RESURGENCE

The Pursuit of Happiness: C. S. Lewis' Eudaimonistic Understanding of Ethics

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ABSTRACT

In "The Weight of Glory" Lewis asserts that "[I]f there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is not part of the Christian faith." Lewis's alternative, classical approach sees ethics as essentially connected to the pursuit of happiness (properly understood). This is called "ethical eudaimonism," from the Greek term, "*eudaimonia*" (traditionally translated as "happiness"). In this paper I explain eudaimonism, reveal its pedigree, and defend its virtues.

C. S. Lewis begins his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," with these justly-famous words:

> If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you had asked almost any of the great Christians of old, he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philological importance. The negative idea of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the Christian virtue of Love. The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.[1]

Although Lewis's specific subject in this sermon is Christian discipleship, the picture he develops reflects a more general vision of goodness, truth, and beauty – the concerns of this conference. Indeed, Lewis begins with an observation about the good, about ethics; for his central notion – of Christian discipleship as rightly motivated by the promise of 'glory' in Heaven – will appear to many to be out of bounds, morally. The view in most "modern minds" of Christian ethics in particular, and of Christian discipleship more generally, is that doing the right thing is most essentially a matter of self-denial, sacrifice, and the

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“disinterested” fulfillment of obligation. Any positive relation that morality may have to one’s own happiness or well-being – any essential connection between “doing good” and “my good” – is ruled out in principle. Put differently, the “pursuit of happiness,” for us, is not a specifically moral pursuit. At best it is *non*moral, a matter of prudential self-interest; something that Americans should be legally free to engage in, in view of the Declaration of Independence, as long as one’s pursuit stays within the bounds of moral obligation. Perhaps more often, however, the pursuit of happiness represents to us something actually *im*moral: “because I want to be happy” is probably the most common reason one hears – or gives – when there is an attempt to justify morally wrong behavior. This way of thinking about ethics, and especially about Christian ethics, has attained an almost self-evident status among Christians and critics of Christianity (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche and Ayn Rand) alike.

But Lewis disagrees, as did the weight of classical – i.e., ancient and medieval – thought, both pagan and Christian, up until the late middle ages. Classical thinkers viewed happiness as intrinsically connected to ethics; indeed, they considered happiness to be the starting point of all moral thought. Moral action, in their view, is grounded rationally and normatively *in* the pursuit of happiness. These thinkers were, in other words, "ethical eudaimonists”; they understood moral action to be grounded in the pursuit of *eudaimonia* (Greek: well-being or flourishing – traditionally translated as "happiness").

Lewis, like the classical tradition in which he was trained, is a eudaimonist. To demonstrate this, and to show how he answers further Christian-inspired objections to this view, are tasks I take up elsewhere.[2] In this short paper I have a modest aim: to give a brief introduction to eudaimonism and its pedigree, and to point in the direction of its virtues as an approach to ethical thought – indeed, to Christian ethical thought.

As indicated, eudaimonism comes from the Greek word, ‘*eudaimonia*’, which is standardly translated “happiness.” These days our English word, “happiness,” typically refers to a feeling or subjective state of pleasure, satisfaction, contentment, or enjoyment – a largely subjective, superficial, and luck-dependent matter. But classical thinkers seldom if ever conceived of *eudaimonia* in that way. Instead, they identified it with the *summum bonum*, the supreme or highest good, the objectively good life for humans.

To understand this adequately, it is important to see that the central questions in classical ethics were teleological, i.e. about aims or goals (*telos* is the Greek word for “end” or “aim”). Classical thinkers such as Aristotle thought of all distinctively human or rational action as end-directed. An intentional action, the kind that comes within the purview of moral evaluation, is an action that is done for a reason, i.e. performed for the sake of an end, for the sake of realizing some good (i.e. something the agent takes to be good or worth seeking). The end for which an action is performed may be sought or desired for its own sake, or for the sake of yet another end, or both for its own sake and for the sake of a further end. Ultimately, however, an individual’s actions are (and are to be) rationally and motivationally grounded in a final or ultimate end that she seeks solely for its own sake. Such an end will represent her integrative vision of the good life, what she takes to be the highest good worth living for, that for the sake of which she seeks everything that she seeks.

The chief ethical question for classical thinkers, then, is: what is the good life, the life worth living? According to Seneca:

> As often as you wish to know what is to be avoided or what is to be sought, consider its relation to the Supreme Good, to the purpose of your whole life.

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> For whatever we do ought to be in harmony with this; no man can set in order the details unless he has already set before himself the chief purpose of his life.[3]

Ancient philosophers generally agreed in referring to this chief end as (one's view of) '*eudaimonia*'. Aristotle, whose eudaimonistic views are perhaps the most influential of all, considered '*eudaimonia*' as synonymous with 'doing well' or 'living well', i.e. as living the best or most excellent kind of life.[4] It is the supreme good at which we aim in all of our action.

> Now happiness (*eudaimonia*), more than anything else, seems complete without qualification. For we always choose it because of itself, never because of something else. Honor, pleasure, understanding and every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves, since we would choose each of them even if it had no further result; but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, by contrast, no one ever chooses for their sake, or for the sake of anything else at all.[5]

Everyone, so Aristotle thought, agrees that in fact all human beings aim at some conception of *eudaimonia* as the ultimate objective of all their action. Differences in ethical views, according to Aristotle, arise because of what different people understand *eudaimonia* actually to consist in, e.g. pleasure, wealth, honors, or virtue. But they agree that *eudaimonia* is our chief aim.

Aristotle's view is borne out in the history of ancient ethics, according to Julia Annas's magisterial work, *The Morality of Happiness*. Annas argues that in fact all ancient ethical theories were eudaimonistic in their general structure, and that differences between them lie primarily in their divergent substantive conceptions of *eudaimonia*.[6] According to Annas, moreover, the different ancient schools of thought generally agreed that the nature of *eudaimonia* is an objective matter, and not simply an issue of subjective feeling or preference. Human well-being is in fact grounded in the nature of things, including facts about the proper functioning of human beings according to their nature, and is no more a merely subjective matter than is human 'health' (health is a common analogue to *eudaimonia* in classical thought). Reasoning along these lines, Aristotle himself concludes that true *eudaimonia* consists in living a virtuous life – hardly our superficial and selfish notion of 'happiness'. On the basis of considerations such as these it has become common in recent years for scholars to render '*eudaimonia*' in English, not as "happiness," but as "flourishing," or "well-being," or "the best life."

Ethical eudaimonism, then, is a teleological moral theory that grounds moral action in the pursuit of *eudaimonia*. Even if we avoid the term, "happiness," however, and speak, say, of "the pursuit of flourishing," this picture may still seem quite foreign to Christian ethics, particularly as the latter has been conceived in recent centuries. But in fact eudaimonism not only characterized the whole of classical pagan thought, but of classical Christian understanding as well. According to historian of Christian ethics, Servais Pinckaers,

> To anyone with an open mind, one huge fact stands out in the history of morality: for the ancients, Christians and pagans alike, the question of happiness was primary. As they saw it, morality in its totality was simply the answer to this question. The thing was obvious; it never occurred to them to talk about it.[7]

Let us take, for example, the two most influential classical Christian ethicists (certainly the most influential in Lewis' thought): St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. I will focus primarily on Augustine, since his inclusion here may seem the more surprising. In words from a sermon that today would probably cost a pastor his or her job were they uttered from the pulpit, Augustine grounds the motivation even for becoming a Christian in the pursuit of happiness.

> All philosophers in common have sought to grasp the happy life by studying, by engaging in discussion and by living. This has been the one and only reason for philosophizing. Now I consider that philosophers are no different from us in this respect. For, if I ask you why you have believed in Christ and why you have become Christians, every man gives this true answer: "To achieve the happy life." Therefore the appetite for the happy life is common to philosophers and Christians alike.
>
> But the question and the difference of opinion relate to where this prize, about which there is no dispute, can be found. It seems to me that it is characteristic of all men to seek the happy life, to want the happy life, to desire, long for, and pursue the happy life.[8]

Augustine obviously fits comfortably within the eudaimonistic picture we have seen. In a letter, he says:

> The man who asks how he can enjoy the happy life is indeed asking just this: "Where is the highest good?" . . . the good which is called the supreme good is that good to which all others are referred. Every man is happy in the enjoyment of that for the sake of which he wants to have everything else. This is because it is loved for its own sake and not on account of something else. We call it the supreme good, because at this point we can find nothing toward which it can advance or to which it can be referred. In it is the resting place of desire . . .[9]

Augustine goes beyond the pagan thinkers, however, in arguing that happiness is ultimately found only in the enjoyment of God himself, in the beatific or blessed vision of God. ('Beatific' comes from one of the Latin terms for 'happiness', which is used sometimes to translate '*eudaimonia*'.)[10] According to Augustine,

> [God] himself is the fountain of our happiness; he himself is the end of all of our longing. In choosing him, or rather, since we had lost him through neglect, in re-choosing him . . . , we strive toward him by love, so that by attaining him we might rest, happy because we are perfected by him who is our end. Thus, our good, the end which is extensively disputed among the philosophers, is nothing other than to cling to him.[11]

Notice what Augustine does *not* do: criticize the pursuit of happiness. In fact he goes on in this context to ground the love precepts in biblical ethics in that pursuit.

> We are commanded to love this good with our whole heart, our whole soul, and our whole strength. We must be led to this good by those who love us, and we must lead those whom we love to it. In so doing, those two precepts on which the whole law and the whole prophets depend are fulfilled: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and with your whole mind," and "You shall love your neighbor even as you

love yourself" (Mt 22.37-9; Dt 6.5; Lv 19.18). So that man might know how to love himself, an end was established for man [i.e. the first great commandment was promulgated to man], an end to which he directs everything that he does in order to be happy, for he who loves himself wants nothing other than to be happy. This end is to cling to God. Therefore, when one who knows how to love himself is commanded to love his neighbor as himself, what else is commanded except, as much as he can, to show his neighbor that it is good to love God? This is worship of God. This is true religion. This is correct piety. This is the service owed only to God.[12]

The self-referring or self-regarding context in which Augustine freely locates loving and worshiping God is striking – to us, but it would not have been to his contemporaries. For Augustine, the proper love of oneself in the pursuit of happiness provides the motivational framework within which the love of God and neighbor are found and which they fulfill. It is true that in the same work from which this passage comes, the *City of God*, Augustine also identifies a kind of self-love that stands in opposition to the love of God.[13] But unless we assume that Augustine was deeply confused, or that his account of these matters is simply incoherent at a very fundamental level, we must assume that he, at least, did not see a problem in holding that there are two kinds of love of self: there is an *improper* self-love that turns away from God, but there is also a *proper* love of self that is expressed in one's seeking to flourish, and that ultimately draws one to love God.

Again, Augustine is not alone here. Aquinas holds similar views, drawing from both Aristotle and Augustine. He begins his massive account of ethics in the *Summa Theologiae* with a teleological analysis of human action. Such action, in his view, is grounded ultimately in the ultimate end of happiness (*felicitas*, *beatitudo*).[14] Moreover, like Augustine, Aquinas argues that the logic of happiness ultimately drives us towards its complete satisfaction in the vision of God. (It is also worth noting that this is not just a "Catholic" position. Reformed theologians William Ames and Jonathan Edwards held similar views.[15])

Lewis' eudaimonistic vision, then, has an impressive pedigree. And there are, in my view, a number of advantages to understanding ethics and discipleship in this way. I have opportunity here only to point generally in this direction, and to highlight two specific aspects or instances. The general point is this: a eudaimonistic approach provides a positive, integrating vision for Christian life and worship. This is exemplified in a rich, imaginative way in "The Weight of Glory," where Lewis blends insights into ethics, discipleship, beauty, worship, heaven, and even evidence for the existence of God, into a compelling vision of the human desire for God.

As a specific instance, first, this approach has unique resources for integrating ethics, aesthetics and other questions of value. A eudaimonistic perspective does not see ethics as a strictly separable domain of issues or rules, only extrinsically related to the overall aim of one's life. Nor, as Lewis points out, does it understand the ethical life as primarily negative or restrictive. Rather, a Christian eudaimonistic approach sees all of one's life, including the ethical life, as a positive, passionate pursuit of the Good worth ultimately seeking, which unifies and integrates all of life and ultimately satisfies one's deepest desires. It is an inherently integrative approach. Moreover, as an expression of this kind of picture, classical thinkers observed deep interconnections between goodness, truth, and beauty – conceiving them as ultimate values that properly draw one's affections, are integrated in a flourishing life, and are ultimately grounded in the nature of God himself. An important Greek word for 'good', which Aristotle used extensively in his ethical writings to identify the specific aim of virtuous action, is *kalos* – 'fine', 'excellent', 'honorable', but also 'beautiful'. This is, to use

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Lewis's words, "of more than philological significance."[16] Goodness is a kind of moral beauty, on the classical view, which is properly attractive. St. Basil (c. 330-379) argued that the beauty of God is the first cause of our loving him and others, and thus motivates our obedience to his command to love:

> In receiving God's commandment of love, we immediately, from the first moment of our existence, possess the ability to love. The command does not come from outside of us . . . , it is a part of our nature to seek what is beautiful, though ideas of it differ from one person to another. Now, what could be more lovable than divine beauty?[17]

This "attractive" vision of life is eudaimonistic, and it provides unique integrative resources for, for example, the ethical evaluation of art.

A second, specific aspect of this picture worth noting is Christian eudaimonism's resources for understanding the nature and motivation of worship. In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis gives a moving description of worship, one that naturally emerges from and culminates this perspective. As such, it seems appropriate to close with these words.

> I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed . . . If it were possible for a created soul fully (I mean, up to the full measure conceivable in a finite being) to 'appreciate', that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that soul would be in supreme beatitude. It is along these lines that I find it easiest to understand the Christian doctrine that 'Heaven' is a state in which angels now, and men hereafter, are perpetually employed in praising God. . . . To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God – drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression, our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.[18]

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Notes:

[1] (Lewis 1996), 25-40.

[2] (Horner In progress).

[3] *Epistle LXXI*. "On the Supreme Good." (Seneca 1962), 73.

[4] *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), 1.4, 1095a18-21. Citations are from (Aristotle 1999).

[5] NE 1.7.1097a35-1097b7.

[6] (Annas 1993). See, e.g., pg. 5.

[7] (Pinckaers 1995), 18.

[8] *Sermons*, 150.3, in (Howie 1969), 86-87.

[9] *Letters*, 118.13-20, in (Howie 1969), 91-92.

[10] *Eudaimonia* and *makaria* are near synonyms in Greek, as are *felicitas* and *beatitudo* in Latin. See Annas, 44 n.62.

[11] *City of God*, X.3, in (Augustine 1994), 73.

[12] (Augustine 1994), 73-74. Augustine is referring in the context to Romans 12.1-2.

[13] Ibid., IV.28, 108.

[14] *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae.1-5.

[15] In *Marrow of Theology* and *Charity and Its Fruits*, respectively. Cited in (Jones 1994), 56.

[16] See the "Weight of Glory" citation at the beginning of this paper.

[17] *Moralia*, q. 2. Cited in (Pinckaers 1995), 31.

[18] (Lewis 1958), 95-97.

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