

Aristotle on eudaimonia, function and virtue¹

‘How should one live?’ It is not a trivial question, as Socrates says. Perhaps uniquely among animals, we human beings not only act, we also consider how we *should* act. We think that there are better and worse ways of acting, we reflect on our experience of making mistakes, and try to improve things. Much of this, of course, relates to our own self-interest - meeting our needs, successfully achieving our personal goals, and so on. But that is not all. We are social creatures, we live together, and our lives and actions affect the lives and actions of other people. How should we relate to one another, how should we treat one another? We are concerned not only for ourselves, but for other people as well, and how other people treat us is critical to our own happiness. How should each of us live so that each of our lives goes ‘best’? What is ‘good’ in life and how may we go about trying to attain it?

These questions form the basis for moral philosophy. Normative ethics is a branch of moral philosophy that aims to give us general guidance on what is morally right or wrong, what is good or bad. It develops theories about people care about or what makes their lives go well, about how to live and what we should do.

Some normative ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantian deontology, focus on morally *right actions* - what is the right thing to do, and why? On these views, to be a good person is to be motivated to do morally right actions. By contrast, virtue ethics starts with what it is to be a *good person*. From this, it then derives an account of what a morally right action is, which it understands in terms of what a good person would do. An important claim of virtue ethics is that there is more to the moral life than actions.

Some form of virtue ethics or other has been the ‘default form’ of ethical theory in Western philosophy until the last few hundred years. Its ‘classical’ version is stated most clearly by Aristotle, and other forms developed by rejecting or adding to some elements of Aristotle’s theory. In this handout, we discuss Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonia*.

THE GOOD FOR HUMAN BEINGS

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the question ‘What is the good for human beings?’ What is it that we are aiming at, that would provide a successful, fulfilling, good life? Our different activities aim at various ‘goods’. For example, medicine aims at health; military strategy aims at victory. For any action or activity, there is a purpose (a ‘why’) for which we undertake it - its end. An

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analysis of the purposes for which we do things is an analysis of what we see to be 'good' about them. An answer to 'Why do that?' is an answer to 'What's the point?' - and 'the point' is what is worthwhile about doing that.

Now, complex activities, such as medicine, have many component activities, e.g. making pharmaceuticals, making surgical implements, diagnosis, etc. Where an activity has different components like this, the overall end (health) is better - 'more preferable' - than the end of each subordinate activity (successful drugs, useful implements, accurate diagnoses). This is because these activities are undertaken for the sake of the overall end.

We undertake actions and activities either for the sake of something further or 'for their own sake'. Suppose there is some end for whose sake we do everything else. Suppose that this end we desire for its own sake, not the sake of anything else. Then this end would be the good for us. As Julia Annas notes in her article 'Virtue ethics', in thinking about why we do what we do, we end up thinking about how to live one's life well as a whole.

EUDAIMONIA

People generally agree, says Aristotle, that this is 'eudaimonia'. What does he mean by this?

Eudaimonia is the good for a human life. It is often translated as 'happiness' but Aristotle says it is 'living well and faring well'. We have some idea of what it is when an animal or plant is living and faring well - we talk of them 'flourishing'. A plant or animal flourishes when its needs are met in abundance and it is a good specimen of its species. Gardeners try to enable their plants to flourish; zookeepers try to enable the zoo animals to flourish. So eudaimonia is 'the good' or the 'good life' for human beings as the particular sort of being we are. To achieve it is to live as best a human being can live.

There are a number of contrasts we can draw with our usual idea of 'happiness'.

1. We can talk of people being happy as a psychological state, and in particular - perhaps a result of the influence of utilitarianism - we think of it as pleasure. But eudaimonia is not a state of mind. It characterises an activity - the activity of living. A good life is one that realises the full potential that a human life has.
2. Eudaimonia is not something subjective, but objective. To say someone is or was eudaimon is to make an objective judgement about their life as a good human life. It is not to say anything (directly) about their state of mind; nor is it a judgement the person themselves has any special authority over. By contrast, if someone says they are happy or unhappy, it is difficult to correct them or know better.
3. 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 person's life (a life lived well) as a whole. This is a very stable judgement.

However, we still don't know just what eudaimonia is - what sort of life is a good or flourishing life? Aristotle notes that people disagree on whether it involves pleasure, wealth, honour, or something else again. But, says Annas, if we start from the idea that it characterises the activity of living one's life, it can't be about passive states of mind, such as pleasure. Another reason it can't be just pleasure per se, Aristotle argues, is because we share pleasure with animals and we're after the good for human beings.

It also can't be about money or wealth. First, notes Annas, having wealth isn't an activity. Second, if eudaimonia is a final end, then it can't be an instrumental good. But money is only useful as a means to an end, it isn't an end in itself. Aristotle argues that it can't be honour either, since to have honour, others must honour you. What is it you want to be honoured (recognised, rewarded, praised) for? Whatever the answer, achieving that must be what is good.

Aristotle briefly raises the suggestion that the wise person wants to be honoured for their virtues. (We'll consider what a virtue is below.) But just having virtues, e.g. courage or intelligence, can't be enough for a good life, for two reasons. First, you can have virtue while asleep. Such inactivity isn't our end in life. Second, having virtue is compatible with suffering great misfortune in life. But this isn't a good life either. So we still don't know yet what eudaimonia is.

FINAL ENDS

Is there such a thing as the good for human beings? Given that we think pleasure, honour, or again, knowledge, are all good, how could eudaimonia be the good, our only good?

Call an end that we desire for its own sake a 'final' end. We can't give some further purpose for why we seek it. If there is just one end for the sake of which we do everything else, that is the good. If there is more than one end, there are various final ends, each of which is good. If pleasure, honour and knowledge are final ends, doesn't that show that eudaimonia is not our only good?

Not yet. Some final ends we might seek both for their own sake and for the sake of something else. Everything that we pursue for its own sake - such as pleasure, knowledge, honour, and so on - we also pursue for the sake of eudaimonia, of living a good life.

How can we pursue something both for its own sake and for the sake of eudaimonia? The solution is to distinguish between 'external means' and 'constitutive means'. We usually think of the relation between means and end as an instrumental relation; i.e. that performing the means achieves the further, independent end. Think about having a good holiday. Suppose you have to get up very early in order to catch the plane. You do this in order to have a good holiday, but it isn't part of having a good holiday. Getting up early is an external means to the end. But there is also another relation between means and ends, a constitutive relation. Later on, you are lying on the beach in the sun, listening to your favourite music. Are you doing this 'in order' to have a good holiday? Not in the same sense. This just is having a good holiday at the moment. Lying on the beach

is a constitutive means to the end of having a good holiday. Having a good holiday is not something 'further' or additional that you achieve by lying on the beach. In these circumstances, here and now, it is what 'having a good holiday' amounts to.

Final ends are constitutive parts of eudaimonia. For example, we can pursue knowledge for its own sake and pursue it for the sake of living well if we believe that acquiring knowledge is part of the good life.

Everything we do, says Aristotle, is done for the sake of living and faring well. By contrast, we never want to live and fare well in order to achieve some other end. If there is a final end which we never seek for the sake of anything else, but only ever for its own sake, this will be a final end 'without qualification'. Annas comments that if eudaimonia is our final end, then it must be 'complete' in just this sense.

A further reason for thinking eudaimonia is our only good is that the good should be self-sufficient; i.e. it makes life desirable on its own. Eudaimonia is the most desirable thing, and we can't make it more desirable by adding something else to it. In fact, given what we've just said, to add some other goal, e.g. knowledge, to eudaimonia is just to make that other thing part of your eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is the only self-sufficient good.

'FUNCTION' AND 'VIRTUE'

Having established the relation between eudaimonia and other goods, we need to think again about what eudaimonia is. So Aristotle embarks on an analysis of eudaimonia in terms of the idea of ergon. This is often translated 'function', but as with translating eudaimonia as happiness, this is 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' of something provides an insight into what type of thing it is (otherwise in what sense would the activity be 'characteristic'?). It thereby provides an evaluative standard for that thing: something is a good x when it performs its characteristic activity well. 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 well, produces flowers well, etc., according to its species).

In order to fulfil its ergon, a thing will need certain qualities. An arête is a quality that aids the fulfilment of a thing's ergon. It can be translated generally as an 'excellence', or more specifically, a 'virtue'. So sharpness is a virtue in a knife designed to cut. Good focus is a virtue in an eye.

The function argument

Aristotle applies this entire account to human beings. Virtues for human beings will be those traits that enable them to fulfil their ergon. So, first, what is the 'characteristic activity' of human beings? At the most general level, we are alive. But this isn't distinctive of just us. So we shouldn't identify 'life' as our characteristic activity. We are a type of animal, rather than plant. We are

conscious, have sense perception, etc. But again, we share this with many animals. But we want to know what the good for human beings, distinctively, is.

A human life is distinctively the life of a being that can be guided by reason. We are, distinctively, rational animals. Many commentators misunderstand Aristotle to be claiming that reasoning is our ergon. But 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, or can be, guided by reasons. Being guided by reasons is, of course, a matter of our psychology, and so Aristotle talks of the activity of the soul (psyche).

Now, we said above, that a good x (eye, knife, etc.) is one that performs its characteristic activity well, and that it will need certain qualities - virtues - to enable it to do this. Our ergon is living as a rational animal, i.e. living in accordance with reason, and the virtues of a human being will be what enables us to do this. To fulfil our ergon and live well, we must be guided by the 'right' reasons - good reasons, not 'bad' reasons. So eudaimonia consists in the activity of the soul which exhibits the virtues by being in accordance with ('good' or 'right') reason. Eudaimonia is living a life in which one exercises the virtues. Finally, we must add - as noted earlier - that this must apply to a person's life as a whole. A day or even a year of living well doesn't amount to a good life.

TESTING THE ANALYSIS

It is worth double-checking that this is a plausible account of eudaimonia. Aristotle argues that it is indeed consistent with other things we want to say about what is good for human beings.

1. There are three types of thing that are good for us - goods of the mind (e.g. intelligence, courage, etc.), goods of the body (e.g. strength, health, etc.) and 'external' goods (e.g. wealth, food, etc.). People generally agree that the goods of the mind are worth more than the others. We often think of the others as additional to, but not comprising, a good life. This agrees with the analysis; eudaimonia centrally concerns goods 'of the soul'.
2. We have said that eudaimonia is living well. The analysis agrees, and spells out what it is to live well.
3. We can return to the suggestions that eudaimonia involves virtue, pleasure and wealth, and now explain the truth in each.
 - a. Virtue: as we said, to possess virtue is not enough; eudaimonia requires that one acts on it as well. The employment of virtues and the achievement of good purposes are better than simply having the virtues.
 - b. Pleasure: people find pleasant whatever it is that they love. A virtuous person loves living virtuously - you shouldn't call someone 'just', for instance, if they dislike doing what is just. But that means that the life of the virtuous person will also be pleasant. Eudaimonia is therefore both good and pleasant.
 - c. Wealth: in order to live virtuously (e.g. to be generous), we will also need a certain amount of external goods. And so, enough good fortune is needed for a fully good life.

Aristotle then raises a puzzle. If eudaimonia relates to the whole of someone's life, then can you call someone eudaimon while they are still alive? Their life is not yet finished - something terrible may yet happen that would lead us to say that theirs was not a good life. On the other hand, it is absurd to say that they are eudaimon after they have died. We could say, once they are dead, that they were eudaimon, but then it is strange that we cannot say that they are eudaimon before they have died.

Aristotle's solution is to say that fortunes change, but living virtuously has a much greater permanence. A virtuous person deals with bad fortune in the best possible way, so only very rarely and through terrible circumstances, can someone virtuous fail to lead a good life. Now we understand that virtue is central to leading a good life, we can call someone who is virtuous 'eudaimon' while they live, if they have sufficient external goods.