

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: happiness, reason and virtue

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1. *Eudaimonia*

a. What is it?

Eudaimonia, the ultimate goal of life in Aristotle, has traditionally been translated 'happiness'. This is somewhat misleading, but clarifying exactly what is involved requires the combination of several approaches. First, it is more helpfully thought of as 'good' applied to a human life, but even this needs qualifications. We readily contrast *having* a good life and *leading* a good life, the latter having more moral overtones, the former perhaps more hedonistic. Second, Aristotle would talk more of 'living well', but this needs further theory to clarify, since it is rather unclear as to what it would be to live 'badly'. Third, we may add in the idea from biology of 'flourishing'. We have an idea of what it is for a plant or animal to 'flourish', to 'do well', to be a good specimen of its species; we can provide an analysis of its needs and when those needs are met in abundance. Putting these three ideas together, we see that eudaimonia is 'the good' or the 'good life' for human beings as the particular sorts of being we are, that to achieve it is to 'live well', living as best a human being can live.

There are now a number of contrasts we can draw with our usual idea of 'happiness'. First, eudaimonia is not a state of mind, but relates to an activity – the activity of living. Second, it is not something subjective, but objective. To say someone is or was *eudaimon* is to make an objective judgment about their life as a good human life. It is not to say anything (directly) about their state of mind; nor is it a judgment the subject themselves has any special authority over. Third, eudaimonia is not something easily changed, it does not come and go as happiness (in the usual sense) can. For it is an evaluation of a life (a life lived well) or a person (a good person) as a whole. These are very stable judgments. Hence the Greeks had a saying that one should not call someone eudaimon until they were dead! Finally, eudaimonia involves the notion of the fulfilment of one's life, and therefore requires the development of the person. A good life is something dynamic, involving the fulfilment of the potential that a human life has.

If this is our ultimate goal, as Aristotle claims, we can see now the force and content of the claim that the central question of virtue ethics is not what to do, but how to live. This latter idea involves the whole person, not simply the person as agent, let alone as an agent whose actions on any one occasion are to be understood or evaluation in isolation. Living involves choosing and acting as a central part, but also involves the nature and quality of one's relationships with others and the state of what Aristotle would call one's 'soul'.

b. 'The final end'

We shall come on to Aristotle's analysis of eudaimonia consists in later. But first, why does he claim that it is our ultimate goal? His argument is based on the logic of action. For any action or activity, there is a purpose (a 'why') for which we undertake it. This should be understood as distinct from the motive – many activities have their purpose 'built in', which defines the activity as what it is. For example, I may play a game of chess with you to make you feel better, but the purpose of the game of chess is to checkmate the opponent's king. So, if we understand my activity as playing chess, this should be my purpose. The purposes of playing a *game*, however, are

manifold, and related to whether the playing is just play, or competition, or the demonstration of virtuosity, or whatever. But not anything can be the purpose of a 'game'.

An analysis of the purposes for which we do things is an analysis of what we see to be 'good' about them. This is obvious is the thought that an answer to the 'why?' is an answer to 'what's the point?' – and 'the point' is only *a* point if there is something apparently worthwhile about it. Now there can't be an infinite regress of why we do things, says Aristotle. We undertake actions and activities either for the sake of something further or 'for their own sake'. This may lead us to believe that we have many 'final ends', as many as the purposes for which we can't give a further explanation. But Aristotle claims that everything is done for the sake of eudaimonia, for the purpose of leading the 'best life'. To reconcile this with the idea that there are many things we do for their *own* sake, we need to understand that there is more than one way in which our actions relate to our ends, and our ends relate to one another.

We are familiar with drawing the contrast between 'means' and 'ends'. But we usually think of this as an *instrumental* relation, i.e. that performing the means achieves the further, independent end. So I might drive to the airport in the early morning in order to catch a flight, which I do in order to go on holiday. But there is another relation between means and ends which Aristotle stresses, a *constitutive* relation. If, like me, you really enjoy flying, the flight is the first part of a good holiday; you are already on holiday when flying. But perhaps the example of lazing on the beach with a drink and a good book works better for you. Why are doing that? Well, in order to have a good holiday – but in this case, having a good holiday *just is* lazing on the beach. It is not something 'further' or additional that you achieve. In these circumstances, here and now, it is what 'having a good holiday' amounts to.

Eudaimonia can either be an end towards which we adopt instrumental means or constitutive means. But it is the final answer to all our 'whys' – we do this thing in order to lead the best life available to us. Everything is ultimately done for its sake. And we never aim to lead the best life in order to achieve some further goal. But eudaimonia is not the only intrinsic good – all other purposes done for their own sake are intrinsic goods, and constitutive means of eudaimonia. (Some, e.g. health, are preconditions; others, e.g. respect, are consequences.) But only eudaimonia is pursued only for its own sake. And it is complete – no goal can be added to it without actually being a part of it.

2. *Arete*

Eudaimonia can be further analysed and understood in terms of the idea of *ergon*. This is often translated 'function', but this is (again) misleading. The *ergon* of a thing can be its function – the *ergon* of an eye is to see – but a more general account would be the 'characteristic form of activity' of something. 'Function' here is better understood in relation to 'functioning' rather than 'purpose'.

The 'characteristic activity' provides an insight into what type of thing something is (otherwise in what sense would the activity be 'characteristic?'). It also thereby provides the basis for an evaluative standard for that thing – for something is doing or 'functioning' well when it performs its characteristic activity well. So if the *ergon* of a knife is to cut, a good knife cuts well; a good eye sees well; a good plant flourishes (it grows, produces flowers, etc. well, according to its species). Aristotle adds further that, because we understand what something *is* according to its *ergon*, when it fulfils its *ergon* well, it is most what it is (the idea of a good example).

In order to fulfil its *ergon*, certain qualities will be needed, relative to the *ergon*. An *arete*, translated as excellence or virtue, is a quality that aids the fulfilment of a thing's *ergon*. So

sharpness is an arete in a knife designed to cut. Good focus is an arete in an eye. By what has just been said, an arete is therefore a perfection of what that thing is.

Aristotle applies this entire account to human beings. In the sense relevant to ethics, a virtue is a trait of a person – in particular, as we will see, their mind or character – that is an arete. To know which traits are virtues, therefore, we need to know what the ergon of human beings is and what qualities would help in the full achievement of that ergon.

3. The function argument (I.7)

A skeletal answer to the first question is a part-conclusion of the so-called ‘function argument’. But the entire *Nicomachean Ethics* can be understood as an answer to these questions. For Aristotle’s claim that *the human ergon is a life of activity in accordance with reason* requires further content – how are we to understand what is ‘in accordance with reason’? But we shall rest content for now with the more skeletal analysis. There is another part to the conclusion of the function argument, viz. that *eudaimonia is activity of the soul exhibiting excellence*. These two part-conclusions yield the final conclusion of the argument, that *eudaimonia is a life of rational activity*.

The first part of the argument is the analysis of eudaimonia in relation to arete. To develop his claim, Aristotle argues that (1) a good life is better than a good soul which never does anything. In general, the employment of good qualities and the achievement of good purposes is better than the simple disposition to do so. This yields the claim that eudaimonia involves ‘activity’. (2) The goods of the soul are more worthy than goods external to it (wealth, health, power, etc.); we often think of the latter as necessary or additional to, but not comprising, a good life. Hence eudaimonia centrally concerns goods ‘of the soul’. But eudaimonia is the perfect good, it can’t be improved upon. So it is not simply the activity of pursuing and realizing goods of the soul, but of doing so well. So it is activity of the soul exhibiting excellence.

So to the second claim: it is crucially important here, for Aristotle’s claim to be plausible today, to understand it correctly. Aristotle’s understanding of ergon was part and parcel of his theory of biology, which involved the view that nature never does anything without reason and never repeats. Each, in other words, is appointed to its place. Ergon is therefore understood as *distinctive* characteristic activity, which singles the particular type of thing out. And what singles human beings out, claims Aristotle, is rationality. But rationality is an activity; and at this point many commentators misunderstand Aristotle to be claiming that *reasoning* is our ergon. But I believe Aristotle makes a deeper point – what is characteristic of us is that *whatever* we do, we do *for reasons*. All our activities – not just ‘reasoning’ – are guided by ‘reasoning’. Of course, there are good reasons and bad reasons. But that is to fulfil our ergon and live well, we must be guided by good reasons. This now tells us what activities exhibiting excellence are for human beings. And so eudaimonia consists in activity of the soul which exhibits excellence in being in accordance with (‘good’ or ‘right’) reason (*orthos logos*).

Aristotle goes on to provide an analysis of the human soul in I. 13, which supports and develops the claims made so far. We share with plants the element of ‘growth and nutrition’ (Aristotle thought the soul was the form of a living being, so all life has it); we share with animals the element of desire. But we alone have the element of reason, and in the element of desire (and emotion), the capacity to respond to reason. Virtues can be of intellect (of the element of reason) or of character (of the element of desire, demonstrated in its responsiveness to reason).

Further reading

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, II.1

J Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics*, Ch. 1, 2

A Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*: Ackrill (on eudaimonia), Nagel, Wilkes, Rorty

S Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, Ch. 1, §§ IV-VII; Ch. 2, §§ II-III; Ch. 7

D Hutchinson, *The Virtues of Aristotle*, 'Man: his ergon and excellence'

1. Contemplation

- a. the divine and the human (NE X.7)
- b. conflict and solutions
 - i) contemplation is the ideal activity, to be achieved in ideal circumstances
 - ii) contemplation is served by practical wisdom
 - iii) contemplation is central to eudaimonia
 - iv) have to choose
 - v) contemplation completes and perfects practical wisdom: the examined life
- c. the hedonist; the aesthete; the philosopher; the worker

5. The good *of* man and the good *for* man

- a. is realising my ergon what is best for me? cp. a dog and a sheepdog; rational activity is the good of man, but is it the good for man?
- b. reason, though, will *aim at* satisfying all the needs of the person as a whole (including physical and social ones); hence the good man leads a life good for man, “since his practical reason is explicitly setting out to order all things for his own overall advantage” (Wilkes, p. 347)
- c. is rational activity morally ambiguous? Aristotle: “this is just an outline” (reminder: eudaimonia is the best life, not (just) the moral life)
- d. is rational activity too narrow, or conversely, indeterminate? are we any less imaginative, creative, aesthetic, than rational? are these forms of activity “rational”?
 - a) are there objectively ‘good’ reasons?