INTRODUCTION

The man who stated his opinion in the god's precinct in Delos made an inscription on the propylaeum to the temple of Leto, in which he separated from one another the good, the noble and the pleasant as not all properties of the same thing. He wrote:

Most noble is what is most just, but best is health, and pleasantest the getting what one longs for.

Let us disagree with him; for happiness is at once the most noble and best of all things and also the pleasantest.

About each thing and kind there are many considerations that raise problems and need investigation. Of these some concern knowledge only, some the acquisition of things and the performance of acts as well. About those which involve contemplative philosophy only we must when occasion arises say what is appropriate to that study. But first we must consider in what the good life consists and how it is to be acquired, whether all who receive the epithet 'happy' are so by nature (as we are tall, short, or of different complexions), or by learning (happiness being a kind of knowledge), or by some sort of training—for men acquire many qualities neither by nature nor by learning but by habituation, base qualities if they are habituated to the base, good if to the good. Or do men become happy in none of these ways, but either—like those possessed by nymphs or deities—through a sort of divine influence, being as it were inspired, or by fortune? For many declare happiness to be identical with good fortune.

That men, then, possess happiness through all or some or one of these causes is not obscure; for practically all events can be traced back to these originating principles; for all acts arising from thought may be included among acts that arise
from knowledge. Now to be happy and to live blissfully and nobly must consist mainly in three things, which seem most desirable; for some say wisdom is the greatest good, some virtue, and some pleasure. Some also dispute about the magnitude of the contribution made by each of these to happiness, declaring the contribution of one to be greater than that of another—some regarding wisdom as a greater good than virtue, some the opposite, and others regarding pleasure as a greater good than both. And some consider the happy life to be compounded of all these, some of two, and others hold it to consist in one.

First then about these things we must enjoin everyone that has the power to live according to his own choice to set up for himself some object for a noble life to aim at (whether honour or reputation or riches or education), with reference to which he will then do all his acts, since not to have one's life organized in view of some end is an indication of much folly. Then above all he must first define for himself neither impetuously nor carelessly in which of our belongings the good life is lodged, and what are the indispensable conditions of its attainment. For health is not the same as the indispensable conditions of health; and so it is with many other things, so that the noble life and its indispensable conditions are not identical. Of such things some are not peculiar to health or even to life, but common to pretty well all states and actions—for instance, without breathing or being awake or having the power of movement we could have neither good things nor bad; but some are peculiar to each kind of thing, and these it is important to observe: for instance, the eating of meat and walking after meals are not appropriate in the same way as the things mentioned above with regard to being in a good condition. For herein is the cause of the disputes about happiness, its nature and causes; for some take to be parts of happiness what are its indispensable conditions.

To examine all the beliefs about it is superfluous; for children, sick people, and the insane all have views, but no
intelligent person would raise problems about them; for such persons need not reasons but years in which they may change, or else medical or political chastisement—for medicine, no less than whipping, is a chastisement. Similarly we have not to consider the views of the multitude (for they talk at random about practically everything, and especially about happiness); for it is absurd to apply reason to those who need not reason but experience. But since every study has its own problems, plainly there are such relating to the best life and the best existence: it is well to examine these beliefs; for a disputant’s refutation of the arguments contrary to his own is a demonstration of the argument itself.

Further, it pays not to neglect these considerations, especially with a view to that at which all inquiry should be directed, namely the causes that enable us to share in the good and noble life—if anyone finds it invidious to call it the blessed life—and with a view to the hope people have of attaining what is upright. For if the noble life consists in what is due to fortune or to nature, it would be something that many cannot hope for, since its acquisition is not in their power, nor attainable by their care or activity; but if it depends on the individual and his personal acts being of a certain character, then the good would be both more general and more divine, more general because more would be able to possess it, more divine because happiness would then be open to those who make themselves and their acts of a certain character.

Most of the doubts and problems raised will become evident if we define well what we ought to think happiness to be—whether it consists merely in having a soul of a certain character (as some of the older philosophers thought) or whether the man must indeed be of a certain character but it is even more necessary that his actions should be of a certain character.

If we make a division of the kinds of life, some do not even pretend to this sort of well-being, their business being done for the sake of what is necessary—for instance, those
concerned with vulgar crafts, or with commercial or servile occupations (by vulgar I mean crafts pursued only with a view to reputation, by servile those which are sedentary and wage-earning, by commercial those connected with markets and selling in shops). But there are three things directed to a happy employment of life, those which we have above called the three greatest of human goods: virtue, wisdom, and pleasure. We thus see that there are three lives which all those choose who have power: the lives of the political man, of the philosopher, and of the voluptuary. For of these the philosopher intends to occupy himself with wisdom and contemplation of truth, the political man with noble acts (which are those springing from virtue), the voluptuary with bodily pleasures. Therefore each calls a different person happy, as was indeed said before. Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, being asked who was the happiest of men, said: ‘None of those you suppose, but one who would appear an absurd being to you’. He answered in this way because he saw that the questioner assumed that it was impossible for one not great and beautiful or rich to deserve the epithet ‘happy’, while he himself perhaps thought that the man who lived painlessly and pure of injustice or else engaged in some divine contemplation was, as far as a man may be, blessed.

In many other cases it is difficult to assess things well, but most difficult where it seems to all to be easiest and knowledge to be in the power of any man—namely, the question of what of all that is found in living is desirable, and what, if attained, would satisfy our appetite. For there are many contingencies that make men fling away life, such as disease, excessive pain, storms, so that it is plain that, if one were given the power of choice, not to be born at all would, as far at least as these reasons go, have been desirable. Further, the life we lead as children is not desirable;¹ for no one in his senses would face returning to this. Further, many incidents

¹ Omitting τίς (an addition to the received text proposed by Casaubon and printed by Susemihl: ‘Further, what is the life we lead as children?’).
involving neither pleasure nor pain or involving pleasure but not of a noble kind are such that non-existence is preferable to life. And generally, if one were to bring together all that all men do and experience but not voluntarily because not for its own sake, and were to add to this an infinity of time, one would none the more choose on account of these experiences to live than not to live. But further, neither for the pleasure of eating or that of sex, if all the other pleasures were removed that knowing or seeing or any other sense provides men with, would any man value life, unless he were utterly servile; for it is plain that to the man making this choice there would be no difference between being born a brute and a man: at any rate the ox in Egypt, which they honour as Apis, in most of such matters has more power than many monarchs. We may say the same of the pleasure of sleeping. For what is the difference between sleeping an unbroken sleep from one’s first day to one’s last, for a thousand or any number of years, and living the life of a plant? Plants at any rate seem to possess this sort of life, and similarly children; for children, too, have a continuous natural life from their first coming into being in their mother’s womb, but sleep the entire time. It is plain then from these considerations that men, though they look, fail to see what is well-being and what the good in life.

They say that Anaxagoras answered a man who was raising problems of this sort and asking why one should choose to be born rather than not by saying: ‘For the sake of contemplating the heavens and the whole order of the universe’. He, then, thought the choice of life for the sake of some sort of knowledge to be valuable. Those who felicitate Sardanapalus or Smindyrides the Sybarite or any other of those who live the voluptuary’s life, these evidently all place happiness in the feeling of delight. Others would rather choose virtuous actions than wisdom or bodily pleasures—at any rate some choose these not only for the sake of reputation but even when they are not going to win credit by them. But most political men are not truly so called: they are not in
truth political; for the political man is one who chooses noble acts for their own sake, while most take up the political life for the sake of wealth and from covetousness.

From what has been said, then, it is evident that all connect happiness with three lives, the political, the philosophical, and the voluptuous. Now among these the nature and quality and sources of the pleasure of the body and sensual enjoyment are plain, so that we have to inquire not what such pleasures are but whether they tend to happiness or not and how they tend, and whether—supposing one should attach to the noble life certain pleasures—one should attach these, or whether some other sort of engagement in these is a necessity but the pleasures through which men reasonably think the happy man to live pleasantly and not merely painlessly are different.

About that let us inquire later. First let us consider virtue and wisdom, the nature of each, and whether they are parts of the good life either in themselves or through the actions that arise from them, since everyone—or at least everyone worth considering—connects them to happiness.

Socrates the elder thought knowledge of virtue to be the end, and he used to inquire what justice is, what courage and each of the parts of virtue; and it was reasonable for him to do so, for he thought all the virtues to be kinds of knowledge. So to know justice and to be just come simultaneously; for the moment that we have learned geometry or building we are builders and geometers. Therefore he inquired what virtue is, not how or from what it arises. This is right with regard to the contemplative sciences; for there is no other part of astronomy or physics or geometry except knowing and contemplating the nature of the things which are the subjects of those sciences—though nothing prevents them from being coincidentally useful to us for much that we cannot do without. But the end of the productive sciences is something different from science and knowledge—for instance, health is different from medicine, law and order (or something of the sort) from political science. Now to know anything that
is noble is itself noble; but regarding virtue, at least, it is not to know what it is but to recognize out of what it arises that is most valuable. For we do not want to know what courage is but to be courageous, nor what justice is but to be just—as we want to be in health rather than to know what being in health is, and to be in good condition rather than to know what being in good condition is.

About all these matters we must try to get conviction by arguments, using people’s perceptions as evidence and illustration. It would be best that all men should clearly concur with what we are going to say, but if not, then that all should do so in a sort of way at least—and this if converted they will do. For every man has some contribution to make to the truth, and it is on this basis that we must give some sort of proof about these matters. For by advancing from true but unilluminating judgements we shall arrive at illuminating ones, always exchanging the usual confused statements for more perspicuous ones.

In every inquiry there is a difference between philosophical and unphilosophical remarks: therefore we should not think even in political inquiry that the sort of consideration which makes not only the nature of the thing evident but also its cause is superfluous; for such consideration is in every inquiry philosophical. But this needs much caution. For there are some who, through thinking it to be the mark of a philosopher to make no random statement but always to give a reason, often unawares give reasons foreign to the subject and empty—this they do sometimes from ignorance, sometimes because they are boasters—by which reasons even men experienced and able to act are trapped by those who neither have nor are capable of having practical and constructive thought. This happens to them from want of education; for inability in regard to each matter to assess which reasons are appropriate to the subject and which are foreign to it is want of education. And it is right to assess separately the explanation and the conclusion both because of what has just been said (namely, that one should attend...
not merely to what is inferred by argument but often more to people’s perceptions—whereas now when men are unable to answer the argument they are compelled to believe what has been said), and also because often that which seems to have been shown by argument is true indeed but not for the cause which the argument assigns; for one may prove truth by means of falsehood, as is plain from the Analytics.