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Author(s): Thomas Nagel

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# *Aristotle on Eudaimonia*<sup>1</sup>

THOMAS NAGEL

The *Nicomachean Ethics* exhibits indecision between two accounts of *eudaimonia* – a comprehensive and an intellectualist account. According to the intellectualist account, stated in Book X Chap. 7, *eudaimonia* is realized in the activity of the most divine part of man, functioning in accordance with its proper excellence. This is the activity of theoretical contemplation. According to the comprehensive account (described as ‘secondary’ at 1178 a 9), *eudaimonia* essentially involves not just the activity of the theoretical intellect, but the full range of human life and action, in accordance with the broader excellences of moral virtue and practical wisdom. This view connects *eudaimonia* with the conception of human nature as composite, i.e. as involving the interaction of reason, emotion, perception, and action in an ensouled body.

The *Eudemian Ethics* exhibits a similar indecision, less elaborately expressed. Most of the work expounds a comprehensive account, but the following passage appears at its close:

“Therefore whatever mode of choosing and of acquiring things good by nature – whether goods of body or wealth or friends or the other goods – will best promote the contemplation of God, that is the best mode, and that standard is the finest; and any mode of choice and acquisition that either through deficiency or excess hinders us from serving and from contemplating God – that is a bad one. This is how it is for the soul, and this is the soul’s best standard – to be as far as possible unconscious of the irrational part of the soul, as such.” (1249 b 17-24)

Although this passage is admittedly somewhat isolated, it seems to support the conclusion that Aristotle was tempted by an intellectualist (or perhaps spiritualist) account of the ends of life in the *Eudemian Ethics*. In fact, considering the emphasis on the divine element in our nature at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1178 b 7-33), it does not

<sup>1</sup> These remarks derive from comments on a paper by John M. Cooper, “Intellectualism and Practical Reasoning in Aristotle’s Moral Philosophy”, presented at a meeting of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy, in New York, December 28, 1969. My research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation.

seem out of line to bring God into the matter at the end of the *Eudemian*. 'Intellectualist' may be rather too dry a term for the almost Augustinian sentiments which can be detected in both works.

Since the philosophical issue between these two positions arises in virtue of the ambivalence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* alone, I shall discuss it largely in that setting. I shall also comment on the relation of this issue to the psychology of the *De Anima*. There is a connection between intellectualist tendencies in the *Ethics* and Aristotle's view of the relation between *nous* and the rest of the soul. But the latter view appears to me to contain as much indecision as the former. It is because he is not sure who we are that Aristotle finds it difficult to say unequivocally in what our *eudaimonia* consists, and how the line is to be drawn between its constituents and its necessary conditions. Moreover I shall argue that intellectualism has strong defenses even without a two-substance theory of human beings.

Aristotle's program is compactly set out in *NE* I 7, beginning at 1097 b 22. If we are not to stop with the truism that the supreme human good is *eudaimonia*, we must inquire into the *ergon* of man, since if something has an *ergon*, that thing's good is a function of its *ergon*. The *ergon* of a thing, in general, is what it does that makes it what it is. Not everything has an *ergon*, for there are things to be which is not to do anything. But when something has an *ergon*, that thing's good is specified by it. The proper *ergon* of man, by which human excellence is measured, is that which makes him a man rather than anything else. Humans do a great many things, but since some are done equally well, or better, by plants, fish, and animals, they are not among the things to do which is to be human.

This lands us immediately in difficulty, for the inference seems unsound. If the feature of life unique to humans could exist in the absence of those features which humans share with the beasts, the result would be not a human being but something else. And why should we take the highest good of a rarefied individual like that as the ultimate end for complicated and messy individuals like ourselves? One would expect at the very least that the *interaction* between the function that differentiates us from animals, and the functions that we share with them, would play a role in the definition of *eudaimonia*. This would mean including the *practical* exercise of the rational faculty as well as the contemplative.

Suppose we pursue this line of criticism further, however, by asking whether we should not demand the inclusion of still more functions in

the definition of human *ergon* and hence of human good. What about health, for example, or fertility? It will be objected that these fail to meet an essential condition for inclusion: the condition of autonomy.<sup>2</sup> This condition states that the fundamental elements of human good cannot be due simply to luck. And health, for example, can be the result of sheer good fortune, rather than a man's own efforts.

But the basis of this objection must be examined. It stems, presumably, from the condition that good is tied to *ergon* or functioning, and what simply *befalls* a thing, whether that thing be a man or a plant, is not an instance of its functioning or malfunctioning. Therefore if I contract cholera, the intrusion of the hostile bacilli is a calamity, but not a malfunction of mine, hence not to be weighed in counting me *eudaimon* or not. Its *effect* on me, however, is certainly a malfunction. And why should this purely physical malfunction not be *in itself* a deviation from my human well-being (rather than just because of its deleterious effects on the life of reason)? If it is excluded on the ground that sweating, throwing up, and shuddering with fever are not things that *I do*, then the question has been begged. For the issue is precisely whether the account of what a person is and does should include or exclude the bodily functions that he shares with animals and even plants. If digesting, for instance, is something a clam does, why is it not something a human does as well – and something to do which is part of being human, even though it does not require *effort*?

In neither the *De Anima* nor the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the nutritive element excluded from the human soul, yet it is not one of the aspects of human functioning that Aristotle is willing to regard as a measure of *eudaimonia*. This position has considerable intuitive appeal. If we could see why nutrition is assigned such a low status, we might have a clue to the train of thought which tempts Aristotle to pare away everything except the intellect, till the only thing which intrinsically bears on *eudaimonia* is the quality of contemplative activity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cooper is responsible for pointing out the importance of this condition. His paper cites three textual statements of it: *EE* 1215 a 12-19, *NE* 1099 b 18-25, and most explicitly *Politics* 1323 b 24-29.

<sup>3</sup> This conclusion would require explanation even if a two substance reading of the *Ethics* were correct. That is, even if the psychology of the *Nicomachean Ethics* included a soul composed of both a form or primary actuality of the body and a pure intellect which was distinct from this, we would still have to ask why the proper function of the hylomorphic section was not counted in the assessment of *eudaimonia*. And I suspect that any account which made sense of the re-

Let me introduce a homely example. A combination corkscrew and bottle-opener has the function of removing corks and caps from bottles. This is a simple *ergon*, which allows us to evaluate the implement in terms of its capacity for successful performance. However, it does not seem simple enough to escape the question Aristotle has raised. It removes bottle-caps, to be sure. But since it has that function in common with any mere bottle-opener, *that* cannot be the special *ergon* (*to idion*) of our implement – the *ergon* by which its excellence is judged. So, by elimination, *to idion* must be removing corks. Unfortunately that is a capacity it shares with mere corkscrews, so that can't be part of its special *ergon* either. Obviously this argument is no good. The thing must have a simple conjunctive *ergon*, and its excellence is a function of both conjuncts.

Why won't such a reduction work for the case of the human soul and *eudaimonia*? We have dispensed with digestion and procreation on the ground that clams do it too. Sensation and desire are common to dogs. So we are left with reason. But the gods have reason without having these other capacities, so *that* isn't the peculiar *ergon* of man, either. Therefore we must abandon this method of arguing by elimination, and acknowledge that man has a conjunctive *ergon* which overlaps the *erga* of gods and dogs, as a combination corkscrew and bottle-opener combines the functions of corkscrews and bottle-openers. They just happen to find themselves in the same *ergon* box.

If this argument were correct, it would support not just a comprehensive position extending to non-intellectual areas of consciousness and activity, but the inclusion of all the lower life functions in the measure of human excellence. But in fact the conjunctive picture of the component capacities of the human soul is absurd, and if we can

striction in light of the two-substance theory, could be applied with equal success to justify corresponding restrictions on what counts toward *eudaimonia* on a purely hylomorphic theory of persons, where *nous*, instead of being another soul, was just the highest type of first-order actuality in the complex – distinguishable only in thought from the other parts of the soul, and not really *distinct* from them. That Aristotle shares this view is shown by a parenthetical remark in *NE* I 13, where he is considering which part of the soul possesses the excellence which is to be identified with *eudaimonia*.

"Whether these two parts are really distinct in the sense that the parts of the body or of any other divisible whole are distinct, or whether though distinguishable in thought as two they are inseparable in reality, like the convex and concave sides of a curve, is a question of no importance for the matter in hand." (1102 a 30-34).

say why it is absurd, we may be able to understand why Aristotle accords to reason the title of *ergon idion* of man, despite the fact that it, like digestion, might be shared by other beings as well.

The operative idea is evidently that of a hierarchy of capacities. The life capacities of a complex organism are not all on a level: some serve to support others. This is not so easy to account for clearly. Take for example the *prima facie* subservience of nutrition to perception and locomotion. That might be a ground for denying that nutrition was part of the special *ergon* of a higher animal. But perception and locomotion e.g. in a giraffe, largely serve the ends of nutrition and reproduction, so the case is unclear. What is the point of being a giraffe? A giraffe leads a certain type of active life, supported by complex metabolic, digestive, and circulatory processes, and ordered in such a way as to permit those processes to proceed efficiently. One thing is clear: its walking and seeing and digesting are not simply three separate activities going on side by side in the same individual, like a doll that wets, cries, and closes its eyes. A giraffe is one organism and its functions are coherently organized. Its proper excellence is not just the conjunction of the special excellences of its component functions, but the optimal functioning of the total system in the giraffe's *life*. And the highest-level account of this will be concerned not with blood pressure and peristalsis but with activity – some of which, admittedly, helps to control blood pressure and provide material for peristalsis.

The main difference between a human being and a giraffe is that a human being has reason, and that his entire complex of organic functions supports rational as well as irrational activity. There is of course feedback as well: in humans, not only perception and locomotion, but also reason, is employed in the service of nutrition and reproduction. Reason is also involved in the control of perception, locomotion, and desire. Nevertheless the highest-level account of a human life puts all the other functions into a supportive position in relation to rational activity. And although reason helps us to get enough to eat and move around, it is not subservient to those lower functions. Occasionally it may have to serve as the janitor or pimp of the passions, but that is not basically what it is *for*. On one plausible view reason, despite its continual service to the lower functions, is what human life is all about. The lower functions serve it, provide it with a setting, and are to some extent under its control, but the dominant characterization of a human being must refer to his reason.

This is why intellectualism tempts Aristotle, and why a conjunctive position, which lets various other aspects of life into the measure of good, is less plausible. Neither a conjunctive nor a disjunctive view about *eudaimonia* is adequate to these facts. The supreme good for man must be measured in terms of that around which all other human functions are organized.

But at this point it is essential to recall that much of the practical employment of reason is in the service of lower functions. Is this a proper exercise of that faculty, or does it have a point beyond the uses of cleverness, prudence, and courage, beyond the rational calculation of the most sensible way to spend one's time and money, or to organize society? This question prompts Aristotle to pass from the vague characterization that human life, as opposed to other life, is rational, to a consideration of the *objects* best suited for the exercise of this capacity. This is a peculiar question, which did not arise about giraffes. The nonrational activity of giraffes and its feedback on the metabolic functions seems at first sight a perfectly satisfactory model, and we might be tempted to apply it to humans. Why can't we reach a parallel account of proper human functioning by just adding reason to the top of the class of capacities that cooperate in an organized fashion to further the life of the individual? Why should there be any doubt that the use of reason to earn a living or procure food should belong to the central function of man?

The answer is as follows. Human possibilities reveal that reason has a use beyond the ordering of practical life. The circle of mutual support between reason, activity, and nutrition is not completely closed. In fact all of it, including the practical employment of reason, serves to support the individual for an activity that completely transcends these wordly concerns. The model of feedback does not work for the *ergon* of humans, because the best and purest employment of reason has nothing to do with daily life. Aristotle believes, in short, that human life is not important enough for humans to spend their lives on. A person should seek to transcend not only his individual practical concerns, but also those of society or humanity as a whole.

In *NE VI 7*, while arguing that *sophia* is the highest type of knowledge, and knowledge of the highest objects, he says (1141 a 21-3): "For it is absurd to think that Political Science or Prudence is the loftiest kind of knowledge, inasmuch as man is not the highest thing in the universe." Theoretical and practical matters must compete for the attention of the rational faculty; and the capacity which enables



humans to concentrate on subjects more elevated than themselves at the same time spoils them for lowlier concerns. The imperfection of applications of reason to practical matters is that these applications make human life the primary object of rational attention, whereas with reason man has become the only creature capable of concentrating on what is higher than himself and thereby sharing in it to some extent. His time is, so to speak, too valuable to waste on anything so insignificant as human life.

This does not mean that there is no distinction between excellence and depravity in the practical domain. It is certainly better to exercise reason well in providing for one's needs and in dealing with others – i.e. to have moral virtue – than to exercise it badly. But this is essentially a caretaker function of reason, in which it is occupied with matters – i.e. the sordid details of the life of a complex person – far below those which it might be considering if it had more time and were less called upon merely to *manage*.

It is this point of view, I believe, which dominates Chapters 7 and 8 of Book X, where the intellectualist account of *eudaimonia* receives its strongest endorsement. Even there the possibility of doubt is acknowledged. Aristotle appears uncertain whether the result is to be described as a strictly human good. Having argued the claims of the contemplative life on a variety of grounds, he breaks in at 1177 b 27 with the remark that such a life would be higher than human. It is achieved not in virtue simply of being a man, but in virtue of something divine of which men partake. Nevertheless this divine element, which gives us the capacity to think about things higher than ourselves, is the highest aspect of our souls, and we are not justified in foregoing its activities to concentrate on lowlier matters, viz. our own lives, unless the demands in the latter area threaten to make contemplation impossible. As he says at 1177 b 33, we should not listen to those who urge that a human should think human thoughts and a mortal mortal ones. Rather we should cultivate that portion of our nature that promises to transcend the rest. If anyone insists that the rest belongs to a complete account of human life, then the view might be put, somewhat paradoxically, by saying that comprehensive human good isn't everything, and should not be the main human goal. We must identify with the highest part of ourselves rather than with the whole. The other functions, including the practical employment of reason itself, provide support for the highest form of activity, but do not enter into our proper excellence as primary component factors. This is because



men are not simply the most complex species of animal, but possess as their essential nature a capacity to transcend themselves and become like gods. It is in virtue of this capacity that they are capable of *eudaimonia*, whereas animals are incapable of it, children have not achieved it, and certain adults, e.g. slaves, are prevented from reaching it.

Perhaps this is an unsatisfactory view of human nature and hence an unsatisfactory view of what it is for a human being to flourish. I believe it is a compelling position, however, and one that does not have to depend on a denial of the hylomorphic doctrine of the soul. It might be challenged in either of two ways. One might simply deny that the *ergon* of man is single, and allege that it is a collection of sub-*erga* without orderings of priority and support – like those of a many-bladed knife. This leaves us uncertain how to draw the line against good digestion as a component of *eudaimonia* (rather than just as a contribution to it.) A second method would be to preserve the assumption that the *ergon* of man is one, but to offer a different account of its organization, according to which the highest-level specification of human capacities was not just intellectual but involved both theoretical and practical concerns. While this seems to me the most promising line of attack, I shall not pursue it here.

*Princeton University*