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ETHICAL DISPOSSESSION AND THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

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Abstract. Cultural and historical context of eudaimonia (flourishing) has not been sufficiently explored. Over-generalization of virtues leads to presenting a thin and impoverished version of them. My own goal has been to resituate eudaimonia by thinking about the virtues less as internal personal qualities and more as capacities that are themselves historically situated and require a variety of cultural and material resources to be enacted.

Key words: happiness, flourishing, eudaimonia, virtues, virtue ethics, moral dispossession.

I'd like to talk about the concern I have with the scientific study of happiness. Though, I'll first begin by saying a little on the word "happiness" itself. Although there are different conceptions of what it means to be happy, I actually prefer the word "flourishing" to "happiness". By "flourishing" I primarily mean the Greek concept of eudaimonia, i.e., the view that the virtues are necessary for living a good life. Flourishing has a certain cachet in happiness studies. Despite its apparent attractiveness as a concept, I don't think recent research has sufficiently explored what it means and takes to flourish. And this is particularly true of those fields explicitly interested in the topic, for instance, positive psychology and the economics of happiness – both of which, despite having discussed at length over recent years the question of "Eudaimonic Well-being", have tended to overlook something essential to it, namely, how it's made possible by culture and history. It is precisely that side of flourishing that I've been interested in over the past years.

My own goal has been to resituate eudaimonia by thinking about the virtues less as internal personal qualities and more as capacities that are themselves historically situated and require a variety of cultural and material resources to be enacted. In doing so, however, I think there's also a serious problem in this regard, for it's also the case that the cultural resources available for sustaining the virtues have historically been in decline, at least, in the West, making avenues for flourishing more problematic. In many ways this is a common story. So moral philosophers have noted for some time now the decline of cultural supports for virtue ethical thinking and practice as a consequence of numerous historical factors, including, for instance, the modernization of philosophy as a university discipline, the declining faith in the polis as a source of character education and the rise of alternative moral and social frameworks such as natural law theory, utilitarianism, liberalism and so on.

What I find interesting, however, is how the history of the cognitive, medical and behavioral sciences might also contribute to that decline. So, for instance, in a recent article on the history of equanimity [1] I looked at how the history of science helped to transform this virtue from being an essential dimension of Western character ethics into

something more like a physiological feeling of inner calm. This new somatic equanimity is quite different, I'd argue, from a moral psychological concept that was common all until about the eighteenth century, and this one which I think is less rich and, therefore, less useful for guiding ethical conduct in the present. Now, transformations like this are part of what I would call, in this case borrowing a term from the anthropologist Christopher Hann [2], the ethical dispossession of Western virtue ethics: in the same way that people may be dispossessed of land or the objects they need for the livelihood, they may also be dispossessed of the conceptual, practical and material resources for virtue ethical thinking and practice.

My concern, however, is that an analogous problem may happen in the scientific study of eudaimonia, if it does not resituate virtues in the social and historical context. So to put the problem another way, if we over-generalize the virtues, we risk presenting impoverished and thin versions of them in the process. These thinner concepts may have the appearance of virtue practice and, therefore, mislead us into thinking we are promoting democratic and sustainable forms of well-being, but at the same time they may also fail to encourage the deep reflection on what a virtue practice entails in order to support a life well lived.

So this is the irony of what I call Homo-eudaimonicus: as a model being promoted in the science of happiness it has much potential for renewing virtue ethical orientations in the modern world, but it also runs the risk of narrowing down the cultural resources available for virtue ethical thinking and practice by over-generalizing the meaning of the virtues.

The questions for me then are: 1. How might the scientific study of well-being avoid contributing to that historical dispossession of virtue ethics? That's to say how might we work to re-enrich the virtue ethics historically? 2. How might we do so when the cultural supports for virtue ethics are in decline or sometimes even under attack (for instance, due to denials of things like freedom, autonomy and stable democracy, all of which are needed for virtues to flourish)?

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