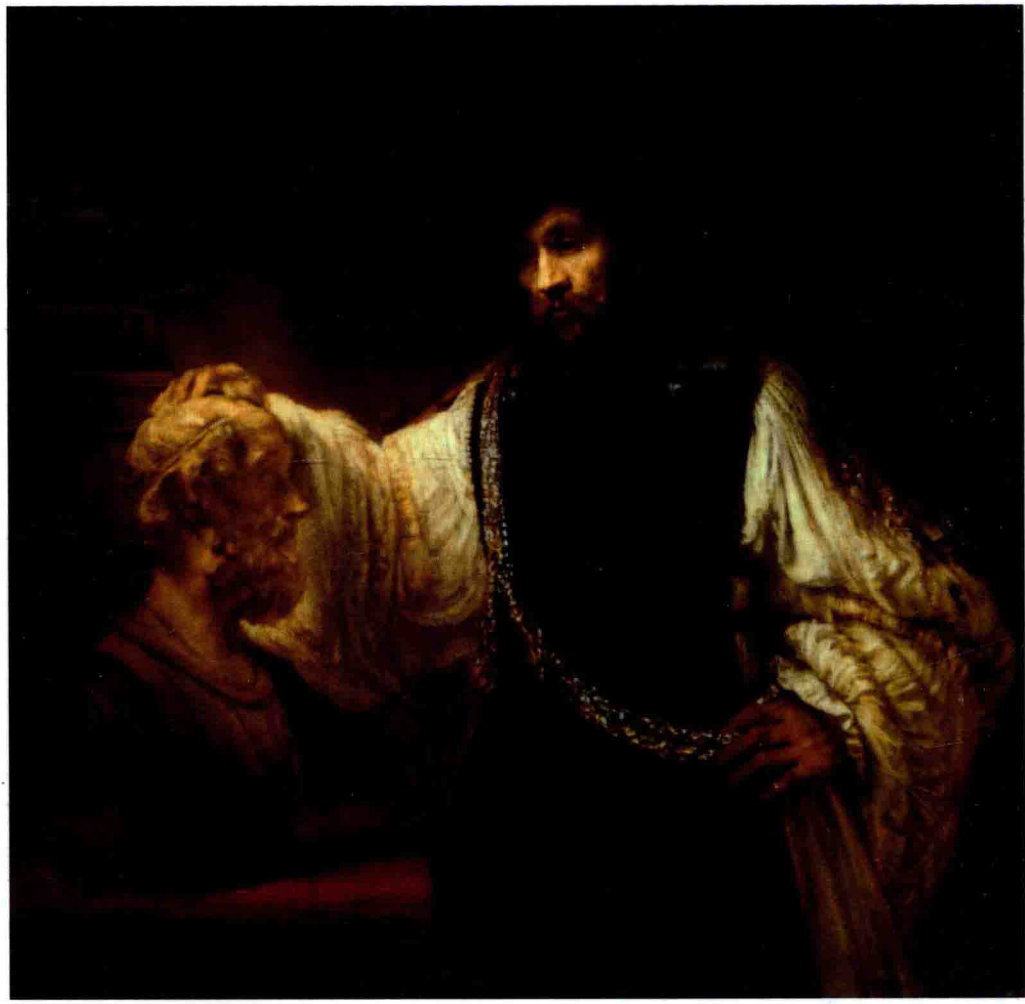
A PERSON AS A LIFETIME

An Aristotelian Account of Persons

STEPHANIE M. SEMLER



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A Person as a Lifetime

For Gordon and Laura Semler

Acknowledgments

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ONE
Aristotelian Persons I

> My life has been the poem I would have writ,
> But I could not both live and utter it —Henry David Thoreau, 1849

Aristotle left to us a robust and useful ethical theory. For him, ethical inquiry is quite unlike other avenues of philosophical inquiry. The purpose of Aristotle's ethics is to improve our lives, and its central area of inquiry is human well-being. In this respect, it is unlike purely theoretical inquiry. We have a pragmatic end in doing ethics and it cannot be expected to arrive at certainties in the way that we tend to expect scientific inquiry to do. We make generalizations in ethics, but only with the caveat that they might not always apply. We make sweeping claims about the goods in life toward which we should aim, what makes for the good life, what virtuous people do. In order to live well, Aristotle believes people need to develop a clear and proper appreciation of the way in which virtue and other goods such as friendship, pleasure, honor, and wealth come together to make for a life well-lived. The usefulness of Aristotle's theory becomes apparent when we can apply the generalizations to particular cases. However, we can only apply them when we have been given a proper upbringing and have cultivated the proper habits of body and mind. If we have those pieces in place, we will be able to cultivate the ability to deliberate to the course of action that is best. Aristotle's working ethical theory is grounded in the notion of practical wisdom. One who possesses practical wisdom does so as a result of habituation combined with a proper rational understanding of the nature of what is good for humans. None of these goals or requirements could be clear without the background assumption that we are talking about human persons who are engaging in both action and ethical inquiry. At every stage in Aristotle's explanation of how to live and fare well, there is talk of agents—that is, humans that are capable of voluntary, deliberate, action, who can also

think about their actions in an abstract and rational way. The goal of this book is to make Aristotle's concept of personhood perspicuous, based on the background assumptions he makes in his ethical works.

THE PROBLEM OF PERSONS

The concept of persons for which I offer an Aristotelian alternative derives from debates about the criteria for personal identity. In the current discussion of personal identity there are several issues and problems—too many to enumerate here. Of this multitude, there are three that fuel my interest in pursuing Aristotle's take on the matter: personal psychological identity, the problem of the persistence of persons over time, and the debate about "what matters" in personal identity. Personal psychological identity is what we often refer to when we speak of one's "personal identity" as what makes one "who one is." Identity in this sense is generally thought of as those properties that belong to an individual and set her apart from all other persons and objects. When questions about who one is go beyond one's outward appearance and historical facts about one's life, we often think about the psychological attributes that determine our personalities. We also characterize each other in terms of moral character and habits, and we tend to think it would be strange for a person to undergo a complete change in character, moral disposition, and psychological makeup. What's more, many psychological features that make us who we are seem to be contingent—we could have been born in another country, been richer or poorer, been born another sex. It also seems clear that there are traits that we lose and acquire over the course of a lifetime. In the process of growing into adults, our dispositions, moral beliefs, and habits change; usually they change a great deal. If those psychological traits give us our identity, at least in part, their malleability seems to beg for an explanation.

The question of persistence centers on the metaphysical requirements for a person to continue to exist from one time to another—as the same person at different times. The notion of survival is invoked in this debate, setting this or that standard as the minimum requirement for survival. Questions about how we identify with our past, about our beliefs that we are identical with our past and future selves come to the fore when we attempt to narrow down the necessary conditions for a person to persist over time. Answers to the question of personal identity over time usually fail to capture our persistence conditions, or to give a satisfactory criterion of personal identity over time. Closely related to questions about persistence and survival are those concerning what matters in personal identity. When we ask about what matters in identity, we are questioning the practical meaning of facts that pertain to our identity and persistence.

These questions challenge the traditional notion of personal identity, to the point that its importance in our understanding of ourselves has been questioned. When we think about the lives of persons in unusual or extraordinary ways, we try to press the concept of personal identity to its limits. In doing this, we hope that we might find the one thing that keeps our notion of a individual person together, or perhaps that we might find no such thing. In terms of action, it might be thought that a person is identifiable by the fact that there is concern for one's future welfare. If persons at any given moment are one and the same with the persons who will have their attributes at some time in the future, then it seems that they cannot rationally ignore the well-being of those future people. It seems also, that we have a peculiarly special interest in our own futures, one that we cannot have with anyone else's—even that of our children.

Contemporary analytic philosophy has been hard pressed to explain what we mean when we talk about who we are, and that we are distinct from others, to explain how it is that we continue as the same person over time, and what it means to continue as the same person over time, and to explain why the uniqueness that we believe ourselves to possess is important to us. So far, the most promising views have been offered by what might be called the "Reductionist" camps after views that reduce the identity of persons to their psychological aggregates, and the "neo-Kantian" views that claim that persons cannot be reduced to their constituent psychological parts; these views usually entail the existence of a unique individual in a person, as evidenced by one's awareness of external objects.[1] Many of these questions have been difficult to answer at best and intractable at worst. The difficulties of the questions are traceable to the commitments of the philosophers who framed them, and I believe that it will be fruitful to examine what Aristotle, as a pre-modern philosopher, can offer.

I have turned to Aristotle for help on this matter—as have many in recent years in other topics.[2] It is in Aristotle's ethical works that we shall find his beliefs concerning persons and so it is there that we will have to look for a concept of persons. In this study, I will seek to derive a definition of what constitutes a person from the Aristotelian perspective. The concept of persons is at least as much a moral one as it is a metaphysical one, and I believe that one of the insights we can glean from Aristotle is that the moral aspect of personhood is the important one—and should inform the metaphysical aspect. The distinction between these concepts has been left rather unclear: for example, we talk about persons in many contexts: moral, legal, religious, and ontological. When we talk about persons in the strictly ontological sense, there has been a tendency to either sideline questions of moral responsibility or to rest the moral outcomes of personhood on the metaphysical findings. While there is no doubt that there is a close relationship between the two, they are not one and the same concept.

There is no explicit Aristotelian definition of persons. I believe that this is for two reasons; one is obvious, while the other is perhaps not so obvious. The first is that the problem of persons as objects whose ontological status is unclear is a modern one. We can trace it to Locke, where he stated that a person "is a Forensick term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery."[3] It is after Locke's expression of the concept that we begin to see the ontological discussion concerning persons and their persistence unfold. For Locke, personal identity is determined by consciousness, understood by him to be encapsulated in memory, as opposed to the substance of either the soul or the body, for being sure of the existence of either is quite beyond our rational capabilities. Locke's criteria are based on self-recognition: a person is "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places."[4]

This is not to say that there was no concept of persons before the modern turn in philosophy. I believe the modern development is in separating the metaphysical—that is, ontological concept from the moral one. This implies that the concept was predominantly moral on the outset—indeed Locke's interest in the concept is moral. According to Locke, personal identity, and thus the concept of persons is to be understood in terms of consciousness, and cannot properly be understood to inhere in a substance of any kind because we cannot have any clear idea of substance at all. Because the idea of substance cannot be traced to any simple idea, we may have the incomplete idea of the substance of a finite intelligence, but we cannot have a fully-fledged idea of that substance.[5]

We are the same persons over time only if we recognize the past and future persons as ourselves, in the same way that we recognize our current selves. The necessary recognition is realized "by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for anyone to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive." Locke forces us to think about the person in terms of an identity of the consciousness, rather than the identity of the physical person. Since Locke is something of an agnostic in terms of what consciousness itself must inhere in, there is no rigorous connection between the consciousness and physical bodies (or spiritual ones, for that matter). What is crucial for Locke in the concept of the identity of consciousness is that the person can know that it is itself over time.

Knowledge of oneself over time cannot be had in the absence of self-awareness in general—the kind of awareness that we have when engaged in some mental action, and also know that we are doing so. One cannot be properly said to be identical with this or that person, if she cannot have the same recognition of the past or future self that she has for her own mind in this instant. For example, those who claim to have led past lives as famous figures in history fail this test of Locke's, for they

have no awareness of having done the famous deeds. Their knowledge of the famous deeds is no different than that of any other third party. Locke also recognizes that we cannot rely on the physical body as a guide in assigning personal identity, since the body may change while the person remains the same. The end result of Locke's view—which has left the debate surrounding persons and their natures—is that a robust determination about identity can only be made by the agent himself. Third parties who might wish to punish or reward can only judge the acts done by a certain physical body. For all that third parties are able to discern, the acts in question may indeed belong to another mind, and only the agent is privy to that knowledge. We assume that someone who is alive now cannot be Napoleon because it is highly unlikely that a person who remembers Napoleon's deeds is still alive—but it is possible that he could be, and only the agent himself can have access to the evidence that gives the final marker of identity.

I believe that the second reason for the lack of a fleshed-out definition of persons in Aristotle's work is that it is most likely that Aristotle didn't feel any need to make the concept explicit. Aristotle did not have to account for the possibility of persons that are numerically different from their physical bodies without the theoretical device of an immaterial soul. If anything, Aristotle found it incumbent on himself to show that human beings are particular individual substances, as he does in *De Anima*. There is no indication, however, that he needs anything besides the physical human body to make identifications.[6] In doing all the things that he thought were important, it seems that Aristotle never needed to explain what persons are—it is simply assumed that his readers will understand what he means. The project before me is to assess what this concept is as it figures in Aristotle's background assumptions.

Since the aspect of Aristotle's philosophy that uses this assumption the most is the ethical works, I will hypothesize that the component parts of an Aristotelian definition of persons can be found in Aristotle's writing on ethics and metaphysics. The explicitly modern concept of persons can be construed as at least as moral as metaphysical in Locke's own formulation. In addition to the aspects of attributing praise and blame (which is usually the focus of Locke's commentators), a key point in Locke's description is that the agent is capable of happiness—because she is capable of following ethical rules ("a Law"). In this light, Aristotle's ethics, as perhaps the paradigm case of ethical Eudaimonism, gives a rigorous exposition of the relationship between the agent and her happiness. In Aristotle's case, as in most cases of Eudaimonism, the happiness is assessed in terms of entire lifetime, rather than at any one moment in that lifetime. For this reason, I believe that Aristotle's notion of persons must be conceived in terms of capacities over lifetimes, rather than as individuals at some point in a lifetime. I will endeavor to make this conception explicit—as assumed in Aristotle's account of voluntary action, rational delib-

eration (prohairesis), practical wisdom (phronesis), the proper appreciation of pleasure (being virtuous, as opposed to vicious, incontinent, and continent), friendship, and rational thought, each of these aspects forming a layer of the capacities that make up the concept of personhood. Upon the examination of these aspects of personhood, I will argue that the capacities implied throughout the ethics, themselves imply a further capacity for self-determination as the net result of combination and layered integration of the others, and so a necessary component of personhood.

ARISTOTLE AND PERSONS

In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle lays out the description of the happy life. Notably, he doesn't set out to convince us that we should live well. He assumes that, if interested in ethics in the first place, the reader is already persuaded on this point. Given that the reader has the belief that the best life is worth pursuing, Aristotle sets out to show us how that might be done. Central to his explanation of how one ought to live, is his concept of happiness—eudaimonia. He sets the stage by telling us that most things are desirable for the sake of something else, but the structure of that desirability requires that there must be something desired only for its own sake. The goal that we pursue that is good for its own sake is what he calls happiness. Eudaimonia is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Aristotle presents eudaimonia in a system of goals as the ultimate goal of all human action.[7] Contrary to our colloquial use and understanding of the word, happiness for Aristotle is not a passing mood or mental state, but a state of being achieved over a lifetime through a combination of virtuous action, fortuitous birth, and physical health.[8] Since there is no guarantee as to one's fortune or health, one cannot be sure of achieving happiness until one's life is fully lived.[9]

The structure of human life is the nexus of the relationship between happiness and persons. In explaining to us how the best life is achieved, Aristotle talks about persons—how they behave, the luck they might have, the virtues and habits they might cultivate. Persons are central for the idea of happiness, for it is they who will or will not achieve happiness. Aristotle's understanding of happiness is that it is a lifetime achievement, and a person spends his or her entire lifetime working toward that end. I propose that we can create an Aristotelian definition of persons based on the relationship that Aristotle assumes between persons and happiness. The structure of this definition will be that of an entire lifetime. That is to say that the judgment of a person, and so the concept of what is it to be a person should be understood as the entire lifetime. The relationship between eudaimonia and persons can be ex-

pressed as follows—only persons are candidates for achieving eudaimonia, so that while it is the case that not all persons achieve eudaimonia, only persons can do so. Moreover, only when one is dead can her life's work be assessed. Since it is only at the completion of a lifetime that eudaimonia-candidates can be assessed, the only complete way to think about a person is in units of entire lifetimes.[10] For this reason, I contend that an important insight about persons is to be found in Aristotle's ethical works, surrounding his concept of eudaimonia. Additionally, that insight is to be understood in terms of happiness as a terminal goal that cannot be assessed until the entire life has been lived.[11]

At first blush, eudaimonia is, for Aristotle, at once the final end of all our actions. Understood as "an activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence,"[12] eudaimonia is explained as the final end in the human ergon,[13] and it is the state of happiness itself.[14] Aristotle understands the happy life to be the perfect life, and, at times, the goal of all our actions. This concept of eudaimonia is comprehensive in the sense that it is not purely predicated on virtue, pleasure, or rational thought. Rather, Aristotle's account is known for synthesizing all three of these elements, which he considered to be necessary for a good, complete life.[15] Eudaimonia is central to Aristotle's ethics in that he sees the human good, and human excellence to be rooted in goal-directed activity and reasoning.[16] Eudaimonia, then, is the anchor of all our goals—because it is one among many ends that are good in themselves, but it is superior to all other ends. Aristotle indicates a need for a final end in human action, when he tells us that all human action aims at a goal of some kind, but that all the actions need a final end toward which to aim. He has made the essential nature of human activity as goal-directed, and then explains what the final goal of all our goal-directed activity is. The final goal is the most important activity for several reasons: we pursue it for its own sake, it is better than all the other goods such as wealth, fame, good looks, and learning, although it certainly may include these other goods. Eudaimonia then has a multifaceted nature—it includes material, psychological, and physical well-being over a lifetime. Eudaimonia is like many other goals in that it is desired for its own sake. However, since it is superior to all other goals, a goal's simply being good for its own sake is not enough to make it the final terminus of human practical reasoning. This places happiness in a different light than any other goods—it establishes the teleological structure of all goals that humans pursue. If a goal is worth pursuing, it is because it fits somehow into the overall conceptual structure of eudaimonia. In order for a person to achieve eudaimonia, all the goals that we pursue must be in a proper ordering in terms of priority. Some goods are better than others, and all play different roles in the overall structure of eudaimonia. The person who wishes to live well, establishes a hierarchy—in terms of value—for all the different goods we pursue. For example, some goods ought to be pursued very rarely (such

as sweets and olives) and others more frequently (such as studying and learning). Happiness then, consists in a plethora of different goods but more than that, happiness is constituted by the overall complexion of the goods in our lives. That is, a significant element of eudaimonia is the arrangement of the various goods. As a symphony is more than a collection of musical notes, eudaimonia is more than just the aggregation of goods—it is the proper ordering and placement of those goods in our lives. If we pursue the proper goods in our lives, at the proper time, and in the proper way, happiness is the end result—thus it is the teleological terminus of all of our pursuits.

Most commentators agree that Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia is the root of our goal-directed behavior, but that is where the concurrence ends. In Nicomachean Ethics, he sets out finality, self-sufficiency, and completeness as requirements for eudaimonia.[17] However, there is a division of opinions concerning the interpretation of Aristotle's claims about eudaimonia. It seems clear at one point in Nicomachean Ethics, that he means to say that the happy life must be one that is both pleasant and virtuous, and later he seems to claim that philosophical contemplation, (sophia) is the whole of eudaimonia. Much has been made of the apparent inconsistency that appears in these passages. One interpretation, called "intellectualist," holds that what Aristotle says in Nicomachean Ethics amounts to the claim that eudaimonia is culminated in the intellectual virtue, sophia.[18] Another popular interpretation, the "inclusivist," understands eudaimonia itself to be one among many ends worth pursuing in themselves, and maintains that not all virtues worth pursuit are part and parcel of eudaimonia itself. Proponents of this view, who include J. L. Ackrill and Terence Irwin, maintain that the concept of eudaimonia is incoherent in that it cannot claim that the best life is a life of contemplation and also claim that the virtues are worth pursuing in themselves.[19] There are, however those commentators who support an inclusivist view that incorporates a monistic interpretation of Aristotle on eudaimonia. This view claims that Aristotle gives us one concept of eudaimonia that is not fragmented, but rather it incorporates all the virtues into a single concept. Most notably among these philosophers are Anthony Kenny and Gabriel Richardson Lear.[20]

The debate surrounding Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia reflects on this project because I propose to derive a concept of persons out of the background assumptions in the ethical system founded on it.[21] I will adopt the inclusivist interpretation of Anthony Kenny, especially in his claim that the primary concept of perfection in the perfect life should be that of completeness,[22] and with Gabriel Richardson Lear that the perfect life is not necessarily one whose primary focus is purely philosophical contemplation.[23] I will especially rely on Richardson Lear's claim that philosophical contemplation is approximated in the execution of the virtues—even in the life of a person who is not regularly engaged in sophia.

I have espoused this view because I believe that a concept or persons is uninteresting if it is too narrow, and so the intellectualist version cannot fully supply the concept. However, I also believe that Aristotle did have a full and robust idea of personhood in mind when he fashioned his concept of happiness. I also contend that the best concept of eudaimonia is the more inclusive one. Whatever Aristotle meant to say about happiness, he certainly must have been aware that not everyone could or would be a philosopher, and he must also have thought of philosophers, eudaimones, and other humans together as a natural kind.[24] Moreover, had Aristotle meant to express the intellectualist version of eudaimonia, the structure of the arrangement of goods would have been the following: all other goods that we might pursue have the teleological purpose of facilitating our participation in rational contemplation. If this picture is correct, then we would only listen to music insofar as it is instrumental to the goal of theoria. Goals that are good for their own sake would still have to fit into the larger picture in a strictly linear and hierarchical fashion to support the goal of contemplation. Given the careful attention that Aristotle pays to the cultivation of good habits and virtues, the nature of pleasure and how one ought to incorporate it into one's life, and the importance of friendship in the nature of eudaimonia, all of which he presents as good for their own sake, and not as merely instrumental to rational contemplation support the inclusivist approach as most likely to have been Aristotle's own view.[25]

ARISTOTELIAN PERSONS

The picture of eudaimonia that I will build my concept of persons from is the following: the human ergon is the rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue; when we fulfill our function well over an entire lifetime, with luck, the result is a life well-lived, or eudaimonia. The life well-lived includes the pleasant, the noble, and at least an approximation of philosophical contemplation through cultivation of the virtues; that our actions, ceteris paribus, aim toward a life that is complete, that is, one that encompasses all three elements of the human good, in the proper proportions. With the above notion as the happy life, we can go on to explain what it is that makes a human being able to achieve eudaimonia. The significance of judging one to be a eudaimon is in understanding that the life is complete—it has a beginning, middle, and an end, with the same person at the helm for the duration. If we know what Aristotle's requirements are for a human lifetime to have all of the features of the best life, I believe that we can derive an Aristotelian concept of persons from that set of characteristics. The concept that will emerge is the following: whatever achievements Aristotle claims to be necessary for dying