

Aristotle on Human Nature  
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Being alive

Aristotle's discussion of human nature in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* takes the 'soul' to identify what is essential to being human. Before we look at that discussion, we should examine the background to this remark, in particular Aristotle's views on the relationship between the soul and being alive.

Aristotle's conception of 'soul' is not equivalent to ours – viz. some form of identification with the mind or the psychological. The soul is what gives *life*, not just consciousness, for Aristotle: "life is the being [*ousia* - essence] of living things, and the soul is the cause and first actuality of this" (*De Anima* 415b13-14). Don't worry about the technical terms here; the quotation demonstrates that soul and life apply to exactly the same things. To understand a living thing, we must understand that it is *alive* – this is its nature. Different living things have different kinds (or parts of) soul. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle identifies two fundamental parts: the rational and the non-rational. Within the non-rational, there is the part of nutrition and growth, which all living things must have to be alive; that of locomotion, perception and sensation (in animals); and that of appetites, desires and emotions, which is responsive to reason. The rational part is possessed by humans alone.

What does Aristotle mean by 'parts' of the soul? There is some debate about this. In a being with more than one part, they may not be separable, but they are at least 'conceptually' distinct. There is a difference between faculties of sensation, of desire, of reasoning. Aristotle's main argument that these faculties are 'parts' is just that some creatures have all of them, some of only some or just one (*De Anima* 413b33).

The type of soul one gives one's nature as a living thing. Human beings are essentially living things. What kind? The kind that has all parts of the soul, including rationality. It was Aristotle who said human beings are 'rational animals'. This is the background to his claim, at the end of Book I of the *Ethics*, that there are two parts of the soul relevant to moral virtue, a part capable of reason and a part capable of obeying reason, constituted by desires and emotions. Virtue is found in the obedience of the emotional (or 'passionate') part of the soul to the rational (NE 1102b27).

Function

The type of soul one has indicates what kinds of things one is capable of. Plants can only be nourished, grow and reproduce. Animals have sensation and movement in addition. Human beings are capable of rationality. Central to Aristotle's understanding of the nature of anything is *ergon*. The term has usually been translated as 'function', but this can be misleading if it suggests a *purpose*. 'Function' here is better understood in relation to 'functioning' rather than 'purpose'. What is it that something is doing when it is functioning, when it is performing the activities that are characteristic of it? So *ergon* is best understood as 'characteristic form of activity'.

This translation covers all types of ‘functioning’, from artefacts to organs to species. For example, the ergon of an eye is to see. The ergon of a knife is to cut. The ergon of a particular species of plant is to grow, flower, and reproduce in the way specific to its species. That gives us an understanding of its nature, of what it is to be that sort of thing. Since we want to know about human nature, we need to identify the ergon of human beings.

A skeletal answer to this question is given in the so-called ‘function argument’ of NE I.7. 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. What is characteristic of human beings is also what is distinctive of them: ‘Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle... the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle’.

This 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’? If this is meant as a substantive question – viz. what do we have reason to do? – then we must defer the answer to an investigation of the *good* life. A different problem faces us immediately. 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*. Human beings, throughout their lives – in their nourishment, perception, as well as desires, emotions and thought – make use of reasoning. For example, we don’t just eat, we eat what is *healthy* or *pleasurable*. All our activities – not just ‘reasoning’ – are guided by ‘reasoning’. We are creatures of practical and theoretical reasoning; this is human nature.

### Flourishing

This forms the basis for Aristotle’s view of ethics. Fulfilling our nature is what living is all about. The ‘characteristic activity’ provides an insight into what type of thing something is. But 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 a good knife cuts well; a good eye sees well; a good plant flourishes. 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).

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. ‘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. Since we live in accordance with reason, flourishing is doing this well. What does this mean? Well, there are good reasons and bad reasons. Bad reasons aren’t really reasons at all. To fulfil our ergon and live well, we must be guided by good reasons.

Being guided by reasons is natural to us; but being guided by good reasons is not natural, but requires training. Aristotle understands the virtues – traits that enable us to live well – as being of two kinds, intellectual and moral: ‘intellectual virtue in the main owes both its

birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (aythikay) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature' (NE II.1).

Against the view that virtues can be 'natural', Aristotle gives two arguments. First, given that virtues are dispositions to feel and behave in certain ways, we come to form these by what we *do*: but 'of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity'. For example, you don't acquire sight by seeing; first you have sight, then you can see. But 'the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well [e.g. learning to play a musical instrument]. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.' We are not naturally virtuous, but we are naturally capable of becoming virtuous, just as we are not born musical but can become so. Hence, 'by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and by being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly... It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.' (II.1)

But some people are more 'naturally musical' than others; couldn't this be so with virtue? Yes, Aristotle allows that we can have good dispositions from birth, e.g. someone might be naturally kind. But this doesn't amount to 'full virtue'. A fully virtuous action is one that requires the agent to *know* what it is they are doing, to choose the act because it is in accordance with virtue (Aristotle describes this as 'choosing the act for its own sake'), and to make the choice from a firm and unchangeable character (II.4). A naturally kind child doesn't fully comprehend the nature of their action, and could easily be misled into being kind for the wrong reasons or at the wrong time. Without practical wisdom, virtue has developed into its fullest form.

But just because we must develop to become virtuous, this doesn't mean virtues go against our nature either: 'nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature... Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit' (NE II.1).