

HAPPINESS, *EUDAIMONIA*, AND THE PRINCIPLE OF DESCRIPTIVE ADEQUACY

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Abstract: Historically, philosophers have identified happiness with, among other things, pleasure, contentment, desire satisfaction, and, if we count the Greek *eudaimonia* as happiness, the life of virtue. When faced with competing theories of happiness, we need a way to decide which theory is more accurate. According to Larry Wayne Sumner's *principle of descriptive adequacy*, the best theory of happiness is the theory that best describes our ordinary, pretheoretical beliefs and intuitions. The chief aim of this article is to show that the principle of descriptive adequacy is mistaken. To do this, it shows how the principle breaks down when applied to Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia*, a theory Sumner claims to be descriptively inadequate as a theory of happiness. The article argues that we should reject descriptive adequacy as a metaphilosophical principle on the grounds that our intuitions and beliefs about happiness are too inchoate for any theory adequately to describe.

Keywords: Aristotle, descriptive adequacy, *eudaimonia*, happiness, Larry Wayne Sumner.

1

Ubiquitous though the concept of happiness is, its meaning is elusive. Theorists have variously identified happiness with pleasure, contentment, the satisfaction of desire, tranquility, and if we count the Greek *eudaimonia* as happiness, the life virtuously lived. Part of the difficulty results from the fact that the words "happiness" and "happy" are used differently in different contexts: when I say that I want my children to grow up to be happy, and when I say that I am happy to meet you, for instance, I mean different things. Nonetheless, when faced with competing theories of happiness, we need a way to decide which theory is more accurate, which provides more insight into the meaning of a word whose importance to our lives is indisputable. Larry Wayne Sumner has proposed a metaphilosophical principle to help us do exactly this. According to Sumner's *principle of descriptive adequacy*, the best theory of happiness is the theory that best describes our ordinary, pretheoretical beliefs and intuitions. So, if a theory fails to capture the meaning of happiness as we use the word in our everyday vernacular, it fails as a theory of happiness; and when we

turn to ancient or foreign languages, as in the case of the Greek “eudaimonia,” if a theory departs significantly from the contemporary, everyday meaning of happiness, we should conclude that it is not a theory of happiness at all. It is a theory of something else. This, Sumner proposes, is why “happiness” is a bad translation of “eudaimonia”: as every student of the *Nicomachean Ethics* knows, much of what Aristotle says about eudaimonia sounds dubious, if not incredible, when we translate the Greek as “happiness” and, because of this, descriptive adequacy tells us that we would do better to find another, less misleading translation (Sumner 2003, 22–39).

My chief aim in this article is to show that the principle of descriptive adequacy is mistaken and that we ought not to adopt it. To do this, I apply descriptive adequacy to Aristotelian eudaimonia and show how the principle inevitably breaks down. In the process, I also argue that we should not reject “happiness” as a translation of “eudaimonia” just because Aristotle’s theory fails to describe happiness as we typically think of it today. Aristotle’s theory takes us far afield of our pretheoretical intuitions; nonetheless, I will maintain that whatever differences we have with Aristotle, those differences are, as Richard Kraut (1978) argues, substantive and philosophical, not conceptual or terminological. To make my case, I first set out Sumner’s principle and explain why Aristotle’s theory of eudaimonia is supposed to be descriptively inadequate as a theory of happiness; I explain, too, why other interpreters who prefer alternative translations, such as John Cooper’s “flourishing” (Cooper 1975, 89–90), implicitly endorse descriptive adequacy. Next, I argue that we should not reject Aristotle’s theory of eudaimonia as a descriptively inadequate theory of happiness on the grounds that our pretheoretical beliefs and intuitions about happiness are themselves too inchoate and confused for any theory adequately and consistently to describe. I conclude not only that it is wrong to reject “happiness” as a translation of “eudaimonia” but also, and more significantly, that the rejection of “happiness” as a translation rests on a mistake about the concept of happiness itself and about the role theory can play in helping us to better understand what it means to lead happy lives.

2

Sumner first introduces descriptive adequacy as a metaphilosophical principle in his 1996 *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, so I will begin with the account he gives there.¹ Descriptive adequacy, as he explains it,

¹ A disclaimer: In *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* Sumner is principally concerned with welfare rather than happiness, and when I explain descriptive adequacy as he understands it, I am going to translate some of his comments about welfare into comments about happiness. This is not problematic, as Sumner claims the demands of descriptive adequacy apply equally to both concepts.

provides a standard for assessing competing theories of happiness and of welfare. Historically, happiness has been associated with a variety of things, from the simple experience of momentary pleasure to a sense of tranquility to satisfaction with the overall character of one's life. If we want to know which of these best captures the true meaning of happiness, the first thing we must do is determine what data a theory must fit, and so Sumner proposes his principle of descriptive adequacy as a test to tell us exactly that. The data a theory must fit, it tells us, is the data we get from our pretheoretical beliefs and intuitions about happiness: our everyday notion of what it means to be happy and our everyday judgments about who is and who is not happy. Thus, a theory's primary job is to describe and make sense of our everyday beliefs about happiness, and the primary test for assessing a theory as adequate or as inadequate is the theory's success or failure in accomplishing that job (Sumner 1996, 11).

Of course, no theory can accomplish that job perfectly. In the first place, as I have already suggested, we employ a number of different concepts of happiness in different contexts. Another, deeper problem is that our pretheoretical beliefs and intuitions about happiness are not perfectly coherent: some beliefs fit uneasily with others, and notoriously, we do not all share the same intuitions equally, or even at all. For example, we might maintain that happiness is a matter simply of how a person feels and nonetheless hesitate to say that a person is living happily, or is *truly* happy, when he is radically deceived about the things that matter most to him, even if in his deceived state he feels quite content. In such a case, our intuitions are in tension with one another. Thus, another job a theory of happiness needs to accomplish is organizational: it needs to help us sort our convictions in rank order of importance. Since some intuitions are "more central to our unreflective practices than others," as Sumner puts it, theories must be informed "by a map of our preanalytic convictions which distinguishes its core from its periphery" (1996, 11).

Now organizing our beliefs about happiness, ranking their importance, and charting their relative location in the broader landscape of our convictions all require knowing how to distinguish our core commitments from those that belong out on the periphery, and that distinction is supposed to be simple, at least in principle: our core beliefs are the ones we hold most confidently, the ones it would be most disruptive to give up, while along the periphery our beliefs become less certain and more tentative. Some peripheral beliefs may turn out, on reflection, to be open to revision. But, according to descriptive adequacy, the further a theory takes us from our core pretheoretical beliefs, the further it takes us from seeing what happiness really is about. Thus, to return to the previous example, if it turns out on reflection that we find ourselves more committed to the idea that happiness is simply a matter of how a person feels than we are to the

nagging idea that there is something sad and unhappy about the life of the deceived but contented person, descriptive adequacy tells us that we ought to give up the latter belief and hold onto the more core, organizational belief that happiness is, as we might say, subjective.

This idea that I should hold on to the most central of my convictions whenever two or more convictions conflict sounds commonsensical, but proponents of descriptive adequacy like Sumner need to explain why we should privilege *any* pretheoretical convictions about happiness in the first place. Their answer has something to do with the public, practical nature of happiness. Happiness is a practical concept that we all use and share in our daily lives and interactions: considerations of happiness inform our deliberations about what to do, our descriptions of others, and our predictions about what they will do. Ordinarily, if our folk understanding of a concept succeeds in the various applications we put it to, then we have good reason to think we have gotten that concept right. And although we sometimes disagree about problem cases, in most contexts we do appear to share the same concept of happiness successfully. We tend to make roughly the same judgments about people, for instance, about whether someone is or is not happy, and we tend to hold roughly the same beliefs, for instance, that happiness is a subjective psychological state, that it is possible for anyone, and that it comes and goes from our lives. Given the public, practical nature of happiness, the thought behind descriptive adequacy therefore is that happiness should be defined by the way it gets used, and that is why theories need to respect our pretheoretical beliefs and intuitions. As Daniel Haybron has put it, “A conception of happiness should, at a minimum, be recognizable as such. It should concern something we can at least get away with calling happiness without butchering the language” (Haybron 2008, 52). According to the principle of descriptive adequacy, then, a theory of happiness that is too revisionary ceases to be a theory of happiness at all. It changes the subject.

3

The reasons Aristotle’s theory of eudaimonia is thought to be too revisionary to count as a theory of happiness are clear. Complaints that his claims about eudaimonia clash with our everyday understanding of happiness are old and familiar, and the grounds for those complaints undeniably look strong. Aristotle’s formal definition of eudaimonia, given at the conclusions of the pivotal “function argument” of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7, in fact sounds bizarre as a definition of happiness. Eudaimonia, Aristotle concludes there, “turns out to be [rational] activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and the most complete. Further, it must be in a complete life,

for a single swallow does not make a spring” (*EN* 1098a16–20).² If this is a definition of happiness, then according to Aristotle to be happy is to be engaged in virtuous behavior over the course of one’s life.

Now this definition, Aristotle is quick to point out, gives us only an outline of what it means to be *eudaimōn* (*EN* 1098a22), and there is a long history of interpretive debate about how we should understand the way in which Aristotle fills in the details of this outline, so we should not rely only on what Aristotle says here. Indeed, the strangeness of what he says here is mitigated somewhat later on when we find out that living virtuously requires or at least typically accompanies many of the features we expect of a happy life, like the presence of friendship, the absence of deprivation or marginalization, and some good fortune. As Aristotle explains, *eudaimonia* “evidently requires the external goods [*ta ekstos agatha*] as well. For it’s not possible, or it’s not easy, to do fine things when unequipped, since on the one hand many fine things are done through friends and wealth and political influence, as though through instruments, and on the other hand, the deprivation of some goods, like a noble birth and good children and physical beauty, tarnishes one’s blessedness [*makariotēs*]” (1099a32–b8). Still, even taking into account these admissions, it is obvious that Aristotle’s formal definition of *eudaimonia* as rational “activity of soul in accordance with virtue” is far different from our ordinary thinking about happiness.

However obvious the difference may be between Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and happiness as it ordinarily is understood today, it nonetheless is helpful to identify some specific examples. In the first place, according to this definition, Aristotelian *eudaimonia* can only be predicated of complete lives (for, as Aristotle says, a single swallow does not make a spring) while happiness as we understand it today can be fleeting and episodic. Next, *eudaimonia* is an activity (*energeia*), while we tend to think of happiness as a state. In particular, happiness is a psychological state dependent on how a person feels; Aristotle, however, has no thoroughly psychological sense of *eudaimonia* to correspond to our notion of simply “feeling happy.” Finally, and most significantly, Aristotelian *eudaimonia* differs from our ordinary understanding of happiness in that *eudaimonia* requires living one’s life in accordance with the demands of virtue, while it seems obvious to most people today that crooks, cowards, and frauds are just as capable of happiness as anyone else.

With these disagreements between Aristotle’s theory and our intuitions in mind, we can in fact identify two distinct challenges to the identification of happiness with *eudaimonia*. According to the first challenge, our commonsense notion of happiness does not correlate to the Greek commonsense notion of *eudaimonia*—that everyday, pretheoreti-

² All translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) are my own, working from Bywater’s texts and borrowing heavily from the Ross/Urmson revised Oxford translations.

cal concept that Aristotle theorizes about and that would have been just as familiar to any Athenian as happiness is familiar to us today. If that is right, it does not matter how revisionary Aristotle's theory is, since he was not talking about the Greek correlate to our notion of happiness in the first place. According to the second challenge, the everyday Greek notion of eudaimonia may correlate to our everyday notion of happiness, but the theorized concept that emerges out of Aristotle's analysis does not: the end product of Aristotle's theorizing in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the concept whose realization requires rational "activity of soul in accordance with virtue," is too revisionary to count as a concept of *happiness*. Somewhere along the way in his theorizing, Aristotle changes the subject.

The first of these two challenges would be hard to respond to, if only because we have no first-hand accounts of ordinary, nonphilosophical Greek views of eudaimonia. Instead, we can only go by the different ways in which those views are represented in the literature, as when Aristotle says that "practically everybody, both ordinary and refined people," agree that eudaimonia is "living well and faring well [*eu zēn kai eu prattein*]" (*EN* 1095a17–20), that they identify eudaimonia with pleasure and reputation, and that they take eudaimonia to be something internal to a person (*EN* 1.8). If these claims accurately represent ordinary Greek views of eudaimonia, they fit naturally with ordinary views of happiness today, and they show that Aristotle's view of eudaimonia would have been just as unconventional to his nonphilosophical contemporaries as it is to us. That this does not come across clearly in Aristotle's works should not surprise us, either. While the exact nature of his extant writings is debatable, they clearly are *esoteric*, that is, intended for distribution only within the walls of the Lyceum, where Aristotle's Platonist view that eudaimonia requires virtue already was orthodox (see Barnes 1995). Other literary evidence suggests that Aristotle's views about eudaimonia would have sounded bizarre, however, to his nonphilosophical contemporaries. Consider Polus's baffled and increasingly outraged responses when Socrates argues that eudaimonia requires virtue in Plato's *Gorgias*: "Even a child could refute you" (470c), "what an absurd position you're trying to maintain!" (473a), and "you're saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain" (473e)! As Julia Annas puts it, for the ancients as well as for us the starting point for thinking about happiness appears to be the conventionally successful and subjectively satisfying life (Annas 1993, 453).

We can, in any case, table this first challenge, for it is the second challenge that descriptive adequacy forces on us: if eudaimonia as Aristotle conceives it is more or less permanent, if it consists in activity, and if it requires virtue, does that mean that it cannot be a concept of what we call happiness? Sumner concludes that any charitable reading must take Aristotle to be talking about something else, and other scholars who reject

happiness as a translation mirror Sumner's reasoning.³ Cooper, for example, prefers "flourishing" to "happiness" on the grounds that "much that Aristotle says about *eudaimonia* manifestly fails to hold true of happiness as ordinarily understood" (Cooper 1975, 89–90 n. 1). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum rejects happiness as "badly misleading," given that we now commonly associate happiness with "a feeling of contentment or pleasure" (Nussbaum 2001, 6), and Sarah Broadie complains that Aristotle's usage of *eudaimonia* is too unlike our ordinary usage of happiness (Broadie 2002, 12). Kraut sums up the orthodox view to which these scholars all subscribe in a way that makes clear the similarity between their view and Sumner's: theirs is the view, Kraut writes, that "we should assign a meaning to *eudaimonia* that makes Aristotle disagree with us as little as possible" (1978, 68). This is no different from what Sumner says when he explains why he thinks we should not associate *eudaimonia* with happiness: doing so, he concludes, "messes too much with the core territory of our concept of happiness" (2003, 30).

I am now going to explain why this conclusion is mistaken. In making my argument, I do not address each of the different respects in which Aristotle's view is said to challenge our modern sensibilities about happiness.⁴ Instead, I focus only on what I take to be the most fundamental challenge: namely, while Aristotelian *eudaimonia* typically is taken to be, and explicitly is said by Sumner to be, an objective concept (Sumner 1996, 69–72), happiness today almost always is taken to be subjective. As Sumner perhaps uncontroversially asserts, "The subjectivity of happiness is obvious on the face of it" (1996, 140). It is something we are supposed to be sure about, a core commitment no theory can challenge. But it looks as though *eudaimonia* must be objective if it is going to connect in any substantive way with the life of justice, courage, temperance, and intelligence, as Aristotle wants. If that is right, descriptive adequacy should reject *eudaimonia*, along with any form of objectivism, as, in Sumner's words, "completely unintelligible as a view about the nature of happiness" (Sumner 1996, 140).

4

For Sumner to build his case, and for me to dismantle it, substance first needs to be given to the notions of subjectivity and objectivity in theorizing about happiness. That could be done in a variety of ways, but a promising place to start thinking about what it means to say that happiness is subjective is with the intuitive claim that all subjective theories

³ Sumner defends "welfare" as the best contemporary correlate to "*eudaimonia*," most notably in Sumner 2003.

⁴ James Dybikowski (1981) discusses these aspects of Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia* and what they mean for our understanding of *eudaimonia* as happiness.

of happiness must make a subject's happiness depend in some significant way on her own self-assessment: whether I define happiness in terms of pleasure, satisfaction, tranquility, or whatever, *my* happiness depends on *my* believing that I am happy. No subjective theory would call a person happy in the face of her denial, nor would it reject a person's claim that she was happy, except perhaps under exceptional circumstances. That exception is going to be important. Exactly what circumstances count as exceptional is an issue about which subjective theories may disagree, but it would be a mistake to think that, in order to count as subjective, a theory must treat all subjective claims as unimpeachable. Extreme versions of subjectivism might hold that view, insisting that a person is happy *whenever* she says that she is.⁵ But more moderate versions could allow for some outside checks on the authority of a person's own subjective assessment. Sumner himself endorses such a moderate version of subjectivism. He considers a subject happy whenever she positively assesses and feels good about her life, but he also allows that her assessment should be disqualified as inauthentic, distorted, or confused if she lies to herself or others, if her state of mind has been altered, or if she misunderstands what it means to be happy (Sumner 1996, 153–55). Thus, for a theory of happiness to count as subjective, it must regard a favorable self-assessment as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for actually being happy (Sumner 1996, 38).

In contrast, we can mark the boundaries of objective theories with the denial of this claim: according to objectivism, happiness does not require that a person believes her life is going well or that she enjoys it. It requires instead that her life really does go well. "On an objective theory," Sumner explains, "something can be (directly or immediately) good for me though I do not regard it favorably, and my life can be going well despite my failing to have a positive attitude toward it." Extreme objectivist theories may even "exclude all references to the subject's attitudes or concerns" (Sumner 1996, 43). So I can be happy even if I do not feel happy, as long as I meet some objective standard against which my life can be assessed as a good one. The central question for objectivist theories therefore concerns what makes lives go well, and Aristotle provides one historically significant response: for a person's life to go well, she must be actively virtuous. Now because Sumner defines objectivism by the negation of the subjectivist's claim that no one is happy unless she thinks she is, he takes these categories to be "both mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive" (Sumner 1996, 39). They form a dichotomy,

⁵ I borrow the phrase "extreme subjectivism" from Richard Kraut. As Kraut defines it, extreme subjectivism is the view that "happiness is a psychological state and nothing more. It involves, among other things, the belief that one is getting the important things one wants, as well as certain pleasant effects that normally go along with this belief" (Kraut 1978, 178).

together mapping out the landscape that competing theories of happiness may cover.

With subjectivism and objectivism about happiness distinguished this way, it now should be clearer why descriptive adequacy is thought to rule out all objective theories: surely we are all committed, and deeply so, to the idea that a person cannot be happy if she is dissatisfied with life, despondent, or just plain sad, no matter how objectively well off she seems. Aristotle's theory, in fact, may seem doubly wrong. First, as Sumner points out, it always would seem to be "a contingent matter whether the possession of some particular [virtue] makes us better off," since, notoriously, acting virtuously sometimes requires acting against what appears to be in our own best interest: courage sometimes gets us killed and honesty sometimes makes us hated (Sumner 1997, 23). More to the point, it certainly seems a contingent matter whether virtue makes us *happy*, at least in the conventional sense of endorsing and feeling good about life: cannot the virtuous hate their lives and the vicious love theirs? It is this kind of objectivist claim, that I could be happy even if I hate my life, that Sumner finds unintelligible, so unintelligible that he is not willing to countenance the idea that it could belong to a theory of *happiness* at all. We are supposed to be so committed to the subjectivity of happiness that the objective dimension of Aristotelian eudaimonism automatically disqualifies it as a candidate theory of happiness. It must be a theory of something else.

Three claims from the foregoing analysis need to be scrutinized before we can accept the conclusion that we should not understand Aristotelian eudaimonia in terms of happiness on the grounds that it fails adequately to describe the subjective nature of happiness as we understand it today. First is the claim that Aristotelian eudaimonia is objective in the objectionable sense suggested above. Next comes the more basic claim that we have clear intuitions about the subjectivity of happiness and that we can therefore dismiss objective theories as descriptively inadequate. Finally, and most importantly, there is the claim that descriptive adequacy is an appropriate and realistic ideal for assessing a theory of happiness in the first place. If both of the first two claims are right, we can conclude that Aristotelian eudaimonism is descriptively *inadequate* as a theory of happiness. If the third claim is right, too, it will mean either that we should abandon Aristotle's eudaimonism as a failed theory of happiness—that is to say, it is a theory that fails to explicate the same concept that we today call happiness—or that we should adopt a new understanding of "eudaimonia," one that does not make Aristotle out to be so obviously wrong.

5

The problem with the first claim is that, given this characterization of subjective and objective theories of happiness, Aristotle's theory turns

out to be categorically *subjective*. In fact, reflecting on Aristotle's theory shows just how confused our intuitions about subjective and objective theories of happiness are. The trouble can be traced to a couple of sources. First is the general idea that any theory that establishes objective requirements for happiness must thereby be an objective theory. But that is not right, if subjectivism is defined, as Sumner says it is, by the principle that believing oneself to be happy is necessary but not sufficient for actually being happy (Sumner 1996, 39 and 163). Aristotle's theory of eudaimonia comes off as boldly objective because it commits him to the claim that eudaimonia requires virtuous activity, but Aristotle also endorses an equally bold claim about what it means to act virtuously, a claim that commits him to the defining principle of subjectivism. To genuinely possess a virtue, you have to enjoy the appropriate behavior. Aristotle explains: "No one is good who doesn't enjoy doing fine things. A person would neither call just someone who doesn't enjoy acting justly nor liberal someone who doesn't enjoy acting liberally, and it's the same with the other virtues" (*EN* 1099a17–20). In fact, Aristotle tells us that the central aim of moral education is to habituate us into finding the right things pleasant: "That's why one must have been brought up in a certain way from childhood on, as Plato says, so that one will enjoy and find painful the things one should" (*EN* 1104b11–12). Aristotle's eudaimonia even seems to require something like contemporary life satisfaction: although "all men desire" life, he explains, eudaimōn people desire life most, "since for them life is most desirable," or alternatively, "most choiceworthy" (*toutois gar ho bios airetōtatos*) (*EN* 1170a26–28). To be eudaimōn is to enjoy life's pleasures and to positively endorse them as good, that is, as the kinds of pleasures that make life worth living. So, according to Aristotle, one cannot be eudaimōn and at the same time feel reluctant, regretful, or resentful about the kind of life one is leading, as the unhappy do.

The notion that Aristotle's theory must be objective in some objectionable sense nonetheless may persist, compounded by another thought. There is some tendency to think that any theory that says a person could mistakenly believe himself to be happy also should allow that he could mistakenly believe himself to be unhappy. But that does not turn out to be right either, and the difference between these two mistakes is significant when weighing the strength of the intuitions that descriptive adequacy exploits. If again we take eudaimonia to be happiness, then Aristotle's identification of eudaimonia with virtuous activity does imply that people can mistakenly believe themselves to be happy: a villain, for instance, who thinks the wealth he has amassed by deceiving and exploiting friends makes him happy. But Aristotle in no way suggests that a person who really is happy could mistakenly believe himself to be *unhappy*. To the contrary, the virtuous love life and find it worthwhile, in just the way we conventionally

think that those who lead happy lives love *their* lives and find *them* worthwhile.⁶

Now, if Aristotle did allow someone to mistakenly believe himself to be unhappy, his theory would be far more counterintuitive than it really is. The idea that I could tell someone who feels miserable that he is wrong to think himself unhappy sounds too presumptuous to tolerate, inasmuch as misery involves suffering, and normally, to deny another's suffering is just a sign of meanness or of a failure to empathize. This is not to say that it would be wrong for me to deny your unhappiness just because it would be hurtful to you. It would be wrong because, normally, were I to deny your suffering, I would be missing something—namely, an appreciation of what it is like to experience the world from your perspective. Of course, there may be cases in which it would be tolerable to distrust another's claim to be unhappy: for example, someone who is momentarily under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or whose thinking has been distorted by illness. People like that may not be unhappy even if they say they are. They may just be drunk or sick. In those cases, though, we distrust what the person says because we think his judgment is so impaired that he is not really himself. As long as he is thinking straight, as long as he *is* himself, we have no business denying the significance of his suffering. But things look different when we turn to cases of people who believe they really *are happy* for reasons we know to be mistaken, childish, or uninformed, and that is why it makes a difference whether we consider a mistaken belief that one is happy versus a mistaken belief that one is unhappy.

Consider a few such cases: a man's contentment with life is rooted in the security, the emotional strength, and the sense of shared identity he derives from what he believes to be a committed intimate relationship, but he is unaware that his partner is unfaithful. A woman convinces herself that she loves someone who abuses her emotionally and physically and that she deserves and can forgive the abuse because she needs her abuser's love. An addict whose addiction has cost him everything he used to care about now swears, even when sober, that he only is happy when high, and that getting high is all that matters to him. Are all of these people happy? Is their happiness equally real, genuine, authentic? Is the happiness of any one of them no truer than the happiness of any other, or of anyone else? How each of us will respond to these difficult questions is not, I take it, a foregone conclusion. In each case, we know the person's understanding of his or her life is significantly distorted, and

⁶ Living virtuously helps secure happiness on Aristotle's account, but, of course, it in no way guarantees happiness: serious misfortune may render you miserable, and serious deprivation of resources may prevent you from living happily as well (most famously, see *EN* 1098a28–b5).

in each case it has been distorted differently: by deception, delusion, and addiction. In none of the cases, however, is the source of distortion as obviously alien to the person, or as obviously incapacitating, as it is in the previous case of a person who is very sick or drunk, even if it is difficult to say exactly how these cases differ from one another. Nor in any of these cases would the kind of cognitive distortion involved (deception, delusion, or addiction) be grounds for denying that the person was *unhappy* if he said he was: we would never tell the addict, for example, that we could not trust him when he said he was unhappy because it was just his addiction speaking. Yet each of these cases does raise serious questions about whether we should believe the person when he tells us that he *really is happy*. So, evidently the idea that a person falsely can think himself unhappy is harder to tolerate than the idea that he falsely can think himself happy.

Now I do not need to resolve any of these troublesome cases here. Each case is difficult and different from the others. In fact, the difficulty in figuring out what to think about them is just the point I want to emphasize. If asked whether the addict and the abused lover are happy, or whether their happiness is real or genuine, it is not immediately clear how to respond. One reason is that someone may be happy in one sense but not in another, and it is not clear which is the primary sense: the abused lover may delude herself into satisfaction, but her satisfaction may betray an undercurrent of fear or sadness; the addict may be euphoric in his drug-induced state, but his life may be, by his own admission, a waste. Cases like these challenge the coherence of our pretheoretical beliefs and the uniformity of our commonsense thinking: is it always up to each person to conclude for himself whether he is happy, or whether his life is happy? Are these people really themselves, or are they somehow alienated from themselves? Whatever we conclude, we must recognize that there is space here for legitimate disagreement; and that is all I want to show, since space for disagreement is all I need to discredit the claim that Aristotle automatically violates a core pretheoretical commitment to the subjectivity of happiness just because he thinks a person's belief that he is happy is open to outside evaluation. Given this, we must conclude one of two things. Either we are not all pretheoretically committed to the subjectivity of happiness, in which case we cannot rule out Aristotle's theory as an account of happiness on the grounds that it is objective; or, our commitment to subjectivity is compatible with the idea that it is not always up to each person to decide for himself if he is happy, in which case we face an open question as to when and on what grounds a claim to be happy *can* be challenged. After all, if thoughtlessness and insincerity can impugn my claim that I am happy, as Sumner allows, *maybe* deception and delusion can too, *maybe even vice*. Either way, establishing independent criteria for happiness is not *a priori* out of the question.

6

If Aristotle does not violate descriptive adequacy just because he questions the idea that people's subjective assessments of their own happiness are defeasible, and if he affirms the subjectivist principle that no one who hates life is happy, then his eudaimonism does not appear to be objective in the objectionable sense proponents of descriptive adequacy, like Sumner, allege. So the first claim Aristotle's critics need to substantiate appears to be false. It may be objected, however, that my defense of Aristotle so far depends on a flawed way of distinguishing subjective and objective theories of happiness, and so it fails to acquit him of the charge that he violates our pretheoretical commitment to subjectivity. I helped Aristotle escape that charge, after all, only by defining subjectivity and objectivity in a way that makes him out to be a subjectivist about happiness, but that conclusion might be thought to constitute an obvious *reductio* of the distinction as I interpret it: *of course* Aristotle is an objectivist. Clearly there are other ways to draw the distinction, so maybe we should expect another strategy to do a better job generating the anticipated results.

One possibility emerges from what I earlier called extreme subjectivism: a person is happy *whenever* she says she is. The correlate to this, extreme objectivism, might then hold that a person is happy *only* when her life realizes some specified external criteria or accomplishments, criteria or accomplishments that have nothing to do with what she subjectively thinks about her life. Now it may be right that if there were such a theory, a theory that completely divorced a person's happiness from her own attitudes, priorities, and values, it wouldn't stand a chance, but Aristotle's is no such theory, and this stark way of redrawing the subjective-objective distinction is no threat to him. Alternatively, then, we might imagine different and more moderate forms of subjectivism by qualifying the authority of people's subjective self-assessments in different ways. For instance, we could introduce an authenticity requirement that says a person's subjective belief that she is happy is authoritative so long as she is not significantly alienated from herself.⁷ Or we could introduce an epistemic requirement that says a person's subjective belief that she is happy is authoritative as long as she is not significantly deceived about her life.⁸ Either of these views could be problematic for Aristotle, but neither of them obviously is. To see whether his or any theory would count such a person's belief that she is happy as authoritative, we would first have to answer some difficult questions: for instance, when has a person become alienated from herself and when has she just changed (think of the addict) and when has she been deluded and when is she in denial (the abused spouse). Of course, however we respond to these subtleties, we will have

⁷ A requirement endorsed by Sumner (1996, 164–71).

⁸ A requirement endorsed by John Kekes (1982, 368–70).

come a long way from the complaint that Aristotle's theory must be "completely unintelligible as a view about the nature of happiness" on the grounds that it is an objective theory (Sumner 1996, 140). As the distinction between subjective and objective theories of happiness grows more complex, the claim that we are all pretheoretically committed to the subjectivity of happiness grows less convincing.

It therefore is unlikely that this objection will do a critic much good. No matter how she draws the distinction between subjective and objective theories of happiness, if she claims that Aristotle's theory cannot be descriptively adequate because it is an objective theory then she also must endorse, as I have said, the more basic claim that we have clear intuitions about the subjectivity of happiness in the first place. But this is starting to look unlikely, given that neither Aristotle's theory nor our intuitions fit neatly into either the subjective or objective categories as we originally imagined them: if Aristotle is an objectivist about happiness, then objectivists can accommodate the notion that to be happy you need to feel subjectively happy, and if he is a subjectivist, then subjectivists can accommodate the notion that you can feel subjectively happy even if you are not happy. Any theory that aspires to descriptive adequacy therefore must acknowledge both the authority *and* the limitations of subjective assessments, and that is exactly what Aristotle's theory does. Sumner, for his part, acknowledges that "hybrid" theories of this sort are possible, even if he fails to recognize that Aristotle's counts among them. Someone could claim, Sumner admits, that happiness requires *both* that people believe they are happy *and* that they meet other, independent criteria. But because he thinks a theory counts as subjective whenever it makes happiness depend, even in part, on a person's subjective assessment, he is forced to conclude that hybrid theories of this sort are "technically subjective," too (Sumner 1996, 163).⁹ That may be misleading, but it is no worse than the conclusion that hybrid theories are technically objective.

This only begins to get at the problem, though. Our question should not be, Can we understand the subjective/objective distinction in a way that makes it fit an antecedent commitment to the subjectivity of happiness? To proceed that way is backward: first we say we are pretheoretically committed to the subjectivity of happiness, then we try to define subjectivity in a way that makes that claim plausible. The fact is, we have no pretheoretical commitment to the subjectivity of happiness. As soon as we introduce the concept of subjectivity, we introduce a theoretical position. Instead, we have beliefs and intuitions about particular cases, and I have tried to show that our beliefs and intuitions about particular cases are not as uniform as they might appear. The conclusion to take away from these reflections is that our pretheoretical beliefs about happiness, even our allegedly core commitments, like our so-called commitment to the

⁹ Kekes (1982, 368–70) also advocates a hybrid theory of this sort.

subjectivity of happiness, are not so simple, and that some of our most basic intuitions, including the intuition that it is up to each person to decide for herself if she is happy, are, at best, incomplete. So no matter how intuitively plausible it is, the second claim that Aristotle's critics need to substantiate, the claim that we have clear intuitions about the subjectivity of happiness and that we therefore can dismiss all objective theories as descriptively inadequate, also appears to be false.

7

Recognizing the complexity of our everyday beliefs and intuitions about happiness helps us finally to recognize the problems with descriptive adequacy as a metaphilosophical principle, problems that come to light by reviewing the progression of my arguments so far. We began by gathering from our basic intuitions one core conviction, a supposedly irreproachable commitment to the subjectivity of happiness. Trying to say precisely what it means to call happiness subjective, however, led us away from that simple conviction, and we found ourselves moving out from the core of our intuitions toward the periphery, asking questions about difficult cases where intuitions divide and are uncertain. Whatever we finally conclude about these problem cases, whether we decide that the addict or the abused lover is genuinely happy or not, we will need to go beyond our pretheoretical commitments and intuitions to settle the matter, since some people's intuitions and convictions may waver and conflict with one another. Raising questions out along the periphery, then, led us to the possibility that our supposedly fundamental commitment to the subjectivity of happiness may be confused or incomplete and that it potentially is misleading, and so it is no longer clear either how or why we should privilege it. In thinking about happiness we therefore should not dismiss what Aristotle says, or conclude that he cannot be talking about happiness as we know it, just because his claims appear to offend descriptive adequacy.

Sumner's idea that the best theory of happiness is the theory that best describes our everyday beliefs nonetheless *seems* plausible, and unsurprisingly it is employed, if only implicitly, in most recent theories of happiness. There is a good reason, too. If the metaphilosophical question that theorists must ask, and that descriptive adequacy is supposed to answer, is the question of how hard we should work to preserve our everyday understanding of happiness, one reasonable response is that we should work to preserve that understanding just to the extent that it is successful in describing, explaining, and predicting behavior. And in the regular run of things, we do succeed at identifying others as happy or as unhappy, at making inferences about their motives and behavior, and at sharing how we feel about ourselves and about our lives. Still, there are contexts in which our ordinary concept of happiness fails us, as when we struggle with

problem cases like the addict whose addiction has warped his values beyond recognition and the lover whose sense of self is so damaged that she mistakes abuse for love. The problem with descriptive adequacy is that, in order for it to function as a workable ideal, we need a fairly clear and consistent set of beliefs and intuitions for theories to describe. The messier our beliefs and intuitions get, the more contested, intricate, incomplete, or inarticulate they become, the further descriptive adequacy recedes as workable ideal. This is not to license theorists to say whatever they will about happiness or to abuse or abandon our everyday thinking about it without reason. As Aristotle says, it is unlikely that our everyday thinking is entirely wrong (*EN* 1098b28–30). The trouble comes when we take too simplistic a view of what most people think because, when we do that, the principle of descriptive adequacy allows us to enshrine some familiar intuitions about happiness at the expense of others, closing off discussion of cases that then get labeled “peripheral.” But if I am right about how multifaceted and potentially problematic our everyday thinking about happiness is, there is no reason to think theories of happiness have to endorse our more common commitments. We should remain open to the possibility that theorizing about happiness may force us to abandon some very strong intuitions and to revise some core commitments about the happy life that we wrongly thought we could not do without.

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