitutive goods of the political nature of humanity. When these constitutive goods are absent or lost, our political humanity is dismantled and our blessedness is marred, and our happiness is hardly possible, if not impossible.

In chapter 7, I test this interpretation of understanding the external goods as constitutive of our political nature by studying what happened to Priam, the last king of Troy. This person loses his family, his friends, his wealth, and his city. His political humanity is dismantled, that is why his happiness hardly possible, if not lost. He is still virtuous, as his actions show, but for his happiness to be rebuild a long time would have been needed. He did not have it, as he was killed by Achilles's son.

In chapter 8, I present my interpretation of the subsistent dependency of happiness on external goods. In *EN* X.6–8, Aristotle returns to the main theme of happiness and explains how his inquiry reaches its completion. The complete happiness, contemplation is the happiness of the intellect. This is separate from the body. Even in this case of separatedness from the body, happiness still needs external goods, because on the whole our political human nature is not self-sufficient, it needs a healthy body, food and other services for staying alive. Someone needs to be alive to be able to contemplate; for an embodied soul as we are, we need at least a healthy body and some food to be able to do it.

Chapter 9 is the conclusion of the project. In it, I gather all insights made along the way of this road map and present my interpretation of the dependency of happiness on external goods in *EN*. As I have already said, this dependency needs to be explained starting with a political understanding of the self-sufficiency of happiness and of our human nature. In *EN*, this dependency is mainly enhancing-instrumental and constitutive, but also subsistent.

Now that the main road map is known to the reader, let us start walking and study it in detail and dialogue with others.

## CHAPTER 2

# HAPPINESS AND EXTERNAL GOODS—AN INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP

### 2.1 TEXTUAL DATA

THIS STUDY IS ABOUT happiness and the external goods in *EN*. Happiness and external goods in *EN* are a complex topic because these two elements of happiness and external goods are conceived in ways that are not easy to interpret. This is so, because there are several main tensions in what Aristotle says about them in *EN*. I quote below the main textual witness to these tensions. Texts (A) say this:

If [15] this is the case, 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. But we must add “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. Let this serve as an outline of the good; for we must presumably first sketch it [20] roughly, and then later fill in the details. (*EN* I.7, 1098a15–20, Ross and Urmson)

Now goods have been divided into three classes, and some are described as external, others as relating to soul or to body; and we

call those that relate to soul most properly and truly goods. But we are [15] positing actions and activities relating to soul. Therefore, our account must be sound, at least according to this view, which is an old one and agreed on by philosophers. It is correct also in that we identify the end with certain actions and activities; for thus it falls among goods of the soul and not among external goods. (EN I.8, 1098b13–18, Ross and Urmson)

Texts (B) say this:

Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are [1099b1] some things the lack of which takes the lustre from blessedness, as good birth, satisfactory children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and childless is hardly happy, and perhaps a man would be still less so if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by [5] death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with excellence. (EN I.8, 1099a30–1099b8, Ross and Urmson)

[25] The answer to the question we are asking is plain also from the definition; for it has been said to be a certain kind of activity of soul. Of the remaining goods, some are necessary, and others are naturally co-operative and useful as instruments. And this will be found to agree with what we said at the outset; for we stated the end of [30] political science to be the best end, and political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts. (EN I.9, 1099b25–33, Ross and Urmson)

Texts (C) say this:

Being connected with the [20] passions also, the moral excellences must belong to our composite nature; and the excellences of our composite nature are human; so, therefore, are the life and the happiness which correspond to these. 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 [25] equipment but little, or less than moral excellence does. (EN X.8, 1178a20–25, Ross and Urmson)

But, being a man, one will also need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body also must be healthy and must have food and other attention. Still, we must not think that the man who is to be happy will need many things or great things, merely because he cannot be [1179a1] blessed without external goods. (*EN* X.8, 1178b33–1179a1, Ross and Urmson)

These texts, (A), (B), and (C), play a decisive role in how the relationship between happiness and the external goods is understood. In texts (A), Aristotle's inquiry about happiness reaches an important signpost at the end of the function argument in *EN* I.7: "human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence" (*EN* I.7, 1098a15, Ross and Urmson). Aristotle tells the reader that this definition should "serve as an outline of the good; for we must presumably first sketch it roughly, and the later fill in the details" (*EN* I.7, 1098a19–20, Ross and Urmson). But, when Aristotle inquires about the goods (which are of three types: of the soul, of the body, and external [*EN* I.8, 1098b13–14]) and how they are relevant for the human good, he says that "we identify the end with certain actions and activities; for thus, it falls among goods of the soul and not among external goods" (*EN* I.8, 1098b19, Ross and Urmson).

These important texts (A) seem to convey the following divergent points about the relationship between happiness and the external goods: on the one hand,

(1) Happiness is just one type of good (activity in accordance with virtue/excellence), and that is why, the external goods are not part of it.

(2) Happiness, as the activity of the soul according to excellence, is only the primary component of happiness that needs to be further explained with details, just as a rough sketch is later on explained more; this seems to be done later in *EN* I.10 where Aristotle says that the happy person is someone "whose activities accord with complete virtue, with an adequate supply of external goods" (*EN* I.10, 1101a16, Irwin).

And, on the other hand:

(3) Happiness is a good of the soul, not an external good, and that is why, the external goods are not included in it.

(4) Happiness, as the ultimate end of man, is primarily a good of the soul, but, according to Aristotle in *EN*, (a) because we are political creatures, our nature is to live with others (*EN* IX.9, 1169b16–20), so, the ultimate good of man is political in nature, and (b) the goods that are relevant