Aristotle on Virtues and the Good Life

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Good as the Goal of Activity

Why do we do things?

The goals of various human activities can be arranged hierarchically. E.g.:

Sharpening a knife is for the sake of making the sake of cutting well.

Cutting is for the sake of cooking well.

Cooking is for the sake of eating.

Eating is for the sake of living.

Cf. also his earlier metaphyics: final causes / ends are explanatorily meaningful and necessary. We can't understand an action without understanding its purpose.

Good as the Goal of Activity

EN I.1, 1094a1–4

"Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."

- we usually have some purpose/end in mind for every intentional action – the question is whether we can stop at some point asking "why you are doing this?".
- Aristotle seems to be saying yes, we can.
- Is this quote an argument? Is it fallacious?
- If we accept that everything seeks some good, the question remains: what is the human good?

How to Look for the Human Good

Disagreements about the (human) good:

1. Agreement on the characteristics of the final good, disagreement on which activities or states exhibit those characteristics.
2. Disagreement about what would qualify as a final good in the first place. — This is the more fundamental question, and this is what Aristotle will begin with.

What Would Count as a Final Good?

We don't know yet whether there is one or more human goods. But a final good must have these properties:

1. It is pursued for its own sake (1094a1);
2. We wish for other things for its sake (1094a19);
3. We do not wish for it on account of other things (1094a21) (cf. (1), but stronger);
4. It is complete: always choiceworthy and always chosen for itself (1097a26–33);
5. It is self-sufficient: its presence suffices to make a life lacking in nothing (1097b6–16).

Happiness

But is there any such thing? Happiness seems to be a good candidate: we pursue it for its own sake, etc.
But of course the question remains: *what is* happiness, exactly?

- happiness = *eudaimonia* (εὐδαίμονια)
- **Subjective** and **Objective** accounts of happiness:
  - Can I be wrong about my own happiness? — subjective accounts: no; objective accounts: yes.
  - Are there some objective criteria about when someone is happy? — subjective accounts: no; objective accounts: yes.

Aristotle thinks that subjective conceptions of happiness fall short of satisfying the criteria for ultimate human goodness: sometimes, our desires don't make us happy; and even if they do, they might not be *good* or worthy desires.

What Happiness Isn't

Aristotle deals with a few common conceptions of happiness and shows why they cannot be what we are looking for.

1. The life of the money-maker (1096a6–11)
2. The life of honor (1095b23–1096a4)
3. Pleasure (1095b16–23; cf. *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*, what makes a human human)

But what *is* happiness, then, and how can we achieve it?

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The Function Argument

EN I.7, 1097b24–29

"[A clearer account of what happiness is] might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, that good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function."

- A good can-opener is the one that opens cans well; similarly, a good (happy) human being is the one that performs the human function well.
- *But what is the human function?*

The Function Argument – 1

1. We can determine the function of a given kind F by isolating the unique and characteristic activity of Fs. (Why? It reveals the substantial form.)
2. The unique and characteristic activity of human beings is reasoning. (Why? cf. the substantial form of human beings.)
3. Therefore, the function of human beings is (or centrally involves) reasoning.
4. Exercising a function is an activity.
5. Therefore, exercising a human function is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason.

Some Remarks

- Aristotle here does not argue for the claim that human beings do have a function; it follows from his other metaphysical commitments (cf. *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *De Anima*).
- This account of the function of a human being tells us something important about the content of happiness. "Happiness is a certain sort of activity of the soul in accord with complete excellence" (1102a1)
  - happiness is an activity;
  - happiness is objectively determined (we don't choose our essences, and thus neither choose our highest good);
  - happiness is forever rather than fleeting (we can't judge whether someone is happy before end of his life).
  - We cannot exercise our function excellently without virtue!

Function Argument – 2

Why do we need virtues?

1. Something is a good instance of its kind if it performs its function excellently.
2. Exercising a human function is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason.
3. We cannot exercise our function without virtue.
4. Therefore, we need virtue in order to be good human beings (= have a good life).

Assumptions: all things have a function (they are teleologically specified); the relevant human characteristic is the ability to reason.

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Two Kinds of Virtues

Aristotle distinguishes two different kinds of virtues.

1. **Virtue of character**: a virtue that helps regulate our activity with regard to passions, emotions, etc. (These were later called *moral virtues*)
2. **Virtue of thought:** a property of the mind that helps one reason practically well (later also called *intellectual virtues*)

Example

Suppose you see a burning building and learn that there is a small child trapped inside. Let's say further that the blaze is proceeding rapidly and the fire department is far away, so there is little chance of waiting for the professionals who have appropriate gear. Furthermore, the other bystanders are all elderly or infirm. Should you run into the burning building to try to save the children?

- Aristotle: it depends. How likely are you to actually save the child versus simply endangering your own life (and others who might come to save you)? How physically fit are you? Do you have any relevant training that gives you a good hope of success in this case?

How Do the Virtues Make One a Good Practical Reasoner?

- Suppose you are a person with the relevant skills and tools. So, your practical reason should lead you to go into the blaze.
- However, you have an intense emotion of fear, which might prevent you from being able to think, or act in accordance with your reason.
- A courageous person can master the emotional response in order to do what reason commands.
- So the courageous person can actually run into the building when it is appropriate.
- So the courageous person is a better person, precisely because he or she is better able to perform the human function of practical reasoning and acting in accordance with the practical reasoning.

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Virtue as the Golden Mean

For Aristotle, all moral virtues have some *object*, and they can be put against usually two kinds of character flaws that hinder our proper reasoning.

- *object* of a virtue: what it is about; usually some kind of emotional inclination. (E.g., fear is the object of the virtue of courage.)
- The two *extremes*: both vices; the extreme of *deficiency* and that of *excess*. E.g., cowardly and rush. Both of these make bad choices.

Virtue

A moral virtue is a *mean* between those two extremes. The courageous person fears the right things at the right times for the right reasons.

Some Examples for the Mean

Deficiency	Virtue	Excess
Cowardice	Bravery	Rashness
Gluttony	Temperance	Insensibility
Meanness	Generosity	Wastefulness
Stinginess	Magnificence	Vulgarity
Pusillanimity	Magnanimity	Vanity
nameless	Mildness	Irascibility
Self-Deprecation	Truthfulness	Boasting

- The mean is not always the arithmetic middle
- Instead, it depends: on the virtue in question (its object), and on the person.

Virtue: Summary

EN II.6, 1107a1–3

"Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect."

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Virtue Ethics

- It does not want to give a universal, always applicable rule for right action
- Instead, it focuses on the character of the agent
- We appeal to the virtuous person

A Developmental Account of Virtue Ethics

When acquiring virtue, look at a virtuous person. How do we do that?

- Think of the builder or the pianist.
- At first, you will be imitating what they do.
- Over time, you acquire the skill, become an expert, will develop your own style, etc.

This is similar with virtues:

- Look at someone whom you think lives well, and see what s/he does.
- At first, try to imitate it.
- Eventually, you will acquire the virtues yourself, and will know what to do and when.

A Developmental Account of Virtue Ethics

The advantages of such a picture:

- Places great emphasis on practical reason
- Explains moral development: we grow up in a certain culture, get accustomed to certain moral ideas, and then — if we reach that point — we might start questioning or modifying them for our own lives.
- Always take the agent into consideration
- We have to do the work ourselves — not a "one size fits all" account
- It does not give a decision procedure.
- You will be responsible for your own choice (and not a manual)