

## Aristotle on Happiness

*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I

### 1. Goods and ends: some structural features (Bk I, Chs 1-2)

The overarching aim of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to inquire into what makes for a good human life.

If... there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good, and the chief good. (1094a:20)

Is there a supreme good for humans?

- i. We, as rational creatures, engage in end-directed (goal-directed) activities .
- ii. Some of the ends (e.g., money) are for the sake of other ends (e.g., yachts). They are of *instrumental value*.
- iii. Other ends don't seem to be for the sake of other things. They are of *final value*.
- iv. If there are no things of final value, the considerations motivating our choices “will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile” (1094a20–21).
  - Note: this observation alone doesn't establish that there is only one final good.
- iv. The supreme good for humans (if there is such a thing) will be of final value.

Aristotle seems to think that in order to live a well-ordered life, that life must be organized around an ultimate or supreme good that is the goal or end of all action. Why? 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. [Example: Sartre's example of staying to care with your mother or joining the French resistance.]

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.<sup>1</sup> Many of us are irrational and our lives are a mess because our lives are not ordered around a supreme good. The goal of his project is to figure out if there is a single supreme good that is good for (all) humans.

- Why assume that the supreme good is the same for all of us? Wouldn't it be more plausible to say that some of us flourish as professors, others as doctors, others as musicians, others as carpenters, etc.? Each human life might be directed towards a supreme good, but not the same one.]

### 2. The good for humans: common beliefs and some formal requirements (Bk I, Chs 4–7)

Aristotle thinks that most people will agree that the good for humans is happiness. As we've noted before, 'happiness' translates '*eudaimonia*' which could also be translated as 'flourishing.' (The word is a compound of '*eu-*' meaning 'good or well' and '*daimon*' meaning 'a minor divinity'—or better, 'guardian spirit.'). Someone is *eudaimon* when things are going really well for her.

Happiness has several important features that seem to make it uniquely suited to be the supreme good. It is:

- a) Final: it is chosen for its own sake.
- b) Complete: It is aimed for purely as an end, and not also as a means or instrument to other things (Aristotle suggests that it is the only 'complete' end.)
- c) Self-sufficient: A happy life lacks nothing.
  - “The self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be.” (1097b:18)

But the story doesn't stop when we conclude that happiness is the supreme good. Everyone may agree on this,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that it is controversial whether the supreme good must be defined in terms of a single dominant value, or may have as constituents a number of things which count as good, e.g., pleasure, knowledge, friendship, practical and theoretical activity, etc. This rationale for a supreme good speaks in favor of there not being multiple (supremely valuable) constituents, for that would leave us with no rational way to proceed when they conflict.

but disagree about what happiness amounts to. Will it be a life in which one experiences lots of pleasure, has lots of money, garners lots of praise or honor, or what. Aristotle wants to know, what are the constituents of a happy life? (1097b22–24) What does it take to be happy, truly happy? Can we characterize the life of complete human flourishing? What would such a life include? He is going to argue for what may seem a surprising conclusion: the perfect human life is one which consists in activity in accordance with virtue, i.e., human excellence; this is the life of human flourishing.

### 3. The Function Argument (Bk I, Ch 7)

Note that the the word translated as ‘function’ is ‘*ergon*.’ It could also be translated as ‘work,’ ‘business,’ ‘proper work,’ or ‘characteristic activity.’

There are three stages to the Function Argument:

- i. The existence of a human function (1097b28–33)
- ii. The nature of the human function (1097b33–1098a7)
- iii. The link between the human function and happiness (1098a7–20)3

#### i. *The existence of a human function*

- It seems like craftspeople (artists, carpenters, leatherworkers) have functions.
- It seems like our body parts (eyes, hands, feet) have functions.
- Are human beings “naturally functionless?” (1097b28–30)
  - Ask: What is the characteristic human activity that makes us who we are?

#### ii. *The nature of the human function*

Granting that humans do have a function, what could it be? Aristotle considers a variety of activities of the human soul, drawing on his psychology from *De Anima*. Some of these he rules out because they are not unique or peculiar to humans. Aristotle is after “the special function of a human being” (1097b34). [Why does Aristotle think that human function must be unique to humans?]

- Living is shared by all living things, so isn’t a suitable candidate.
- Nutrition and growth are activities shared with plants.
- A life of sense perception is shared with every animal.
- In NE I.6, Aristotle argues against the Platonic conception of the human good—which is identified with the Form (or “Idea”) of the Good.

What remains?

- “An active life of the element [part of the soul] that has a rational principle” (1098a3–4).

Conclusion: “the function of man is an activity of soul in accordance with, or not without, rational principle,” (1098a7–8).

- Is this function unique to humans? What if we encountered aliens that engaged in rational thought?
- Are there other (better?) candidates for the human function?

#### iii. *The link between the human function and happiness*

Granting that the human function is “activity of the soul in accord with reason,” what does this tell us about the human good? The connection comes via an observation about performing one’s function well. The virtues proper to a kind are whatever capacities enable things of that kind to perform their function well.

- The function of a paring knife is to cut fruits and vegetables. A good paring knife has certain virtues: it is sharp, and is easy to handle and wash.
- Doctors also have a function: to heal the sick. Doctor virtues include knowledge of illnesses and cures and skill in applying this knowledge, a good bedside manner, an ability to organize their time.
- So the human virtues are those capacities that enable humans to perform their function well. The function of humans is to lead a certain kind of life, and excellent humans (good people) are those who do that well. “And so the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, then with the best and most complete.” (1098a16–18).

What we discover by the end of I.7 is that the good for humans, *eudaimonia*, amounts to an active life of virtue. In what follows, Aristotle delves into virtue—what it is and how we get it.

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