

Self-sufficiency in Aristotle: what's so good about *autarkeia*?

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Michael Frede Memorial Lecture, British School at Athens, May 2022

Section 1 The *Nicomachean Ethics* on the self-sufficiency of happiness (*eudaimonia*): two treatments, two different glosses on the self-sufficiency requirement

T1 *N.E.*1.7 Happiness must be *teleios* (complete, final, end-like) and *autarkes* (self-sufficient) (cf. Plato, *Philebus* 67a9).

'Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife and in general for his friends and fellow-citizens, since man is born for citizenship. ... The self-sufficient we now define as **that which on its own makes life desirable and lacking in nothing**, and such we think happiness to be.' 1097b8ff

T2 A new development in *N.E.* 10.7: Aristotle offers several criteria for identifying *theōria*, contemplative activity, as happiness. Among these, self-sufficiency:

T2a 'For the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to contemplative activity. For while a philosopher as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessities of life, when they are adequately equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man and so on, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; perhaps he can do so better if he has fellow workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient' (1077a27ff)

N.E. 10.8 adds a further reason why a life of contemplation is better/happier than a life practising ethical virtues. Both lives have basic needs to be satisfied, but

T2b '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 ...and the brave man will need power .. and the temperate man will need opportunity. ... 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 to his contemplation. (1178a25ff)

The puzzle: two very different glosses of self-sufficiency

In **T1** the self-sufficiency of *eudaimonia* is glossed in a **broad way**

In **T2** it is glossed in a **narrow way**, so that an activity needing others as recipients or companions is not self-sufficient (T2a) ; similarly an activity needing resources or opportunities to practise it is not self-sufficient (T2b).

Section 2 Self-sufficiency for a *polis*

T3 Plato, *Republic* 2. 369b5

Then, I said, a city comes about, as it seems to me, because we are not, any of us, self-sufficient αὐτάρκης, but have very many needs. Or can you think of any other reason why a city is founded?

T4 Thucydides 2.36. Pericles' Funeral Speech

And then we ourselves, who are here today and mostly in the prime of life, have added to it <the *archē*> in most ways and have rendered our city fully self-sufficient both for war and for peace

τὰ δὲ πλείω αὐτῆς αὐτοὶ ἡμεῖς οἶδε οἱ νῦν ἔτι ὄντες μάλιστα ἀνὰ τῆ καθεστηκυῖα ἡλικία ἐπηυξήσαμεν καὶ τὴν πόλιν τοῖς πᾶσι παρεσκευάσαμεν καὶ ἐς πόλεμον καὶ ἐς εἰρήνην αὐταρκεστάτην.

Some passages from Aristotle *Politics*

T5a The complete association composed of several villages is the *polis*; it has attained the limit of full

self-sufficiency. Though it came into existence for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well. *Pol* 1.1.7

ἡ δ' ἐκ πλειόνων κωμῶν κοινωνία τέλειος πόλις, ἤδη πάσης ἔχουσα πέρας τῆς αὐταρκειᾶς ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, γινομένη μὲν τοῦ ζῆν ἔνεκεν, οὔσα δὲ τοῦ εὖ ζῆν.

T5b If each individual when separate is not self-sufficient, he is related to the *polis* as a part to the whole, while one who can't or doesn't need to join the community through self-sufficiency is not a part of the *polis*, so that he is either a beast or a god.

ὁ δὲ μὴ δυνάμενος κοινωνεῖν ἢ μηδὲν δεόμενος δι' αὐτάρκειαν οὐθὲν μέρος πόλεως, ὥστε ἢ θηρίον ἢ θεός. *Pol* 1.1.1253a28

T5c And a polis is an association of clans and villages for a complete and self-sufficient life; that is, as we say, living well and finely. *Pol* 3.5.14, 1281a1

T5d A *polis* consisting of too few people will not be self-sufficient – but the *polis* is self-sufficient – while one consisting of too many is self-sufficient in necessities, but as an *ethnos*, not a *polis*, for it's not easy for it to have a *politeia*. *Pol* 7.4.7 1326b1 ff.

T5e These then are the occupations that virtually every *polis* requires <viz. food production, *technai*, weapons, money, priesthods and courts>, for the *polis* is not any old multitude, but one self-sufficient for life, and if any of these is missing it is impossible for such an association to be self-sufficient 7.7.5, 1328b15

T5f (On the question: what kind of territory should a *polis* have) all would praise the *autarkestatē*, and that means bearing every kind of produce, for to be *autarkes* is to have a supply of everything and to be lacking in nothing 7.5.1 1326b27

Zimmerman, *The Greek Commonwealth* 5th ed 1931 286-7

How strong was the tradition <that a city must rule itself, clothe itself, feed itself etc> may be seen by the way it lingered on, years after Greek traders had begun pouring in goods from east and west, in the political economy of the philosophers.

Section 3 Self-sufficiency as a personal ideal: a few texts

T6 Democritus Taylor D 110 Foreign travel teaches self-sufficiency; barley-bread and straw are the pleasantest remedies for hunger and weariness.

T7 from Xenophon *Memorabilia*

T7a Critias and Alcibiades chose to associate with Socrates in spite of disliking his lifestyle 'for they knew that Socrates lived *autarkestata* on very little, and was most self-controlled in his pleasures' 1.2.14

T7b By refusing payment for teaching, Socrates is free to take or refuse pupils, 1.5.5

T7c and by his frugal lifestyle he avoids being enslaved to physical pleasures, and all the time (he claims) is becoming better and gaining better friends. 1.6.4-9

T7d Closing tribute to Socrates as pious, just, self-controlled etc, and wise in his judgements of good and bad, relying on no others but self-sufficient in his recognition of these matters. *autarkēs pros tēn toutōn gnōsin*. 4.8.11

T8 Xenophon *Symposium* 4.42 Antisthenes boasts of his frugal lifestyle; those for whom what they have to hand suffices will not envy others: οἷς γὰρ μάλιστα τὰ παρόντα ἀρκεῖ ἥκιστα τῶν ἀλλοτρίων ὀρέγονται.

T9 Plato *Republic* 3, 387de (Socrates forbids the poetic depiction of men grieving a dead comrade) But we say this too, that when it comes to living well the good man is the most self-sufficient, αὐτὸς αὐτῷ αὐτάρκης and has markedly less need than others of another person. True. So he least of all people will find it terrible to lose a son or a brother or money or anything else.

T10 Aristotle, *N.E.* 4.3, 1125a13, describing the great-souled person (the *megalopsuchos*): He's the sort of person whose possessions are fine and unproductive rather than useful and productive, since that is more proper to a self-sufficient person αὐτάρκους γὰρ μᾶλλον

T11 Aristotle *N.E.* 8.10, on the difference between a tyrant and a king: the tyrant looks to his own profit, the king to that of his subjects, for someone is not a king who is not self-sufficient and provided with all the goods. Such a person needs nothing more.

Thus a **person** may be called *autarkēs* on the strength of (*inter alia*) a frugal lifestyle (T6, T7a) or independence of judgement (T7d) , or not relying on others nor finding their loss something terrible (T9). T 10 and T11: being self-sufficient is compatible with having considerable wealth of the right kind and used in the right way.

Section 4 God as needing or lacking nothing

T12 Xenophanes DK A22.33ff And he said that it was not holy for any of the gods to be ruled by another, and that none of them was in need of anything ἐπιδεῖσθαι τε μηδενὸς αὐτῶν μηδένα μηδ' ὄλως

T13 Euripides, *Heracles* 1340-46. Heracles does not hold that gods chain each other up and so forth: 'The god if he is truly god needs nothing' δεῖται γὰρ ὁ θεός, εἴπερ ἔστ' ὀρθῶς θεός, οὐδενός·

T14 Antiphon B.10 DK God lacks nothing nor receives anything from anybody, but is limitless and not wanting in anything

T15 Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.4.10 Socrates reproaches Aristodemus for not sacrificing to the gods. Aristodemus replied 'Socrates, in no way do I despise the godhead. But I think it is too grand to need service from me.'

καὶ ὁ Ἀριστόδημος, Οὔτοι, ἔφη, ἐγώ, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὑπερορῶ τὸ δαιμόνιον, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο μεγαλοπρεπέστερον ἡγοῦμαι <ἦ> ὡς τῆς ἐμῆς θεραπείας προσδεῖσθαι. (Compare Plato, *Euth* 13-5.)

T16 Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.6.10 Socrates remarks that Antiphon thinks that happiness is luxury and extravagance (τρυφὴν καὶ πολυτέλειαν) but he, Socrates, holds that to need nothing is divine (τὸ μηδενὸς δεῖσθαι θεῖον).

Section 5 Friendship and self-sufficiency: the *Lysis* puzzle (Plato, *Lysis*)

T17 Plato, *Lysis*, 215a-b

The good person, *qua* good, is sufficient to himself, καθ' ὅσον ἀγαθός, κατὰ τοσοῦτον ἰκανὸς ἂν εἶη αὐτῷ. Hence he needs nothing; hence he won't be fond of anything; hence he won't love anything; so the good man can't be *philos* to good people, for when apart they won't miss each other and when present they won't need each other.

Aristotle's struggles with the question why the good man/the happy man needs friends.

T18 Aristotle, *Nic Eth* 9.9,1169b3 ff..

It is also disputed whether the happy man will need friends or not. It is said that the supremely happy and self-sufficient have no need of friends οὐθὲν γὰρ φασι δεῖν φίλων τοῖς μακαρίοις καὶ αὐτάρκεσιν·, for they have the things that are good and therefore, being self-sufficient,

they need nothing further αὐτάρκεις οὖν ὄντας οὐδενὸς προσδεῖσθαι, while a friend, being another self, furnishes what a man cannot provide by his own effort.

His question (in **T18**) is not: whether, being fully happy, a good person needs friends as well. But rather, whether the having of friends is a necessary constituent of a flourishing life (Cooper 1999 337).

T19 N.E. 9.9 Commonplace reasons in favour: i) friends are the greatest of the 'external goods', ii) a good person needs friends to do good things for (not to be benefited by them), iii) absurd to make the *makarios* person solitary; no-one would chose to have all the goods but live a solitary life, for man is political and born to live together with others πολιτικὸν γὰρ ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ συζῆν πεφυκός
The opposing view holds correctly that the good person has no need of useful friends or friends merely for pleasure, but friends who are loved for their good character will be needed by the good person. Aristotle goes on to offer some implausible arguments for this, based on the idea that a friend is a second self, together with the plausible claim that life is hard when solitary, and it's difficult for the happy person to be continuously active by himself, easier with and towards others οὐ γὰρ ῥάδιον καθ' αὐτὸν ἐνεργεῖν συνεχῶς, μεθ' ἑτέρων δὲ καὶ πρὸς ἄλλους ῥᾶον.

The Eudemian Ethics treatment of the same question (E.E. 7.12):

T20 A man who is self-sufficient doesn't need friends for utility or for amusement or for company; his own company is all he needs οὐτε τοῦ συζῆν· αὐτὸς γὰρ αὐτῷ ἰκανὸς συνεῖναι. This is most evident in the case of God; *since he lacks nothing, he will not need a friend*, and since he does not need one, he will not have one. Consequently the happiest human being will have very little need of a friend except to the extent that self-sufficiency is not possible. (E.E. 7.12, 1244b5-7)

ὥστε καὶ ἄνθρωπος ὁ εὐδαιμονέστατος ἥκιστα δεήσειται φίλου, ἀλλ' ἢ καθ' ὅσον ἀδύνατον εἶναι αὐτάρκη. (Aristotle will go on to reject this argument.)

T21 (our argument went astray through the comparison with God): **'Because God is not of such a nature to need friends**, the same is claimed to be true of one who resembles

God. **ὅτι γὰρ ὁ θεὸς οὐ τοιοῦτος οἷος δεῖσθαι φίλου**, καὶ τὸν ὅμοιον ἀξιοῦμεν

But if one followed this line of argument, one would say that a virtuous man does not think of anything, because that is not what makes God happy, being, as he is, too grand to think of anything else except himself. The reason is that for us well-being involves something other than ourselves, whereas he is his own well-being. (E.E. 1245b14-19)

οὐ γὰρ οὕτως ὁ θεὸς εὔχει, ἀλλὰ βέλτιον ἢ ὥστε ἄλλο τι νοεῖν παρ' αὐτὸς αὐτόν.

αἴτιον δ' ὅτι ἡμῖν μὲν τὸ εὔ καθ' ἕτερον, ἐκείνῳ δὲ αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ τὸ εὔ ἐστίν.

Section 6 : back to our puzzle: the self-sufficiency of happiness/the best life in *N.E.1* and *N.E.10*

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Post script: Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus* 130

We also regard self-sufficiency as a great good, not with the aim of always living off little, but so that little will be sufficient for us if we do not have much.

Καὶ τὴν αὐτάρκειαν δὲ ἀγαθὸν μέγα νομίζομεν, οὐχ ἵνα πάντως τοῖς ὀλίγοις χρώμεθα, ἀλλ' ὅπως, ἐὰν μὴ ἔχωμεν τὰ πολλὰ, τοῖς ὀλίγοις ἀρκώμεθα

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Selected readings

A: closely related

Bosman, P., 'Ancient debates on *autarkeia* and our global impasse' *Phronimon* 16.1 2015 : contrasts '*autarkeia* by affluence' with 'frugal *autarkeia*'

Brown, E. 'Aristotle and the Choice of Lives: Two concepts of self-sufficiency' in Destrée and Zingano (edd) *THEORIA* (2014) : E.B. contrasts 'solitary self-sufficiency' with 'political self-sufficiency'

Curzer, H., 'Criteria for happiness in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7 and X 6-8' *Classical Quarterly* 40.2, 1990

Gasser-Wingate, M., 'Aristotle on Self-sufficiency, External Goods and Contemplation', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 102(1) 1-28, 2020: argues for a single account of self-sufficiency as 'independence from external contributors to our activity', to cover both I.7 and 10.7

Heinaman, R., '*Eudaimonia* and Self-sufficiency in the *Nicomachean Ethics*' *Phronesis* 33, 1988: argues for a single account of self-sufficiency in NE1 and NE10, as 'has no necessary conditions for its existence outside of itself and is a means to nothing else'

B:

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Transl. T.H. Irwin, with Introduction, Notes and Glossary 3rd ed 2019

Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, Oxford World's Classics translated by Anthony Kenny 2011

Ackrill, J.L., 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*', ch 11 of his *Essays on Plato and Aristotle* 1997

Cooper, J.M., 'Friendship and the Good in Aristotle', ch 15 of his *Reason and Emotion* 1999

Edgerton, David 'The New Age of Autarky' *New Statesman* 10 June 2020

Gauthier, R.A., Jolif J-Y, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, Louvain 1970

Irwin, T.H. 'Permanent Happiness, Aristotle and Solon' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1985)

Kenny, A., *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* 1992

Most, G.W., 'The stranger's stratagem: Self-disclosure and self-sufficiency in Greek Culture', *JHS* 109 (1989)

Osborne, R., *Autarkeia* in Brill's New Pauly (online)

Nussbaum, M.C. *The Fragility of Goodness* 1986