

## Aristotle's function argument

### EUDAIMONIA AND FUNCTION

In Bk 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines eudaimonia (living well) as the good (see the handout 'Aristotle on Eudaimonia'). It is our 'final end', and we never seek it for any other purpose. But this doesn't tell us what eudaimonia is. Aristotle embarks on an analysis 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'.

### 'FUNCTION' AND 'VIRTUE'

The 'characteristic activity' provides an insight into what type of thing something 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 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* will be living in accordance with reason, and the virtues of a human being will be what enables this. Only the virtuous person can achieve *eudaimonia*. 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 (*orthos logos*). Finally, we must add that this must apply to a person's life as a whole. A day or even year of living well doesn't amount to a good life.

### TESTING THE ANALYSIS

The next question might be 'But what is it to live in accordance with right reason?' The rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* can be understood as an answer to this question. But before moving on to that issue, it is worth double-checking that this is a plausible account of *eudaimonia*. In §8, 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 *eudaimonia* is living well. The analysis agrees, and spells out what it is to live well.
3. Common sense suggests that the good life involves virtue, pleasure and prosperity. The account can explain the truth in each of these claims.
  - a. Virtue: to simply *possess* virtue is not enough; *eudaimonia* requires that one *acts* on it as well. The employment of good qualities and the achievement of good purposes are better than simply having the disposition to do so.
  - 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. Prosperity: 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.

Can we call someone *eudaimon* while they are still alive? 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 eudaimon while they live, if they have sufficient external goods.

### **THE RATIONAL 'SOUL'**

We now have the outline of an answer to the question 'what is the good for human beings?' It is a life of activity in accordance with reason, and this requires the virtues. So what are the virtues?

Because our ergon is the activity of the soul in accordance with reason, a virtue is a trait of a person's 'soul'. In §13, Aristotle provides an analysis of the soul. We can divide it into an arational part, and a rational part (at least in analysis, even if there aren't literal 'parts'). The arational part can be further divided in two - the part that is related to 'growth and nutrition' (Aristotle thought that all life has soul) and the part related to desire and emotion. The desiring part we share with other animals, but in us, it can be responsive to reason. For instance, in someone who is tempted, but controls themselves, what they want yields to what they think is good. Someone with the virtue of temperance is not even tempted by what they think is not good. What they want 'speaks with the same voice' as their reason.

We can talk about the rational 'part' of the soul having two parts as well. There is the desiring part which can respond to reasons and there is the part with which we reason, which has reason 'in itself'. Virtues are traits that enable us to live in accordance with reason. They are, therefore, of two kinds - virtues of the intellect (traits of the reasoning part) and virtues of character (traits of the part characterised by desire and emotion).