

“At Home in the World”: A Look at Daniel C. Russell’s Dilemma about Virtue, Attachment, and Happiness*

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“I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.” – Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

There is a deeply rooted tension in Western moral philosophy, and indeed in the unreflective moral intuitions of ordinary folk, between the view that people are by and large in control of their happiness and the opposing view that they are not. The latter view boasts the backing of Aristotle and the majority modern opinion, and appeals to the well-entrenched assumption that forces beyond one’s control can (and frequently do) derail one’s happiness. The former view, however, is not without its own prominent proponents. I can do no better here than to quote Socrates himself: “Keep this one truth in mind, that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods.”¹ This idea, taken up and developed by the Stoics—that a good character is somehow immune to misfortune, that one who sacrifices pleasure, property, or even life, for virtue, is not thereby losing anything of lasting importance—is arguably equally entrenched as the Aristotelian view, even within the modern mind (though the corresponding intuitions may need a bit more prodding).

In his book, *Happiness for Humans*, Daniel C. Russell traces these opposing conceptions of happiness, arguing (in qualified support of the Aristotelian side) for what he calls an “embodied” conception of the self, whereby one’s happiness is *constituted by* one’s activities and their relations to one’s particular surroundings.² Russell, however, is nothing if not fair, and so does an admirable job of presenting the Socratic/Stoic position. He does such a good job, in fact, that he leaves himself with what he takes to be an unanswerable Stoic argument, and he thus ends his book with a dilemma. The dilemma is this: One needs various things in order to live a happy life. Those things include virtue, autonomy, wisdom, and a healthy emotional life. But one may also need intimate relationships with other people,

¹ Plato, Apology in *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 41d., pg. 36.

² Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For convenience and clarity, I will use the labels “Aristotelian” and “embodied” throughout the paper to refer to Russell’s view in contrast to the Stoic view, even though Russell goes beyond anything Aristotle said about the self.

or even to shape one's environment in a way that reveals and extends one's personality. But if the Stoics are right, then one cannot have all of these things simultaneously; the first set will preclude the second, and vice versa. We are thus left with a "tragic conflict": we either uphold our autonomy and safeguard our virtue, but at the loss of close, "embodied" relationships; or we give ourselves to those relationships and sabotage our happiness by relinquishing control of our virtue. Such is the dilemma, and as Russell says, "we are *all* stuck with it."³ There is a great loss either way, and one must simply choose which sort of loss she prefers. For Russell's part, he opts for the Aristotelian conception of the self, and for a happiness that is constituted by embodied relationships, but he admits that he does so not because of any convincing argument, but merely because he has "chosen to accept the risks on this side of the dilemma over those on the Stoics' side," and further that "It is a choice...made with some faith and much trepidation, which is...the most that anyone can do here."⁴

I respectfully disagree. My aim here will be to show that there is a way out of this dilemma, a way that allows both those influenced by the Aristotelian and Stoic ideas to maintain what is most central to their concerns. And this is important, for if we are honest, we all feel the tug of both worries. My goal is to provide a resolution that is consistent with a view of happiness as embodied virtuous activity, but that also allows for a measure of security in one's happiness—perhaps not enough to convert the dedicated Stoic, but at least enough to weaken his grip on the Aristotelian. My solution may still require a measure of faith, but I at least hope to mitigate the trepidation.

I will proceed as follows: I'll begin by sketching in a bit more detail the dilemma under consideration (§1). I'll then provide a brief account of the Stoic and Aristotelian arguments (as related by Russell) for their preferred conceptions of the self (§2), and take a closer look at the Stoic argument against embodiment (§3). I'll then relate the question of whether virtue is sufficient for happiness to the question of whether, and how, virtue might "pay," and borrowing from Robert Adams, I'll sketch a couple of insights from this question into our dilemma (§4). Finally, I'll give my solution to the dilemma and highlight some key features of it with a literary illustration (§5).

§1 – *The Dilemma*

Russell helpfully notes for us that Epictetus (from whom he draws the central arguments for the Stoic view) lived in a time when one's prospects for happiness were very often up to the will of a "patron or autocrat."⁵ It thus makes sense that someone in such a culture would be concerned not to stake too much of her happiness on her external situation. But this raises the objection that the Stoic view may be overly tied to a relatively narrow sociological context—the product of a historical accident—or at least only useful when one is faced with relatively dire circumstances. As Russell says, "Perhaps the strength of Epictetus' outlook in desperate circumstances is its weakness everywhere else."⁶ But this

³ Ibid., 257.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 251.

⁶ Ibid.

is not so. Epictetus is careful to point out that being in better or worse circumstances, having greater or lesser ambitions, makes no difference whatsoever to the risk one assumes in allowing her happiness to be affected by anything other than her own will. And this is because *anything* we cannot control can impose a constraint on our freedom if we let it become constitutive of our happiness. We risk just as much by marrying or having children or even building an estate as we do by seeking public office or some grander ambition, provided that in both cases we stake our happiness on the success of those relationships/projects. The worry for the Stoics is that in extending ourselves in this way, we open the door to seriously compromising our virtue. And this is because we are simply not usually in the position to guarantee that our projects succeed or that our relationships last, and when they are threatened, we will be driven to save them, sometimes at all costs. If the loss is significant enough—think what one might be tempted to do to save one’s child, for instance—even reason may not be sufficient to keep one from vicious action to preserve one’s fortune.

I think Russell does not pay quite enough attention to this objection, and will return to something like it in sections 4-5 below. This is not just a worry that arises in major life events either. Russell notes that “anxieties and failures to act virtuously also tend to be part of our daily experience,” and these are frequently the result of our tendency to cling tightly to the things (people, possessions, projects) in which we have sown our happiness. And it is important to note that our compulsion to protect these things is not a caving of reason to desire; it is precisely how one should be expected to act when one’s happiness is on the line, for one cannot help but act in the way that seems best to one, all things considered. As Russell says, the bouts of possessiveness that tend to accompany one’s investments in external goods “are not failures or lapses of practical reasoning; on the contrary, they are just how practical reasoning works when we adopt certain assumptions about our happiness.”⁷ The Aristotelian view thus commits us to a very restrictive view of autonomy, says the Stoic, one that in fact seriously undermines our potential for virtue, and thus for happiness. For this reason, the Stoic is committed to what Russell calls the “sufficiency thesis,” which says simply that virtue is sufficient for happiness. The Aristotelian denies this thesis, arguing that external goods are also necessary. The difference, as we will see, owes to their contrasting conceptions of the self, which Russell labels the “embodied” (Aristotelian) and “formalized” (Stoic) conceptions. The dilemma arises from the observation that these conceptions are incompatible, and yet each is rooted in closely held intuitions about what happiness consists in and to what lengths people generally go to protect it. Thus, if the differing views of the self are exhaustive and cannot be reconciled, one must choose between loss of happiness due to fortune and impaired virtue, or loss of happiness due to the lack of close relationships and fulfilling projects. Hence our dilemma.

§2 – *Conceptions of the Self*

Since the dilemma is rooted in opposing conceptions of the self, it will be helpful to see the arguments offered for each conception. I’ll here outline Russell’s reconstruction of

⁷ Ibid., 254.

these arguments, but first I want to more precisely distinguish them from one another. Russell helpfully offers four ways in which to contrast the conceptions (which are really variants on a single core difference). First, they differ regarding the particularity of the objects of one's activity. On the embodied conception, one's activities always have particular objects—*this* relationship, *this* job, *this* house, etc.—and the loss of some object is, as Russell puts it, “to lose for ever a particular way of being in the world, leaving one to find a new self to be.”⁸ On the formalized conception, however, the objects of one's activity are open-ended; activity just is the exercise of the will (guided by practical wisdom), and as such, its ability to proceed as is cannot be hampered by the loss of any particular object. Secondly, one's happiness differs between the two conceptions for precisely the same reason that one's activity does—both conceptions agree that happiness is virtuous activity, but owing to their differing views of the particularity of activity, happiness will be more secure on the formalized view than on the embodied view, since the former is not as sensitive to the reversals of fortune as the latter. Third, it also follows from this that the response to significant loss will be different on the two conceptions—i.e. it will be a much bigger threat to happiness on the embodied view, and so will merit a more drastic response. And fourth, the conceptions take different views of the necessity of external goods outside one's control (such as birth, upbringing, health, twists of fate, etc.). On the embodied view, such goods are necessary for virtuous activity (since this activity is only possible in the context of such particular goods), whereas on the formalized view, they are not. This is just another way of stating the opposing perspectives on the sufficiency thesis outlined above, as it entails that on the Stoic conception of the self, virtuous activity is sufficient for happiness, whereas on the Aristotelian conception, it is not.

§2.1 – *The Stoic (Formalized) Conception*

The Stoic argument for the sufficiency thesis, according to Russell, follows from two beliefs: 1. virtuous activity is the only good, and 2. virtuous activity is the virtuous exercise of the will.⁹ This second belief is what Russell calls the “formalized” conception of the self. For the Stoics, as for Aristotle, all animals have a proper function; the Stoics, however, insisted that the most basic function, shared by all of them, including humans, is self-preservation. Further, the highest good for humans is the proper use of reason, and since the only thing truly within our power is choice, the best a human can hope for is to properly exercise the power of choice—i.e. to do the best one can with what one is given. Thus living virtuously is simply choosing well among the alternatives one is given. But the Stoics go further: it isn't just that the power of choice is all that properly belongs to the human person—the self actually *consists in* that power. I.e. it is the most uniquely human trait, the only part of the person that is fully within that person's control and no other's. As Epictetus says, a tyrant can chain one's leg or lop off one's head, but he can do nothing to restrain one's choice—“Fetter *me*? You will fetter my leg; but not even Zeus himself can get the better of my choice.”¹⁰ It follows from all this that the goal of human life is self-preservation (since the

⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁹ Ibid., 156.

¹⁰ Ibid., 163.

highest good is preserving the power of choice, and that power is identical with the self). It is no wonder then that the Stoics have such a problem with the idea of embodiment; we are driven above all else to preserve what we see as part of us, whatever that may be, and the further we get from the truth (that we are simply our power to choose), the more compromised we become. As Russell puts it, “if once we think our well-being requires us to preserve something outside the power of choice, then we shall try to do so, even when this violates right reason.”¹¹ What Russell means in calling this conception of the self “formalized” is that on this view, all virtuous activity has the same form: one exercises her choice on the objects in her environment, whatever they may be.¹²

§2.2 – *The Aristotelian (Embodied) Conception*

Russell’s argument for the embodied conception of the self is simple, straightforward, and compelling. He takes loss as his point of departure, particularly bereavement and the experience of grief, as this is perhaps the clearest avenue to illustrating how the two conceptions come apart in common experience. I.e. if the Stoic objection to the embodied conception holds water, then this will have significant consequences for how one should view both the seriousness of the loss and its implications, as well as the best means of recovery. Though he does not phrase it this way, Russell’s argument is essentially a simple *modus tollens*: if the Stoic objection to embodiment is sound and the formalized conception of the self is correct, then an examination of significant loss should reveal both (a) that the grieving should¹³ see themselves as autonomous wholes with respect to the lost loved one, even while grieving, and (b) that a healthy (the healthiest?) means of recovery will be a form of detachment from the lost relationship and a reassertion of one’s will sans that relationship; in fact neither (a) nor (b) is the case; therefore, the formalized conception of the self is not true.¹⁴ In support of his denial of (a), Russell appeals to the common sense among the bereaved that they have lost a part of themselves. Indeed, comparisons of grief and the feeling of having lost a limb are so common that psychologists have labeled the phenomenon the “amputation metaphor.”¹⁵ E.g. C.S. Lewis, in his famous account of his own bereavement, *A Grief Observed*, which Russell takes as his paradigm case, says,

Getting over it so soon? But the words are ambiguous. To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he’s had his leg off is quite another. After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce, continuous pain will stop. Presently he’ll get back his strength and be able to stomp about on his wooden leg. He has “got over it.” But he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life, and perhaps pretty bad ones;

¹¹ Ibid., 164.

¹² Ibid., 168. I take this line of argumentation from the chapter on Epictetus, and there is some question as to the idiosyncrasy of his views. However, as Russell argues at length that Epictetus’ views are indicative of the Stoics’ views in general as regards this argument, I will not try to distinguish them in this paper.

¹³ The Stoic does not here deny that the grieving *can* or even often *do* see themselves otherwise; her point is a normative one: the most reasonable and consistent view of oneself, even and especially during grief, is as an autonomous whole.

¹⁴ Ibid., chs. 9-10.

¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

and he will always be a one-legged man. There will be hardly any moment when he forgets it. Bathing, dressing, sitting down and getting up again, even lying in bed, will all be different. His whole way of life will be changed. All sorts of pleasures and activities that he once took for granted will have to be simply written off. Duties too. At present I am learning to get about on crutches. Perhaps I shall presently be given a wooden leg. But I shall never be a biped again.¹⁶

Not only do Lewis and many like him not see themselves as autonomous wholes in the midst of their grief; their experience is decidedly the opposite. It is precisely this sense of one's self being partly constituted by the other that Russell has in mind with his embodied conception. As he says, this way of viewing the self "draws the boundaries of the self so as to include beloved others within the self."¹⁷ Further, Lewis's description shares the particularity aspect that we saw in section two is essential to the embodied conception. He sees his happiness, both before and after the loss of his wife, as a matter of being *here, now*, sharing *this*, with *her*. Indeed, that is the point: happiness on this view is a matter of having something that it would hurt to lose. As Lewis' wife Joy Davidman says to him before her impending death, "The pain then [in the future] is part of the happiness now."¹⁸ Far from a weakness, Russell (and Lewis) takes this to be the peculiar strength of the embodied view. Now, this does not by itself discount (a) since that, as noted, is a normative claim, not a descriptive one. Epictetus would likely readily grant that many, perhaps even most, experience grief in the way Lewis describes, but would maintain that this is a mistake and contrary to the proper use of reason.¹⁹ The fact of this tendency among the bereaved, however, does at least cast some doubt on (a), by showing that it is directly opposed to what seems to be a natural human process. Russell's case against (b) is a bit stronger, owing to an extensive psychological literature on the patterns of grief resolution.²⁰ A full discussion of this literature would take us too far afield, but the relevant point is that studies show that successful resilience is in fact strongly positively correlated with the *closeness* of the relationship, provided that one has a high level of confidence in one's own coping skills

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 61-2.

¹⁷ Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, 204.

¹⁸ This is a quote from the movie adaptation of Lewis and Davidman's story, *Shadowlands*, quoted in Russell, 216.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁰ Russell here cites, among others: J. Archer, *The Nature of Grief* (London: Routledge, 1999); J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1 (New York: Basic Books, 1969), vol. 2 (London: Hogarth, 1973), vol. 3 (London: Hogarth, 1980); R.C. Fraley and G.A. Bonanno, "Attachment and Loss: A Test of Three Competing Models of the Association between Attachment-Related Avoidance and Adaptation to Bereavement," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 39 (2004), 878-90; E. Lindemann, "Symptomatology and the Management of Acute Grief," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 101 (1944), 141-8; M. Mikulincer and P.R. Shaver, "An Attachment Perspective on Bereavement," in M.S. Stroebe et al., eds., 2008; C.M. Parkes, *Bereavement*, 2nd American ed. (Washington, DC: International Universities Press, 1987), and *Love and Loss* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); T. Rando, "The Increasing Prevalence of Complicated Mourning," *Omega* 26 (1992-3), 43-60; P.R. Shaver and C.M. Tancredy, "Emotion, Attachment, and Bereavement: A Conceptual Commentary," in M.S. Stroebe et al., eds., 2001; R.O. Hansson, H. Schut, and W. Stroebe, eds. *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008); R.S. Weiss, "The Nature and Causes of Grief," in M.S. Stroebe et al., eds., 2008; W. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer, 1991). See also Emily Delespau, Anne-Sophie Ryckebosch-Dayez, Alexandre Heeren, and Emmanuelle Zech, "Attachment and Severity of Grief: The Mediating Role of Negative Appraisal and Inflexible Coping," *Omega* 67.3 (2013): 269; and Tracey D. Waskowic and Brian M. Chartier, "Attachment and the Experience of Grief Following the Loss of a Spouse," *Omega* 47.1 (2003): 77-91.

(what Russell calls “self-assurance”). Given the complexity of grief and the myriad personality and relationship types, there are of course exceptions to this, cases where some form of detachment might be the best option. But by and large, the research suggests that “being very closely connected to the people one loves is probably the best bet for psychological well-being. At the very least, there is no bet that’s better.”²¹ Additionally, the continuation of this connection even after the loved one’s death is important—another aspect of grief modeled by Lewis, who rejects the possibility of returning to his life before Joy and is able to move forward by maintaining his attachment to her but allowing it to transform into the past tense and shape his future accordingly.²²

§3 – *The Argument against Embodiment*

Having sketched Russell’s compelling case for the embodied conception of the self, I now want to return to the Stoic point of view and take a closer look at their argument against embodiment. One might wonder why this is necessary at this point, since Russell’s argument, at first blush, seems successful: people do not, in fact, commonly view themselves before, during, or after grief as detached from their loved ones, nor is there any psychological evidence to date to suggest that they should. Nonetheless, an arrow remains in the Stoic quiver, and it is a particularly sharp one—attachment to objects or people outside one’s control leads one not only to personal pain and loss, but also to *wrongdoing*. It is actually to open oneself up to developing a vicious character, and thus—since all sides of the debate agree that a good character is necessary for a life of *eudaimonia*—an unhappy life. Additionally, it might be that our natural tendency as humans is to form deep attachments and then to suffer when they’re lost, and to heal afterwards in a way consistent with the strength of those attachments. The Stoic need deny none of this. What she insists on is that this is not the *best* state for the human being. For all we know, no one truly living a consistent life of detachment has ever been studied and had her grieving process compared to that of the more attached. Typically (we can imagine the Stoic saying), detachment is misunderstood and therefore inappropriately applied; if ever we happened upon a modern Epictetus, say, *then* we’d see the difference. So while Russell’s argument is undeniably persuasive, it isn’t *quite* successful. Russell recognizes this, of course, and so devotes the final chapter of his book to a closer examination of the Stoic objection, to which I’ll now turn.

For the Stoic (via primarily Cicero), some ways of viewing the world are deeply misguided, by virtue of being contrary to reason, and this includes “distress” (and consequently grief).²³ The argument for this, as it is normally constructed, is that since virtue is sufficient for happiness, virtue is the only good and vice the only bad, and therefore treating anything else (such as loss) as though it were bad is unreasonable.²⁴ But of course this is question-begging (Russell calls it “hopeless”).²⁵ Fortunately, Russell provides a more

²¹ Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, 221.

²² *Ibid.*, 229.

²³ *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 235. As he says, “Surely *this* is not the idea that kept the Stoics in the sufficiency debate for a few hundred years—a debate that by and large they were *winning*.”

plausible reconstruction. And this we've already hinted at: the person seeking happiness faces a dilemma: she can, if she chooses, form deep attachments (and likely be "happier" than otherwise for the short term), but in doing so, she assumes an "ethically perilous" position, because these attachments necessitate grief once the object is lost.²⁶ As Russell says, (tellingly, as we'll see), choosing to make something/someone pivotal to one's fulfillment (and thus making loss necessarily devastating to that fulfillment) "leaves exactly two options: either downsize the boundaries of the self to include only the faculty of choice that makes one human, or else upsize those boundaries and compromise that very humanity."²⁷

But why think that attachment will lead to a degradation of character? Here Epictetus is helpful. The reason is, unsurprisingly at this point, that by giving oneself over to one's attachments, one makes oneself vulnerable to manipulation. As we saw, this is a simple consequence of the formalized conception of the self: one will—indeed, *can only*—do what she take her happiness to require, and so if this includes things outside her control, then she can be coerced, either by enemies or fate itself, into vicious action. To do so is to abandon autonomy and therefore give up on happiness, as autonomy is constitutive of human flourishing.²⁸ The story is a familiar one: one party willingly attaches herself to another, while a third party seizes this opportunity for manipulation and coercion; what will the first party now *not* do to protect her happiness? As Dumbledore memorably confesses to Harry, "I acted exactly as Voldemort expects we fools who love to act."²⁹

So Epictetus' argument reconstructed looks like this:

1) Humans tend to do what they judge to be their best option for preserving their happiness. (Indeed, this is required by practical wisdom.)

2) Humans can be manipulated by whatever or whoever can dispose of things they take to be important for their happiness which they cannot control themselves (and this undermines autonomy).

3) Human happiness requires autonomy (because autonomy is essential to human nature).³⁰

4) Happiness requires that we shouldn't take things we cannot control to be important for our happiness.³¹

The key to the persuasiveness of this argument lies in two points. The first is that its reasonableness comes not from strict logical deduction (though it is certainly a valid argument), but from basic observation of human behavior: namely, that a good deal of

²⁶ Ibid., 236.

²⁷ Ibid., 237.

²⁸ Ibid., 238.

²⁹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter & the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2003), 838.

³⁰ This does not imply a libertarian view of freedom, nor any overly Kantian view of the human person. Rather, Epictetus (a compatibilist) means only that "the very form of human life is acting by way of responding to what reasons to act one takes oneself to have." Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, 246.

³¹ This is almost verbatim Russell's reconstruction. The parentheticals are mine, though (mostly) still inspired by him. I say "shouldn't" in the conclusion, rather than Russell's "not," in order to make the argument more clearly valid. Ibid., 240-7.

human suffering comes from the loss of chosen attachments. The second point lies in recognizing that the manipulating party need not be a *person*—circumstance itself can, and in fact frequently will, play this role. The only evidence needed for this is a simple survey of one’s temptations to (even minor) wrongdoing: how many have purchase only because of one’s attachments?

But how persuasive is this argument, even with these caveats? Russell attacks it (if it can be called an attack) by noting that *not* allowing anything external within the boundaries of the self carries its own cost, and this leads him eventually to his dilemma (since on his view one must ultimately choose the cost one is willing to bear).³² It seems to me, however, that if one is going to attack the Stoic argument, the best place to start is premise 2: “Humans can be manipulated by whatever or whoever can dispose of things they take to be important for their happiness which they cannot control themselves.” In my statement of it above, I added the parenthetical “and this undermines autonomy.” I take it that this is an implied premise of the argument, and it’s exactly here that I think Russell ought to have pressed. Why think that relational attachments, e.g., are inimical to the sort of autonomy that is essential to human nature? Presumably it is because those attachments (indeed, perhaps *especially* those) are ones we often hold to be constitutive of our individual happiness, such that when they are threatened, our ability to choose our responsive course of action is constrained or even undermined entirely.

Consider a parent whose child has gone missing: it can reasonably be said that that parent at that moment has less choice over her actions than does a childless person who hears of a missing child on the news. The parent is constrained to act in a certain way, and what’s more, to sacrifice a great deal to accomplish that action. But is her autonomy thereby undermined? Recall (from fn. 30) that autonomy for the Stoic is simply responding to the reasons one takes oneself to have. Surely our parent is still doing *that*; the kicker is that she now has a reason that overrides all others, one that we might say she *must* choose to act on. But there is nothing in our characterization of autonomy that requires a plurality of motivating reasons.³³ It’s hard to see, then, why attachment must damage the self, and therefore it is hard to see why it should undermine one’s happiness to the extent the Stoics say it does. Nonetheless, even with this caveat, it remains a psychological fact that much suffering (some might make a case for *most* or even *all*) has attachment as an essential feature, and that people—including otherwise reasonable, healthy people—are frequently driven, in ways both large and small, to non-virtuous action by virtue of their happiness-constituting attachments. Thus, to escape the Stoic’s grasp entirely, we need a fuller response.

§4 – Does Virtue Pay?

We can relate the question of whether virtue is sufficient for happiness to the question of whether virtue “pays.” The latter question, also phrased by Rosalind Hursthouse and others as the question whether virtue “benefits the possessor,” is a commonly discussed—and difficult—issue in virtue ethics, as well as ethics at large (the bulk of Plato’s

³² Ibid.

³³ Indeed, a compatibilist like Epictetus might think this a strength of the definition.

Republic, e.g., is taken up attempting to answer it).³⁴ Initially, the similarity between the two questions is unclear, for “happiness” for the neo-Aristotelian is a technical term. It refers not to pleasure, or general good feeling or contentment or anything else that the average person might readily associate with a “payoff,” but rather to *eudaimonia*, the flourishing or well-being of a human life, considered in toto. Thus, whether or not virtue is sufficient for “happiness” on this picture, it remains unclear whether it “pays.” It would seem that the sense of the question is whether virtue makes life enjoyable, overall, for the possessor, rather than whether the life viewed externally would be considered a valuable one. Note that we definitely want to say “Yes” to this question; otherwise, we are left, as Robert Adams notes, in the clutches of a Nietzschean worry: we must, on any plausibly moral outlook, encourage others to be good, but what if goodness is not *good* for them? What if it even harms them? Nietzsche’s are not clutches one wishes to be in.³⁵ The Stoic (following the Platonic) answer to this question is, unsurprisingly, yes. Virtue *does* pay, because it in fact is the *only* actual good (and with the proper training, one can conceivably come to experience it as such). It follows that the loss of anything other than virtue is not properly viewed as any loss at all. But providing an affirmative answer to this question is a bit more difficult for the neo-Aristotelian. This is because virtue, when left open to the influence of fortune, can and does result in great suffering and death. One is easily tempted here to say with Thrasymachus that “the just man always comes out at a disadvantage in his relation with the unjust,” or with Adams, “Might it not be to one’s own advantage to be like the virtuous person in most contexts but hold open an escape hatch of selfishness for occasions on which virtue would be too costly?”³⁶

How to deal with this problem? Adams suggests two approaches, not mutually exclusive:

(1) We might say that virtue, while not sufficient for happiness in general [and here the connection to the sufficiency thesis is manifest], is necessary for the *best* sort of happiness. In other words, being virtuous makes it likely that one will attain the best sort of happiness, and failure to do so is rare.

(2) We can say that the virtuous person has “a *motive* to perform, even at great cost, actions recognizable as virtuous, and a basis for seeing *reason* to perform them.”³⁷ The “reward” of being virtuous here is the intrinsic one of being motivated to goods wherever they are found, and this is seen as a more valuable good than, say, physical pleasure, because it is more in line with “the Good,” knowledge of which is the best possible state for the human being (a claim with which Aristotle, arguably, concurs).³⁸

I doubt if either of these approaches will be satisfying to many. It is unclear if (1) is true, and in some ways it depends for its success on (2), since it appeals to a “best” form of happiness.

³⁴ See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 8.

³⁵ Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2006), 60-1.

³⁶ Plato, *Republic*, Book I, 343d, retrieved from

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D343d>; Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, 61.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61-2. (2) is a weakened (and thereby more compelling) version of Plato’s own constraint, which is that the just person just will do actions recognizable as just.

And (2) is unlikely to be compelling to modern, naturalistic ethicists for whom the Good is not a feature of reality at all, much less the sturdiest of metaphysical entities. The neo-Aristotelian, then, is left with the problem of how virtue can be recommended, if it doesn't secure happiness; though we should also note that even the Stoic has trouble saying how virtue "pays" entirely, since as Russell notes, avoidance of deep, fulfilling, natural attachments carries a hefty cost of its own.³⁹ Thus, while these suggestions don't resolve our dilemma for us, they do provide us with a direction to look for a more satisfying answer.

§5 – *The Dilemma Revisited*

With this in mind, then, let's return to our dilemma: must we, as I said at the beginning, choose between upholding our autonomy and safeguarding our virtue—at the loss of close, "embodied" relationships—or giving ourselves to those relationships and thereby sabotaging our happiness by relinquishing control of our virtue?

§5.1 – Setup

I suggest that the dilemma can be made a *bit* less drastic by examining the two positions in light of Adams' suggestions from the last section. We can, as it were, tug the two sides toward each other somewhat. The Stoics can, I think, become a bit more Aristotelian if we extend Adams' second suggestion. While a naturalist ethicist will not be prone to much talk of the Good in any robust metaphysical sense, she can at least grant that there are ways of living that "fit" better with life in a human society than others, and that one could, if she wished, refer to living in these ways as living "according to the Good." The point is that living in one of these ways will almost surely lead one closer to altruistic behavior. Even Epictetus would not deny this.⁴⁰ The key, though, is to see that altruism requires a certain *self-giving*. There is often a sacrifice involved that goes deeper than mere inconvenience; one is often compelled by her altruistic inclinations to suffer a serious reduction in quality of life (measured by things like comfort, personal gain, privacy, health, reputation, etc.) for another, and we as a human society almost universally praise such sacrifice. True, one need not give up on her power of *choice* to be altruistic (we are unlikely, after all, to convince the Stoic completely); but we can safely say, I think, that the Stoic ought to agree with the Aristotelian that virtue demands a willingness to sacrifice a great deal of one's potentially fulfilling outcomes for others.

Secondly, we can tug the Aristotelians a bit closer to the Stoic side by recognizing that embodied virtuous activity is relatively *safe* most of the time, and it is so because of the control we have over it as autonomous agents. This is, somewhat oddly, an extension of Adams' first suggestion, which is on the face of it anti-Stoic, but whose thrust is that virtue

³⁹ Indeed, Adams notes that many thinkers, including Adams himself as well as the likes of Anscombe and Kant, and arguably Nietzsche and Plato, among others, do not think that virtue can be wholeheartedly recommended, without qualification, without something to guarantee that it will be fully rewarded, such as an afterlife. *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁰ For him, being detached from relationships and objects does not entail being antisocial, or even sacrificing for those things—but one must always stop short of sacrificing one's *happiness* for them. See Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, ch. 8.

can be said to “pay” *most of the time*. The addition, both to appease the Stoic and instruct the Aristotelian, is that a necessary condition of its doing so is its occurring in a community of autonomous agents who have intentionally designed their communal structures in accordance with reason and who exercise their virtue in accordance with practical wisdom.

§5.2 – The Solution

Having (hopefully) closed the gap a bit between the opposing conceptions of the self, we are now in a position to look for a fuller solution. For the problem is not yet solved: even if both the Aristotelian and (less likely) the Stoic are happy to accept the points from the previous section, for all we have said so far, it is still possible that there is a limit to how much of ourselves we can give, after which our control over our happiness is not complete, and we can still fall prey to the Stoic worry. We can, at least, however, now see what a satisfying resolution of the dilemma will (and won't) require: it will *not* require a radically new concept of self, for either side. But it will require a way to explain relational autonomy. I.e. we need a new way of seeing our self-giving (or as Russell has it, our decisions about what to allow within the “boundaries of the self”) that does not commit us to a problematic moral outlook. Is there a way of seeing attachment to others, or even environments, that does not increase one's risk of wrongdoing or unduly limit one's freedom? Is there a way of seeing it that makes sense of our powerful intuition that such attachments are *healthy*—that they are even what life is about?

Fortunately, such an explanation is ready to hand in Western thought: Christian charity. The view one finds expressed in the New Testament, and consequently embedded deeply within the history of post-Roman Western civilization (though it certainly has precursors in Jewish thought) is that human happiness and self-giving are intimately linked. Hence Jesus's remark, recorded several times in the synoptic gospels, that “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”⁴¹ This intentional laying down of one's life for others is of course modeled on the ultimate self-giving: the divine kenotic act accomplished in the Incarnation, and reflected in the practices of Christian charity, pacifism, and mutual submission. This view is certainly cautious of certain kinds of attachment (more precisely, of certain ways of weighting one's attachments), but, significantly, its solution is not Stoic detachment, but rather an attachment *of a new sort*. The view stipulates that human flourishing (to translate into virtue ethical language) is constituted by living for, with, and through others, and this because it reflects something essential to the divine nature. Thus, health and happiness is found *in* one's relationships and attachments, much like on the embodied view, with the difference that the risk of loss is minimized because all such attachment is ultimately expression of a deeper, prior attachment to God.⁴² In other words, one always has at least one secure attachment: God; the value and health of the rest is parasitic on this one. Nonetheless, the more attachments one has to others, the better, as it is part of the nature of the divine attachment that it should spread (remember that the feature of the divine nature being modeled here is self-giving).

⁴¹ Matthew 10:39, NIV.

⁴² Thus, immediately preceding the passage just quoted, Jesus is warning his disciples that their attachments to their family must not take precedence over their commitment to him.

Can this sort of view be “naturalized” for non-Christian ethicists (or humans for that matter)? I.e. can it be shed of its metaphysical and religious commitments and still tell us something useful about human happiness?⁴³ We can, I think, “secularize” this approach somewhat by translating it into community language. I.e. the role played by God in ensuring at least one secure attachment at all times can instead be played by the members of an intimate community of friends. Here we see that one’s security comes not by restricting the boundaries of the self, as on the Stoic view, but rather by *expanding* them: the *more* relationships constitute one’s happiness (both quantity and variety), the *more* secure that happiness is. We could, if we like, think of it in terms of a mutual fund: it is a well-known investment principle that financial security is strongly tied to the diversity of one’s investments. So in relationships: the more numerous and diverse, the lower the risk of devastation by great loss. Indeed, the psychological evidence seems to bear this out. For example, Virginia Richardson, in a study of 200 widowers, found that “number of friends” was among “the most significant factors” contributing to positive affect in the second year of bereavement.⁴⁴ Similarly, Judith Murray and Deborah Terry, in a study of mothers who had lost infant children, found that “the number of friends in whom mothers had the confidence to confide emerged as a positive predictor of adjustment to infant death.”⁴⁵ This also accords well with the literature cited by Russell in his discussion of grief: there too continued attachment was correlated with successful grief resolution, even when the attachment was still to the deceased (though in a new form). This is, essentially to take the second option offered (and dismissed) by Russell above in §3: we “upsized” the boundaries of the self, but without thereby compromising our humanity.⁴⁶

One of the particular strengths of Russell’s book is his deft use of literary illustrations; I’ll now follow suit. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead* (from which our title and epigraph is drawn), Marilynne Robinson speaks through the character John Ames, an aging Congregationalist minister writing a sort of memoir to his young son. Several themes of this work are relevant to our project here, but I wish to highlight two: the relationship of Rev. Ames with his godson and namesake, John Ames Boughton, and Rev. Ames’ own progression into a more embodied (by virtue of being more Christian) view of attachment and distress resolution. Regarding the first of these, Rev. Ames, in the midst of penning his memoir to his only son, is unexpectedly visited by the return of Boughton, now a middle-aged man and something of a prodigal figure. Throughout the novel, the tension builds between the two men, especially as Boughton takes a potentially inordinate interest in Ames’ young wife and son. Rev. Ames is thus plunged in his old age into the fear of losing his investment in his family to the influence of a man of potentially dishonorable character—a fear that tugs at the heart strings of the Aristotelian and Stoic alike. Significantly, however, Rev. Ames comes to peace with the situation, and with Boughton—

⁴³ If I am completely honest, I must say no, not entirely. Despite what follows, God plays a role in the stance of Christian charity that may not be translatable into human communities alone, namely, the ability to *guarantee* the security of one’s flourishing, so long as one remains devoted to him.

⁴⁴ Virginia E. Richardson, “Length of Caregiving and Well-Being among Older Widowers: Implications for the Dual Process Model of Bereavement,” *Omega* 61.4 (2010): 333. Another significant factor is “having a confidante.”

⁴⁵ Judith A. Murray and Deborah J. Terry, “Parental Reactions to Infant Death: The Effects of Resources and Coping Strategies,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 18.3 (Sep 1999): 341-369.

⁴⁶ Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, 237.

not by shoring up his grip on his existing relationships (which the Aristotelian might do), nor by detaching from them (the Stoic recommendation)—but rather by forming a *new*, intimate relationship with younger John Ames Boughton himself (and not in order to keep an eye on him). This illustrates both the effectiveness for security of spreading one’s relational commitments widely, and also the peculiar transformative effectiveness of giving oneself to one’s perceived enemies (a feature that a fuller treatment of this subject would explore).

Additionally and importantly, Ames’ response here is set against the background of an increasingly embodied attachment to the world and his relationships. Early in the work we are confronted with an altogether honest and beautiful depiction of how his view of the world has changed since his youth:

I don’t know how many times people have asked me what death is like, sometimes when they were only an hour or two from finding out for themselves. Even when I was a very young man, people as old as I am now would ask me, hold on to my hands and look into my eyes with their old milky eyes, as if they knew I knew and they were going to make me tell them. I used to say it was like going home. We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I’d walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried-egg sandwich and listen to the radio, when I got one, in the dark, as often as not. Do you remember this house? I think you must, a little. I grew up in parsonages. I’ve lived in this one most of my life, and I’ve visited in a good many others, because my father’s friends and most of our relatives also lived in parsonages. And when I thought about it in those days, which wasn’t too often, I thought this was the worst of them all, the draftiest and the dreariest. It’s a perfectly good old house, but I was all alone in it then, and that made it seem strange to me. I didn’t feel very much at home in the world, that was a fact. Now I do.⁴⁷

What’s noteworthy is that this view (in ways that become clearer in the fuller context of the work) is not in tension with his later decision to form an attachment to Boughton himself, but rather is the impetus for it. Seeing himself as “at home in the world” both makes it more difficult to leave it, but also suffuses it with a beauty that allows him to see Boughton, and all his other attachments, in a new, heavenly light.

This, I think, gives us a rather straightforward way to mitigate the Stoic worry about risking one’s autonomy and virtue by committing oneself to things outside one’s control. The basic point is that if one commits oneself widely enough, the amount of security lost at any one point is minimized. And since this is the source of the “tragic” choice Russell thinks one has to make (“with some faith and much trepidation”) between close relationships and a secure character, the choice now seems to me not nearly so tragic. I said at the outset that I would attempt to mitigate the trepidation, and I hope I have done, though perhaps at the cost of strengthening the faith required.

⁴⁷ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 3-4.