

THE EMBODIED GOOD LIFE: FROM ARISTOTLE TO LIFE-GROUND ETHICS

Jeff Noonan

Department of Philosophy, Windsor University, Canada

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Summary

The chapter examines the development of the understanding of the embodied good life in the western philosophical tradition, focusing on Aristotle, Nietzsche, Marcuse, Adorno, Sen and Nussbaum in light of the contemporary philosophical framework of life-ground ethics originating with McMurry. Historical conceptions of the ‘embodied good life’ differ as regards their content, but are agreed that the capabilities or potentialities of humans understood as terrestrial beings are the real ground of good lives. The development of this idea through philosophical history reveals a growing rejection of invidious moral hierarchies and a deepening understanding of the social conditions without which good lives are impossible. Ultimately, without healthy social (and natural) life-support systems as its enabling conditions, an embodied good life is impossible.

1. The Embodied Good Life

It is always possible to maintain in theory, with Plato, that the body is but a prison house for the soul and to look forward to the body’s death as a welcome liberation. It is much more difficult to *live* in accordance with that principle. After all, Plato himself did not commit suicide, but devoted himself in exemplary fashion to the development of understanding of the most profound problems of relevance to the conduct of human life, not death. In so far as philosophy concerns itself with life it must contend with the life of the body, for speculate as we may about the soul and immortality, the only life we *know* is the life of finite embodiment. Even Plato, the world’s first systematic idealist did not plan his utopia for immortal souls, but for embodied human beings.

However, it is one thing to be unable to avoid, as a matter of practical necessity, the care of the body, and quite another to conceive of the good life as embodied. Theorizing the embodied good life is as rare in Western philosophy as it is essential to a real philosophical understanding of human nature and its highest possibilities. As in metaphysics so too in ethics, an idealist hope for transcendence and ultimate unity with the divine dominates over the experiential reality of embodied finitude and struggle. But the hope for transcendence, while it may prove motivating for some, can never replace the need for an understanding of the highest to which we may aspire *on earth*. It is in the interests of exploring the question of the highest to which we may aspire on earth that the present re-examination of the key moments of the history of thinking about the embodied good life is offered.

What each of the philosophies of the embodied good life share is a general idea that the way in which human life is socially organized can make it better or worse. As soon as the problem of the good life is posed the question of what life actually requires for its full development cannot be avoided. Of course, the different positions to be examined diverge on specific questions of what the range of life-requirements are, the content of the potentialities they claim are most worthwhile, their beliefs about the relative equality of different people, and the social and political conditions necessary for human flourishing. Each implies, but does not fully ground itself in, a normative conception of life-value as the widest and deepest development, realization, and enjoyment of the capabilities that distinguish human beings. Because the major historical accounts of the embodied good life do not fully understand what McMurtry calls the “life-ground of value, (the totality of life’s conditions which forms the basis for the development, realization, and enjoyment of all values that exist), (McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, p. 23) each is beset with internal tensions and contradictions. The aims of this chapter are first to reconstruct and explain the major conceptions of the embodied good life in Western philosophy, and second to derive from this history the basic principles of a life-grounded synthesis appropriate for the twenty-first century.

The organization of the chapter will therefore be historical. It will begin with the ancient world’s most important conception of the embodied good life, that of Aristotle. From Aristotle it will next consider the work of Marx. The chapter will pass over the contributions of the ancient atomists and Epicurus not because they do not contain a conception of the embodied good life, but because, in the first case, the extent material is too limited to enable much of any certainty to be said, and, in the second, the conception of the good life is essentially passive. Important as Epicurean philosophy may be to a complete history of conceptions of the embodied good life, it does not advance to any significant degree the main focus of this investigation, which is slow emergence in consciousness of the reality of life-requirements, their instrumental connection to the development of valuable human capabilities, and the ultimate good for embodied humans, the development, realization, and enjoyment of these capabilities in ever wider and deeper scope. From Marx the chapter will shift to the anomalous work of Nietzsche. As will become clear, Nietzsche is anomalous in so far as he affirms a tendentiously one-sided understanding of life-value. From Nietzsche the analysis will shift to the work of Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse comes the closest of all the historical accounts to explicitly grounding his conception of the embodied good life in the life-ground of value. From Marcuse the chapter will move to consider the contributions of

his colleague at the Institute for Social Research, Theodor Adorno. A thinker of acute insight, Adorno nevertheless restricts his conception of the embodied good life to its negative plane– the avoidance of material harm. The historical moment of the work will conclude with an overview of the contributions that Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s attempts to construct a “capability approach” to the problem of social justice has made to the development of a contemporary conception of the embodied good life. The chapter will conclude with a framework for a life-grounded understanding of the embodied good life that synthesises the main insights of the historical material into a future-oriented idea of the highest to which terrestrial humanity may aspire.

2. Aristotle: Human Capabilities and Social Hierarchy

Aristotle’s conception of the embodied good life must be understood in the context of his metaphysical understanding of form and matter. Form is understood in general as the principle of active structuring and determination, while matter is its passive and determined complement. In the natural universe, form and matter are always found together in concrete individuals. For living things, form is the soul of the living material body. Living beings are determined in their specific nature through the presence and activity of soul within them. While it is true that soul is the active principle, matter or the body is equally important because, for finite natural things at least, the soul cannot exist in separation from its bodily matter. While Aristotle does note one important exception to this conclusion, it remains the case that so long as he is thinking of human beings in their earthly activity, the good life must be embodied. The exception will be explained in the conclusion of this section. At this point it is essential to examine the relationship between form or soul, body, and the good life for human beings.

For Aristotle it is impossible to understand life in general, and human life in particular, in mechanical terms. Reacting against the atomistic attempt to reduce life to simple atomic motion, Aristotle contends that it is impossible to understand the motions characteristic of life in abstraction from desire. Even the simplest organisms *move themselves* to action in pursuit of the object of desire. Hence there is a difference of kind between vital motion and the externally determined motions of inanimate material. All life seeks to preserve itself and develop its defining capabilities. In other words, life pursues goals in a way impossible for insentient and non-conscious matter. As he says, “the essence of soul is to move itself.” (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, p. 543). In other words, there is a freedom definitive of life that consists in being endowed with the power to pursue goals that are natural to it. Living things act, they do not simply behave in response to external stimuli. If life is, in general, activity, then the good life will be, in general, the best sort of activity in accordance with the defining potentialities of living things. While it follows from Aristotle’s understanding of life that all living things have a natural good, human beings will be the exclusive focus in what follows.

For Aristotle, the differences between species are not simply natural facts, as in modern biology, but signs of a normative hierarchy of value at work in the universe. The more potentialities a living thing shares in, the closer it is to the divine perfection, and therefore the more valuable its life can be. Humans are the most valuable species

because they alone can reason and understand, a potential they share with the divine but with no other terrestrial creatures. “Life seems to be common even to plants, but what we are seeking is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, nutrition and growth ... [as well as] perception [because] *it* also seems to be common even to ... every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in McKeon, ed, p. 942, 1098a-1-5) The element of the human being that has a rational principle is the intellect, an element unique to the human soul.

Aristotle means by “soul” that which gives life to living things and determines the set of capabilities that defines them as a species and locates them within the cosmic hierarchy. (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, p. 555) Unlike Plato, for whom the soul was in principle separable from the body, for Aristotle soul and body form a unity whose disintegration means death for living things. The soul shapes and organizes the raw material of the body into living matter, capable of self-activity and self-realization. Whatever human beings are distinctively capable of they are capable of because of the organizing activity of the soul. The good for human beings is therefore grounded in the highest potentialities which the human soul encodes.

Although Aristotle argues that the good life for human beings is distinct from the good of plants and animals, he does not follow Plato and claim that there is no value whatsoever in the ‘animal’ requirements and activities of human beings. On the contrary, the hierarchy that Aristotle defends does not reject the value of the capabilities that we share with animals, although he does indeed regard them as lower values. He makes it clear that there are goods specific to the body, arguing that “all men think that the happy life is pleasant ... and reasonably too; for activity is perfect when it is unimpeded, and happiness is a perfect thing; this is why the happy man needs the goods of the body, and external goods ... in order that he may be unimpeded in these ways.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1055). All the capabilities of the human being therefore have value, but are arranged in a hierarchy according to which those that are distinctive of human beings are higher than those that link us to animal life, and that which only some human beings share with the divine (the intellectual comprehension of universal order and truth) is highest of all. Thus the goods of the body are of real value for humans, but they are not (as they are for lower animals) ultimate goods.

Instead, the goods of the body are instrumental goods for Aristotle. Since the soul is integrated with the body, the soul cannot act (it cannot move, sense, or think) if the body is seriously damaged. It is to avoid the impediments life-requirement deprivation causes that rational people must concern themselves with the body’s goods. The ultimate aim of satisfying those goods, however, is to realize one’s specifically human capabilities in the best way possible. Aristotle is neither hedonist nor ascetic, but instead defines happiness as resulting from the highest form of realization of the natural capabilities of human beings. “If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue [i.e., excellence] it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue, and this will be the best thing in us.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1104). Now, the best thing in us, according to Aristotle, is our reason, our capability for conscious understanding of the universal order that structures the cosmos. It is reason that distinguishes human beings from lower animals and unites those humans who can

exercise it fully with the divine. Thus it is reason that frames the essential goals of human life. To the extent that Aristotle connects reason with the essential goals of human life within nature and society, his arguments here contribute significantly to the history of conceptions of the embodied good life. To the extent, however, that he turns reason away from earth and toward the divine, Aristotle's arguments stand in serious tension with his conception of human nature as integrated unity of soul and body.

There is therefore a tension in Aristotle's work between an implicitly life-grounded understanding of conscious capability realization and enjoyment for human beings as such, and an exclusionary and hierarchical understanding of the exercise of contemplative reason as the most human of capabilities, to be realized and enjoyed only by the best sort of people. When Aristotle is focussed on the human being as an integral unity of needs and capabilities, he is open to the possibility of a diversity of good lives. In this dimension Aristotle seems to recognise that individuals are particular embodiments of the total set of human possibilities. Differences in the capabilities each individual is able to realise and enjoy does not *entail* invidious distinctions of moral worth. Instead, they could be interpreted simply as the expression of necessary and valuable differences of interest and talent: "One might think that all men desire pleasure because they all aim at life; life is an activity, and each man is active about those things and with those faculties that he loves most." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1100) Aristotle does not *ultimately* affirm the equality of all pleasures, but there is nevertheless an implicit recognition that people realise their human capabilities in distinct ways, and that to some extent each of these ways, provided they are not vicious and destructive, have real value.

Judged as a whole, however, Aristotle's conception of the embodied good life ultimately affirms a divine standard of perfection as of ultimate value. The life-grounded road implicit in his recognition of the diversity of expressions of human capabilities is the road *not* taken. His conception of the divine model of goodness recognises only one life as best – the philosophical life of contemplative reason. This life is open only to the best men, not to women and slaves. It is devoted not to the realization of human capabilities in ways that support, encourage, and enable other humans to realise their capabilities, not to social health as the foundation of the freedom of each to realise themselves in unique ways for others, but to the private contemplation of the divine perfection in an effort to make oneself immortal as far as possible. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, p.879) Indeed, the contemplation of the divine life is directly a contemplation of inequality in the relation between the human and the divine. This inequality, Aristotle believes, is and ought to be replicated in the social and political relations between the best *men* and their inferiors (the young, women, and slaves). "The male is superior by nature, and the female inferior, and the one rules, and the one is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. Where there is such a difference as that between ... men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them that they should be under the rule of a master." (Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 1132) Once human potentialities are judged from the divine standard, a hierarchy of potentials appears within human life, and it turns out that most human beings are not capable of a life of rational activity, and therefore *their* good consists only in being ruled. From being a means towards a valuable and meaningful life for all Aristotle's

account of the embodied good life ends up a justification for a subservient, impoverished, indeed, subhuman life for most. (See also Chapter Philosophy and World Problems).

Notwithstanding the unrecognised conflict evident between Aristotle's life-grounded conception of the embodied good life and his earth-transcending model of the ideal good life, his work is the first to systematically argue for an essential link between the possibilities of the human organism and goodness. His limitations owe more to the slave-based social order in which his thought developed and which he regarded as normative, than to abstract failures of ethical reasoning. The implications of Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between life-requirements and capability realization and the grounding of life-value in free development and enjoyment of vital capabilities exceed his vision which, like every finite human being, could not fully escape the gravitational pull of his own time, place, and class position. The truly philosophical appropriation of his work is to follow out the implications beyond the relative narrowness of his self-interpretation. Thus, having noted and explained the unrecognised conflict in his conception of the good life, the chapter can now shift to the more explicitly developed (but still not comprehensive or consistent) life-grounded understanding of the embodied good life in Marx.

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Biographical Sketch

Jeff Noonan was born in 1968 in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. He received his B.A (Philosophy and Social and Political Thought) from York University (Toronto) in 1991, his M.A (Philosophy) in 1993 and his Ph.D (Philosophy) 1996 from McMaster University (Hamilton). He taught as Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alberta (Edmonton) between 1996 and 1998. He is currently Associate Professor and Department Head of Philosophy at the University Windsor, and serves on the Coordinating Committee of the Centre for Studies in Social Justice and the Coordinating Committee of the Program in Labour Studies. He is the author of *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference*, (McGill Queen's University Press, 2003) and *Democratic Society and Human Needs*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). He has published widely in such journals as *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Reviews*, *Philosophy Today*, *Res Publica*, *Social Theory and Practice*, and *Rethinking Marxism*, and is a co-editor of *Studies in Social Justice*.