

Aristotle on Characteristic Activity, Function, and Virtue

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Certain kinds of thing have *characteristic activities*, which Aristotle identifies as their *functions*. Features of a thing that help it perform its function well are its *virtues*.

1 Artifacts

The case of artifacts brings out the relationship between our three topics in a nice, clear cut way.

Take a steak knife:

- The characteristic activity of a knife is to cut meat.
- The purpose, or function, of a steak knife is to perform this activity.
- The virtues of a steak knife are to be serrated, to be sharp, for the handle to be well-attached, etc.

Check your understanding:

- Can you think of another artifact and make a similar list?

2 Living Things

It may sound odd to say that living things have functions. It sounds less strange, if you ask me, to say that they have characteristic activities. Consider the following text¹:

When springtime comes, and the snow begins to melt, the female bobcat gives birth to two to four cubs. The mother nurses them for several weeks. ...As the heat of summer approaches, the cubs will learn to hunt.

¹Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*, pp. 63-4

The narrator of this text is describing a moment in a *kind of life* that an organism may live. Namely, those organisms that are *bobcats* will live this kind of life. To live this kind of life is the characteristic activity of a bobcat.

Aristotle's claim that living things have a function is made more palatable by his identification of function with characteristic activity. The function of a bobcat is to live the bobcat kind of life, the flavor of which we give in the above quote.

Check your understanding:

- What would you say some of the virtues of a bobcat are?
- Think of a pet you've had or your favorite species of animal. What kind of life do animals like that live (that is, what is their characteristic activity)? What are some of their virtues?