

HAPPINESS.

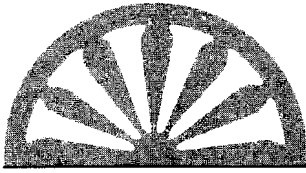
DEATH.

AND THE

REMAINDER

OF LIFE

ONATHAN LEAR



JONATHAN LEAR

**HAPPINESS, DEATH,
AND THE REMAINDER
OF LIFE**

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**HAPPINESS, DEATH,
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The Tanner Lectures on Human Values

FOR BERNARD AND PATRICIA WILLIAMS

Human nature, essentially changeable, unstable as the dust,
can endure no restraint; if it binds itself it soon begins to tear
madly at its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall,
the bonds, and its very self.

—FRANZ KAFKA, "The Great Wall of China"

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HAPPINESS

What difference does psychoanalysis make to our understanding of human existence? I want to focus here on a particular aspect of civilized existence: our life with values. What difference does psychoanalysis make to our understanding of ethical life?

Psychoanalysis teaches us that wish, if not hope, springs eternal. Here is a wishful thought which comes quickly to mind when we begin to think about psychoanalysis and ethics. Might it not be possible to expand our understanding of ethical life to take account of the fact that human beings live with unconscious motivations? The idea would be to use psychoanalysis to devise a more humane ethics—one which considered humans more fully and realistically before saying how they should live. The prospect might then open for some kind of reconciliation of individual human desire with the needs of society and civilization.

The tradition I am concerned with grounds ethical life in the development and expression of character. Perhaps the greatest achievement in this tradition lies at its origin—in Aristotle's

ethics. For Aristotle, character is a developmental and psychological achievement. We are habituated into certain character formations by our parents, family, and teachers, who get us to act in certain ways repeatedly, before we can understand the reasons for doing so. We thereby develop certain stable psychic dispositions—to see and think about the social environment in certain ways and to act accordingly. This is our “second nature.” Now, for Aristotle, certain character-formations are better than others. Those that facilitate the living of a full, rich, meaningful life—a *happy* life—are the human excellences, or virtues.

The attraction of this character-based approach is that it purports to account for ethical life in terms of the lived realities of human motivation and judgment. Consider, for example, human kindness.¹ This character trait is not on Aristotle’s own list of the virtues, but we do not have to stick to that list to preserve the overall ethical spirit. A kind person will have a distinctive sensitivity to the world—and a special sort of motivation to act. To be truly kind, one needs to be able to distinguish a situation in which one ought to step *in* and help someone who is struggling, from a superficially similar situation in which one should step *back* and allow the struggling person to develop the requisite skills and sense of autonomy. A kind person will be sensitive to that difference—and in noticing that difference will thereby be motivated to act in the appropriate ways. On this character-based approach, there is no way to specify, in a particular set of circumstances, what is the kind thing to do independently of the judgment of a kind person.

I shall discuss the structure of the virtues in the next lecture,

but already the hope of an expanded Aristotelianism is coming into view. After all, if ethical life is an expression of character, and character itself can be shaped by the psychologically enlightened training of parents and teachers, why can we not include our understanding of the unconscious in that training? We might then differ with Aristotle over what the best character formations are—a happy life might come to take a different shape from the one he imagined—but the overall approach would be Aristotelian in spirit.

It is a thesis of these lectures that such a project cannot work—and, in coming to see why not, we shall learn about the psychoanalytic unconscious and about the attempt to ground ethical life in character. In brief, I want to argue that the unconscious is too disruptive to be contained in any straightforward account of character formation.

Ironically, this project of including the unconscious in ethical character formation would be unassailable if psychoanalysis were one more science among others. On this normalized understanding, psychoanalysis would be distinctive because of its hitherto unexplored subject matter, the unconscious. In opening up a new realm of inquiry, psychoanalysis would be adding to our knowledge. On this conception, psychoanalysis is an extension of what philosophers tend to call “folk psychology.” Folk psychology is the attempt to explain human action on the basis of beliefs, desires, and intentions to act. Indeed, its first systematic exposition is in Aristotle’s ethics. Of course, the term “folk psychology” is somewhat unfortunate insofar as it suggests that these are the mental states people ordinarily ascribe to one another before they are in

the grip of some particular psychological theory. In fact the situation is almost the reverse. People regularly ascribe all sorts of complicated motivations and emotional states—including unconscious ones—to one another. And they talk about “folk psychology” only after they are in the grip of a philosophical theory about the elementary explanation of action. Nevertheless, one can see the idea that is at play: folk psychology would have to be expanded to include unconscious wishes and fantasies along with beliefs and desires, but then we could formulate a character-based ethics designed to take account of the whole kit and kaboodle.

But psychoanalysis is not another science in any normal sense: about this, the critics are right. Indeed, it seems not just mistaken but ultimately complacent to treat it as such. For what psychoanalysis uncovers is not a new area of knowledge so much as something disturbing about ourselves. Could there be a non-disturbing way of doing this? By now it is, perhaps, a too-familiar idea that in life we somehow keep the unconscious at a distance. The process which Freud called “making the unconscious conscious” could not, he thought, be a straightforward discovery, but necessarily involved transformation of the soul. It always involved uncovering something disturbing—and the uncovering always occurred under conditions of resistance and repression. Should the uncovering be so fraught in ordinary life, but theorizing about it be straightforward? Or might the apparent straightforwardness of psychoanalytic theory itself be part of the covering over?²

But if in theory and in practice the unconscious is always being covered over, it is also always already present and manifest in the coverings over. It is this intuition I want to take back to the first

systematic attempt to work out a psychologically minded ethics. The question then becomes, not “What do we have to *add* to Aristotle?” but rather “What is already there in Aristotle’s ethics, disturbing the self-presentation, yet not quite conscious of itself?”

This question is of more than historical interest. For we live at a time when the promising approaches to ethics are broadly Aristotelian in spirit. Philosophical culture has grown weary of rule-based approaches to ethics. By now, the critiques of Kant’s attempt to ground morality on the moral law are well known.³ In briefest outline, from the moral law it is impossible to derive any specific conclusions about how to act in a specific set of circumstances. It is, in part, because this critique has become widely shared that there is a renewed interest in Aristotle. For Aristotle, it is precisely because it is impossible to specify a set of rules on how to act well that one must turn to a psychologically informed account of how to build good character.

Interestingly, this is an approach that Freud himself ignored. Freud’s critique of ethical value is itself addressed to a certain law-based interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This interpretation focuses on the Ten Commandments, the Mosaic Law, the injunction “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” and so on. As I shall discuss in the third lecture, Freud was concerned with a certain inexorability of unconscious guilt which life within this ethical tradition tended to facilitate. Being brought up in the Law tended to produce in individuals cruel superegos, set up over against the ego, judging it harshly and inflicting ever-greater punishments and inhibitions. This was Freud’s diagnosis of life within civilization. But Freud more or less equated life within the Law

and life within the ethical, and he thereby overlooked this alternative, Aristotelian approach.⁴ For Aristotle seems to hold out the prospect of an ethics based on an integrated psyche in which values are harmoniously expressed in a genuinely happy life. Is this, then, a real possibility that Freud simply ignored? It is striking that Freud turned to ancient Greece for its myths, but not for its ethics or philosophy. Returning to Aristotle thus opens up the possibility of a different type of psychoanalytical reflection on the ethical.

Of course, psychoanalysis is itself concerned with the returns we feel inclined to make. And there seems little doubt that in contemporary philosophical culture the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whatever else it might represent for us, has become a fantasy of origins. It is where we return when we want to work our way back to the origins of an alternative to law-based approaches to ethics. And psychoanalysis teaches us to suspect that if there is a disturbance within the ethical, we ought to find at least hints of it at the origin. Certainly, the disturbance ought to be gaining some expression in the fantasy of origin. So this ought to be a return with a difference. The hope is to find out more, not just about Aristotle, but about ourselves in our previous goings-back. What have we had to overlook in order to treat Aristotle as an origin? What doesn't get seen in order to preserve the fantasy? In answering those questions, we may start to gain insight into the distinctive difference psychoanalysis makes.⁵

There is, I believe, reason to question the foundations of the Greek ethical experience. One can glimpse the problem at the first moment in which Aristotle invites us to participate in ethical

reflection. For the very first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* induces a reflective breakdown. “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason *the* good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”⁶

As generations of commentators have noted, the inference is invalid. From the fact that every art, inquiry, action or choice aims at some good, it simply does not follow that there is one good at which all things aim. There has been no shortage of articles criticizing Aristotle—here the oedipal struggle and the desire to get tenure converge—but are we really to think that the founder of formal logic committed such a flagrant fallacy? More insightful commentators assume that Aristotle could not be making such a blunder, and so there have also been ingenious attempts to make this sentence come out right. According to one of the best attempts to make sense of this sentence, Aristotle is here trying to state what the supreme good *would be* (if there were such).⁷ The problem for this interpretation is that there is no textual indication that Aristotle is speaking hypothetically; indeed, he seems to emphasize that the good has “*rightly been declared*” (*καλῶς ἀπεφάνησαν*) to be that at which all things aim. I suppose one can add “if there were such a thing,” but it seems an interpretive stretch.

This looks like a dilemma: Either one accepts that Aristotle made a logical error in the opening sentence of his fundamental ethical work or one must make coherent sense of what he is saying. Rather than choose, however, I should like to shift the question away from what Aristotle is saying and ask instead what he is

doing. I would like to suggest that Aristotle is here participating in a peculiar kind of *inaugural instantiation*. He is attempting to inject the concept of “the good” into our lives—and he thereby changes our lives by changing our life with concepts.

Aristotle does not do this on his own. For an inauguration to be successful there must be a context in which it occurs. The relevant context in this case is the Greek philosophical effort—notably of Socrates and Plato—to found ethics as a form of practical-rational inquiry. For Socrates, the fundamental question is “How shall one live?” Ostensibly Socrates is asking a question, but ultimately it makes more sense to see him as attempting to introduce a concept—the concept of “a life”—into life. We are now challenged to consider *our lives* in deciding what to do.

Why think of this as the introduction of a concept rather than, say, an invitation to reflect upon a concept we already possessed? One of the twentieth century’s most significant contributions to philosophy—manifest in the work of the later Wittgenstein and of Heidegger—is a working through of the idea that there can be no viable distinction between the existence of concepts and the lives we live with them. There can be no fundamental divide between thought and life. If we consider the confusion, anxiety, and anger that Socrates generated, there is little doubt that the Athenian citizens had, in Socrates’ time, no way to think about the question he was asking. Indeed, Socrates regularly confused himself. One has only to read the *Charmides* to see Socrates get himself into serious confusions as he tries to think about how to think about one’s life. And in the *Apology* Socrates famously says that he discovered the oracle that he was the wisest of men was right be-

cause of his peculiar ignorance. Although he did not know, at least he knew that he did not know, and that alone made him wiser than anyone else. But if no one knows the answers to the questions Socrates is asking—if, indeed, no one really knows how to go about finding an answer—then there is reason to believe that Socrates is not asking well-defined questions but is rather trying to introduce new ways of thinking and living. This is the context, as elaborated by Plato, in which Aristotle injects “*the good*” into our lives.

Aristotle takes himself to be merely extending the locus of our preexisting concern with our lives. But remember the case in Wittgenstein of a person who takes himself to be going on in the same way with the instruction “Add 2,” but who at some point in the series starts going on in what we take to be strange ways: 1004, 1008, 1012 . . .⁸ We realize in his bizarre goings-on that he hasn’t really grasped the concept—or that he is operating with a different concept which we do not yet understand. Now look what happens *to us* when Aristotle invites us in the first sentence to move from a concern for the various goods in our lives to a concern with *the good*: we are stumped; we need his lectures to teach us how to go on. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, this is evidence that, whatever he says he is doing, Aristotle is inducting us into a new way of life.

Jacques Lacan and the later Wittgenstein have, each in his own way, argued that a successful inauguration will tend to obscure its own occurrence. Lacan takes as an example the introduction of the concept of irrational numbers.⁹ Once we have the concept of irrational numbers, it will look as though they were al-

ways there, awaiting discovery. But if we take the later Wittgenstein and Heidegger seriously, this cannot be right. Life before the “discovery” of irrational numbers was not “missing” anything. People lived with lengths, with numbers. The decision to apply numbers to lengths changed our lives with numbers and lengths: it opened our lives to new possibilities, to new ways of living and thinking. For the later Wittgenstein it only looks as though the irrational numbers were already there, waiting to be discovered, because our lives with numbers have fundamentally changed. Retrospectively, it will look as though earlier life without the concept of the irrational was incomplete, missing something. But that is because we are now embedded in a life with the concept, and it has become difficult to see any earlier form of life as anything other than incomplete.

Now if we go back to the first sentence of the *Ethics*, we can see an attempt to cover over its inaugurating nature. Aristotle himself says almost nothing about goods or the good: his assertion is basically about what others have thought and said. “Every art . . . is *thought* to aim at some good”: strictly, Aristotle is passing on some high-class gossip. Rhetorically, the claim presents itself as a certain kind of received knowledge—common knowledge of the right sort of group. Indeed, part of what it is to be in this group is to take it as obvious that this is what “is thought.” Notice the impersonality and passivity: “and for this reason the good has . . . been declared . . .” No one in particular is doing the declaring: impersonally, it is thus. No doubt, Aristotle’s audience would have thought of Plato—it is hardly a secret who has done the declaring—but the sentence construction pushes one away from the ac-