

24.200: Aristotle
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Aristotle on the Human Good

Aristotle believes that in order to live a well-ordered life, that life must be organized around an ultimate or supreme good which is the goal or end of all action. Think of it this way. Practical reason enables us to determine what means are appropriate given certain ends; this allows that we might have many ends in life. But when the ends conflict we are either stuck with no way to (rationally) proceed, or we must have some way of ordering the ends, i.e., a way to rank them in order of priority. Aristotle thought the way to provide this rank ordering of ends was to have some one *ultimate* end in terms of which the others could be ordered. Thus, in the well-ordered life there is some ultimate end towards which all action, desire, activity, is directed. (Note that the supreme or ultimate good need not be defined in terms of a single dominant value, but may have as constituents a number of things which count as good, e.g., pleasure, practical and theoretical activity....etc. In other words, it might be a complex good.)

It is important to recall that there are different kinds of goods. This claim we find in Plato (Republic II) as well as in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE). Some goods are intrinsic, some instrumental, some both. Each thing that we do is done either as a *means* to an end which is chosen for its own sake, or it is an *end* in itself, or both. For example, health is chosen both as a means to and as a constituent of happiness; so it is chosen both for the sake of happiness, and for its own sake. Health is a mixed good; it is both intrinsically and instrumentally good. The final or supreme good is chosen for its own sake and *not* for the sake of anything else; e.g., happiness is always chosen for its own sake and not for the sake of some higher goal. We don't want to be happy because this enables us to achieve some other goal; we want to be happy simply in order to be happy. The question arises: what is this supreme good? How is it related to (a) happiness, (b) moral virtue, (c) contemplation?

From the characterization of what it is to be a "supreme good," it looks like happiness is the best candidate for the supreme good for a human life. It is what is chosen for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. But immediately more questions arise. Aristotle wants to know, what are the constituents of a happy life? What does it take to be happy, *truly* happy? Can we characterize the life of complete human flourishing? What would such a life include?

Aristotle, like Plato and Socrates before him, believes that the happy life is the life of virtue or excellence. The outlines of his main argument for this claim appear in *Nicomachean Ethics* I:7; the argument has traditionally been called the "function argument".

Aristotle takes it to be unproblematic to claim that the highest good for human beings is happiness. He says,

But presumably the remark that the best good is happiness is apparently something <generally agreed, and what we miss is a clearer statement of what the best good is. Well, perhaps we shall find the best good if we first find the function of a human being. For just as the good, i.e., <doing> well, for a flautist...and, in general, for whatever has a function and <characteristic> action, seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function. (1097b22-28)

Recalling our discussion of Aristotle's views in the *Physics* and *On the Soul*, the function of human beings will be specified in terms of the characteristic activity towards which our natural development aims. The main steps of the argument are as follows:

I. The good for human beings is the performance of our function, i.e., our characteristic activity, in an excellent manner. (1097b26-28)

--If there is more than one kind of excellence, then the good for humans will be in the best and most complete. (1098a17-18)

II. The characteristic activity of human beings is the activity of the rational element, for reason is distinctive of humans. (See *On the Soul* II:3 414b35-415a14, *NE* I:7 1097b33-1097a8, and I:13)

--Nutrition, growth, and reproduction are common to all living things.

--Perception is common to all animals.

--Reason is distinctive of humans.

III. Therefore, the good for human beings is the activity of the soul in conformity with the excellence of our rational element. (*NE* I:7 1098a4-18)

We can continue to explicate this excellence further, as follows:

IV. The rational element of human soul is twofold, and likewise, its excellence is of two kinds: intellectual wisdom is the excellence of theoretical reason, and practical wisdom is the excellence of practical reason. (*NE* I:13 1103a4-10)

V. The excellence of practical reason is a state of character, which given opportunities for expression, leads to a life of moral virtue. (See *NE* II:6 1106b36-1107a2, and *NE* X:8 1178a9-b7)

VI. The excellence of theoretical reason is the activity of contemplation. (*NE* X:7 1077a11-18).

VII. Since what is distinctive of humans is the dual nature of their rational element, the distinctively human good will be a life combining moral virtue and contemplation. (e.g., *NE* X:7 1077b27-30)

VIII. However, if we focus on what is best in humans (and what is closest to the divine), the good will be a life of contemplation. (See, *NE* X:7-8)

Questions: After having devoted considerable attention to the excellence of practical reason, and its expression in moral virtue, Aristotle turns at the end of the work to emphasize the virtue of theoretical reason and its expression in contemplation. Is there an irreconcilable tension in his view? Does the function argument force him to favor the life of contemplation over the political life of moral virtue? What assumptions are leading him to favor contemplation? Could one resist those assumptions while remaining true to the principles of the function argument?

Aristotle's account of happiness rules out certain characterizations of the happy life, e.g., it isn't a life spent in the pursuit of money, nor is it a life spent in the pursuit of honor, etc. His view is that a perfect human life is one which consists in activity in accordance with virtue, i.e., moral excellence; this is the life of human flourishing; this is the supreme good for humans (even

though some of us don't understand that this is the supreme good and mistakenly choose some other good as our ultimate end).

Although Aristotle thinks that most people would agree with the claim that the final good is happiness, he thinks that they would not agree with the philosophical definition of happiness -- activity in accordance with virtue. They will think that happiness is some obvious thing like pleasure or wealth. He thinks they are wrong, but not completely on the wrong track. For example, although happiness cannot be identified with pleasure, nonetheless the happiest life is the most pleasant. Aristotle thinks that his view can account for this because virtuous activity is in itself pleasant. The pleasures associated with virtue are pleasant by nature, and are more pleasant than the pleasures the majority pursue: the latter pleasures, in addition to being inferior, come into conflict with each other.

So in addition to the function argument, Aristotle offers a variety of further considerations which support the view that the human good, i.e., the happy life, consists in the activity of the soul in conformity with excellence of the rational element. His strategy is to articulate a number of principles concerning happiness and the human good, and to argue that they are best satisfied by the virtuous life (as he has defined it). (See especially, e.g., *NE* I:5 and X:6) These principles include:

- a) The happy life is pleasant; the happy life will be free of excessive suffering and grave misfortune. (I:5 1095b34-1096a1, also I:8 1099a6-b8)
- b) The human good is something only humans can achieve. (I:7 1098a1)
- c) Happiness should not depend wholly on other people or things, but is one's own. (I:5 1095b23-26)
- d) Happiness, or human good, is relatively stable, and is not easily lost. (I:5 1095a24-26)
- e) Happiness involves activity. (I:5 1095b32-1096a1, also I:8 1098b34-99a3)
- f) Happiness, as a supreme good, is chosen for its own sake, and not for the sake of something else; it is a complete end. (E.g., I:2, and I:7 1097a15-b7)
- g) Happiness is (at least to some extent) self-sufficient; your life would not be improved if it were to have something other than or in addition to happiness. (I:7 1097b7-21)
- h) Happiness can be achieved in action, in a human life. (I:6 1096b35-37)

Consider a common set of candidates for the good life (below). In which of these lives will one best be able to achieve the happiness characterized by (a-h)? How does Aristotle argue that (4-5) are better than (1-3) in offering happiness?

- 1) The life of enjoyment. End: pleasure
- 2) Military/Political life. End: honor
- 3) Money-making life. End: money, material goods
- 4) Life of practical excellence. End: moral virtue
- 5) Contemplative life. End: theoretical wisdom

Questions:

There is a temptation to hesitate here, for we might be inclined to say that what constitutes a flourishing human life might differ between people; some people may flourish in one kind of life, others in others (think of Plato?); some may flourish as professors, others in business, others as farmers, others as nurses. No particular life is required in order to be fully happy. Can Aristotle accommodate this idea?

There is a sense in which Aristotle can agree with this; for there are moments when Aristotle seems to suggest that what matters in a life is not what you've chosen to do, e.g., to be a carpenter or to be a farmer, but the kind of character you have developed to make choices and respond to situations. If you are a person who has developed your capacity for practical reason, and if you have had the experience and habituation to develop the dispositions to act and feel appropriately, then as long as your life is not beset with gross misfortune, you can flourish.

How does this fit in with Aristotle's function argument? Consider it this way: Aristotle could say that our function qua *humans* is concerned with our specifically *human* capacities, e.g., for practical reason, choice, etc. Your development of these capacities, in whatever domain you find yourself, is a kind of human excellence. So even if there are more specific social functions, e.g., one person functions in the society as a farmer, another as a soldier, the virtue/excellence/happiness of each will be a matter of their ability to develop the states of character which do justice to these human capacities.

It is worth noting that it may be that some circumstances may prevent one from developing the capacities in a way which allows excellence. E.g., it may be that a slave is not in a position to exercise choice, or to develop the states of character which stem from acting out of practical reason because the slave is, so to speak, governed from without. Thus, although it may be that any of a range of choices regarding the specifics of a life may be consistent with virtue; if one is denied choice altogether, then one is thereby denied the possibility of virtue. (In effect, one is denied one's humanness?)

But there are other parts of Aristotle which conflict with this picture, or suggest that there is more to the story. In NE book X:6-9, A returns to the notion of happiness and suggests that there is a hierarchical ranking of happy lives. The happiest life, i.e., the life which most fully embodies the supreme good, is the life of contemplation. Commentators have found this puzzling for centuries. What is Aristotle claiming here and how does it relate to the earlier books of NE and their arguments? At the beginning of X:7 he says:

If happiness, then, is activity expressing virtue, it is reasonable for it to express the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best is understanding, or whatever else seems to be the natural ruler and leader, and to understand what is fine and divine, by being itself either divine or the most divine element in us. Hence complete happiness will be its activity expressing its proper virtue; and as we have said that this activity is the activity of study. This seems to agree with what has been said before, and also with the truth. (1177a12-19)

(The editors emphasize in the note that contrary to his suggestion that he is repeating here something he's already said, he hasn't made this point before, at least not explicitly.) Aristotle then goes on to suggest that contemplation best fits the requirements placed on the supreme good, and is the best candidate for the account of what happiness consists in. He argues that contemplation (theoretical wisdom) is, among human activities:

- the best
- the most continuous
- most pleasant
- most self-sufficient
- most free and leisurely
- especially loved for its own sake.

Furthermore, (and importantly), A suggests that if we consider the different kinds of activities

we engage in, and if we consider what kind of thing we are, we will find that we are theorizing beings; beings whose highest function is to theorize. Thus the highest excellence for us will be to pursue this highest function; and the perfect life of human flourishing will be the contemplative life.

How might we relate this to the earlier views about moral virtue?

I) There is a conflict between the two positions:

Aristotle has changed his mind during the course of writing the text; there is no coherent position in the NE. Earlier he counts moral virtue as the supreme good; here he counts contemplation as the supreme good.

II) There is no conflict between the positions:

a) Aristotle still believes that moral virtue is the supreme good, but sees that contemplation is inseparable from moral virtue; thus contemplation is included in the supreme good as a constituent of moral virtue. For example: moral virtue requires knowledge and choice; in order to have knowledge and to exercise choice we must develop the capacity to theorize. [Problem: this isn't what he actually says in X:7...]

b) Aristotle believes that contemplation is the supreme good, but also realizes that contemplation is inseparable from moral virtue; so moral virtue is also part of the supreme good as a constituent of contemplation. For example: friendship a constituent of the contemplative life? [Problem: moral life defined by virtue as its supreme end; contemplation won't have virtue as its supreme end.]

c) Aristotle believes that moral virtue and contemplation are distinct parts of the supreme good. [Problem: because their demands sometimes conflict, we don't have a well-ordered life. If we give them an order, on what basis do we order them? Isn't the basis for our ordering the supreme good?]