

Aristotle on eudaimonia, pleasure and philosophy¹

(This handout follows the handout ‘Aristotle on eudaimonia, function and virtue’. You should read that handout first.)

Eudaimonia is the good for a human life. It is often translated as ‘happiness’ but Aristotle says it is ‘living well and faring well’. 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. But what sort of life is a good or flourishing life for us? Aristotle argues that a human life is distinctively the life of a being that can be guided by reason. What is the place of pleasure in such a life? And what is the place of philosophy?

EUDAIMONIA AND PLEASURE

In his account of eudaimonia, Aristotle emphasises the importance of virtue and reason. But many people think that pleasure is central. What place does Aristotle give to pleasure in his account?

Is pleasure good?

Aristotle claims that pleasure is good, and that eudaimonia involves pleasure. To defend his view, he needs to answer objections that reject the goodness of pleasure, and to clarify just how and when pleasure is good.

1. Objection: The temperate person avoids pleasure.
Reply: Not true. What the temperate person avoids is an excess of certain bodily pleasures.
2. Objection: The practically wise person doesn’t seek pleasure, but only avoids pain.
Reply: Not true. The practically wise person does seek pleasure, but in accordance with reason. Furthermore, the fact that they avoid pain (in accordance with reason) shows that pleasure is good. As pain is bad and to be avoided, the contrary of pain, pleasure, is good and to be pursued.
3. Objection: Pleasure interferes with thought.
Reply: Not true. The pleasures of thinking don’t interfere with thinking, but assist it. It is pleasures that arise from other sources that interfere with thinking. It is generally true of pleasurable activities that each interferes with the others.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 294-301

4. Objection: Not all pleasures are good, for example bodily pleasures or taking pleasure in something bad or disgraceful. (Aristotle doesn't provide an example, but voyeurism - an invasion of someone's privacy, especially sexual privacy - provides a fairly clear example.)

Reply: If we say bodily pleasures are not good, then how can we explain that their opposite, bodily pains, are bad? It is only excess of pleasure here that is bad. Disgraceful pleasures are not good, agreed. To explain this, we could say any of three things:

- a. Disgraceful pleasures are not really pleasures, but only pleasant to bad people. All real pleasures are good, though.
- b. The kind of pleasure involved in something disgraceful is a pleasure (e.g. looking at an attractive naked body), and so it is good in general. But such pleasure is not good when it is caused by or involves something disgraceful (such as an intrusion on privacy).
- c. Pleasures are of different kinds, and only some pleasures are good. We will look further at this below.

Do we have any positive reasons for thinking that pleasure is good? Aristotle considers four arguments from another philosopher, Eudoxus, for the claim that pleasure is the only good. He argues that Eudoxus is right that pleasure is a good, but not that it is the only good. (We will see further arguments from Aristotle in the next section.)

1. Every creature aims at pleasure. This is a good indication that it is, for each thing, the good. And what is good for all things is the good.

Aristotle agrees that this is the strongest reason for thinking that pleasure is good. However, he argues that pleasure is not the only thing that we aim at, it is not our only end. There are other things which we seek out, such as seeing, knowing, being virtuous, that we would seek out even if they brought us no pleasure. The pleasure they bring is not why we seek them. They are not simply a means to pleasure.

With the next three arguments, Aristotle agrees that they show that pleasure is good, but not that it is the only good.

2. Everything avoids pain, so its contrary, pleasure, is good.
3. We choose pleasure for its own sake, not for some further purpose.
4. Adding pleasure on to any good makes it more desirable. So, we should conclude that pleasure is good, but not the only good.

Pleasure, virtue and function

What is pleasure? We naturally think of it as a kind of subjective feeling, which we can only define by how it feels. But Aristotle argues that it is the unimpeded activity of our faculties.

This is a very difficult claim to understand, but we can start by thinking about being 'in the zone', as we say now. Start with the activities of the senses, such as seeing. Pleasure in the activity of a sense is caused most when that sense is at its best (e.g. when you can see well) and active in relation to its 'finest' object.

Aristotle doesn't define this, but we can think of it as something on which we can really exercise that sense. So with vision, this is something that is (at least) interesting to look at, that we can explore and engage with through sight. Works of art and beautiful landscapes might provide examples. Looking at such things gives us (visual) pleasure. The same can be said of activities of thought - there is pleasure here in grappling with something that exercises our thought, but which doesn't impede it, e.g. through being too difficult to understand. We can extend this analysis to all our activities.

But pleasure is not something simply caused by, and separate from, such unimpeded activity. It 'completes' the activity. It is part of it, not a separate end, nor a state produced by the activity, as deliberating might produce a decision or looking might produce finding. The pleasure is in the activity itself and intensifies and supports it. Thus, when we enjoy an activity, we throw ourselves into it, and we enjoy it less if our attention is distracted.

If this is the correct analysis of what pleasure is, we can explain how pleasures can be good or bad, and how they relate to virtue and eudaimonia. Each kind of activity - eating, thinking, running, listening to music - has a corresponding kind of pleasure. So there are different kinds of pleasure. A pleasure is good when the activity that produces it is good and bad when the activity is bad.

Aristotle claims that different animals have different characteristic activities, and so they enjoy different pleasures. The pleasures that are most suited to human beings are, therefore, those that relate to our characteristic activity, namely living in accordance with reason. Now, it is the virtuous person who has the traits and the practical wisdom that enable them to perform this characteristic activity and this constitutes the good life for human beings. So what is 'truly' pleasant is what is pleasant to the virtuous person. It is these pleasures that form part of eudaimonia. People who are not virtuous may get pleasure from other activities, but such pleasure is not good or 'truly' pleasant.

EUDAIMONIA AND PHILOSOPHY

Aristotle divides reason into practical reason and theoretical reason. We discuss the place and role of practical reason in eudaimonia in the handout 'Aristotle on practical wisdom'. But we have said nothing about theoretical reason. What part does this play in eudaimonia?

Before we turn to the role of theoretical reason, it is worth listing some central claims about eudaimonia.

1. Eudaimonia is not a state, but an activity. You don't live the best life by being asleep or suffering such misfortune that you can do very little.
2. It is desirable for its own sake and it is self-sufficient.
3. It involves virtuous actions, as these are desirable for their own sake.

Aristotle has also just argued that eudaimonia involves pleasure. But we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that the best life is one of pleasant amusements, even if this is what people with power and wealth spend time doing. People find

different activities pleasant depending on their character. What is truly pleasant is what is pleasant to the good person, and this is a life of virtuous activity, not a life of mere amusement.

So, to theoretical reason. Theoretical reason - the contemplation of truth - is what is 'highest' about human beings, Aristotle argues. Animals have a form of practical wisdom, in that they consider and act on what is best for themselves. But they do not contemplate general truths. This ability is our share in 'divinity'. Eudaimonia, therefore, must include excellent activity of theoretical reason, which is philosophy.

- P1. This activity is best, because theoretical reason is the best thing in us and with it, we contemplate what is best (the greatest, most wonderful and most divine things in the universe), not merely what is best for us (as in practical wisdom).
- P2. We are able to undertake this activity more continuously than any other activity, so it leads to the most continuously happy life.
- P3. It is the most pleasant activity - at least, its pleasures are most pure and enduring, unlike pleasures of the body.
- P4. It is the most self-sufficient activity. Nothing further arises from it (it is knowledge for its own sake), while in other virtuous activities, we normally gain something (honour, gratitude, friendship, power, etc.) beyond doing the action. We need fewer external goods for this than for any other virtuous activity. (To be generous, you need money. To be courageous, you need power. To be temperate, you need opportunities)
- P5. We are active in order to have leisure. 'Leisure' is undertaking those activities we wish to undertake. The virtues of politics aim at creating space for leisure, just as we only undertake war in order to achieve peace. They serve the activity of reason.
- P6. Finally, theoretical reason is what we most are, it is our characteristic activity.
- C1. Therefore, the best and most pleasant life for us, given our nature, will be a life of reason. The life of the philosopher (or more generally, a life dedicated to knowledge) will be the best life.

Aristotle concludes that we should strive to live such a life of theoretical reasoning as far as possible, to live in accordance with the best thing in us. But we are human, and require more than this. Hence the life of virtue more broadly is also part of eudaimonia, as he has argued all along. Having passions, having a body, living with others - these are all characteristically human too. Furthermore, the life of virtue doesn't require a great deal of external goods, and so while these are necessary, they are not central.