

3. Aristotle's account of the good

Martín Abreu Zavaleta

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We have considered some answers to the question what is the good, and Aristotle's objections to those answers. We have also seen that, according to Aristotle, *happiness* is the ultimate human good, but we are still missing a theory of the good. This theory should, at least in part, explain what happiness is, and why happiness turns out to be the human good. Now it's time to examine Aristotle's views on the matter.

1 The function argument

Aristotle believes that the good for humans is that which best fulfills the function of humans. He seems to think that the function of a kind of thing is some goal-directed activity such that it is essential to that thing to *aim* at performing that activity, insofar as it belongs to that kind. For instance, insofar as someone is a painter, it seems essential to her to aim to paint, and so, Aristotle would say that the function of a painter is to paint. Inanimate objects may have functions too. Consider a piston: one could think that insofar as something is a piston, it is essential to it to aim to transfer force, and so, that the function of a piston is to transfer force.

This definition can use some clarification. We'll say that an object has a certain property *essentially* (or, alternatively, that that property is essential to an object) if the object couldn't have existed without having it. Philosophers disagree as to which properties are essential to which objects, but here are some standard examples. According to Saul Kripke (a prominent philosopher), it is essential to a person to have the parents that she actually has. Consider Anna, whose parents are Tom and Mary. If Tom and Mary hadn't had a child, then Anna would have existed. Perhaps there could have been people with lives very similar to the life that Anna actually had. Perhaps they would have even looked exactly like Anna, but as long as their parents weren't Tom and Mary, all those people wouldn't have been Anna.

Our definition of essential properties doesn't entail that if a property is essential to Anna, then it is *enough* for something to be Anna that it has that property. In other words, having the essential property is just a *necessary* condition for being Anna, but it is not *sufficient*. Similarly, even if it's true that it is essential to a painter (insofar as she is a painter) to aim to paint, that doesn't entail that painting is sufficient to be a painter (perhaps one also needs to have proper technique, know about art history, etc.).

Unfortunately, our clarification can't go much further than that. We still don't have a clear idea of what it is to *aim* to perform a certain activity, but hopefully we have a clear enough conception of that for our present purposes. As we said above, Aristotle thinks that the human good is that which best fulfills the human function.

He presents a brief argument for this claim in §10:

Perhaps then, we shall find this [a clearer statement of what the good is] if we first grasp the function of a human being. For just as the good, i.e., [doing] well, for a flautist, a sculptor, every craftsman, and, in general, for whatever has a function and a [characteristic] function, seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has a function. (1097b25)

Aristotle is saying that the function of a thing determines what its good is. If something has a particular function, the good of that thing is to fulfill that function well. For instance, a good flautist is one who plays the flute well, and a good piston is one that transfers force well. Moreover, the good of a flautist *insofar as she is a flautist* is to be a good flautist, and similarly for other kinds of things. So if human beings have a function, the human good must be to fulfill that function well.

Next, Aristotle offers a brief inductive argument to the effect that human beings in fact have a function: “Or, just as eye, hand, foot, and, in general, every [bodily] part apparently has its function, may we likewise ascribe to a human being some function apart from all of these?” (1097b30).¹ This, together with the previous claim, yields the conclusion that the human good is determined by the human function.

We can reconstruct Aristotle’s argument as follows:

- (1) For each kind of thing that has a function, the good of that thing (insofar as it belongs to that kind) is to fulfill its function well. [assumption]
- (2) Thus, if human beings have functions, then the good of human beings is to fulfill that function well. [this follows directly from (1), by universal instantiation]
- (3) The bodily parts that constitute a human have functions. [assumption]
- (4) So humans too have functions. [by induction from (3)]
- (5) So the good of human beings is to fulfill their function well. [from (2) and (4), by modus ponens]

The step from (3) to (4) may seem a bit mysterious. If Aristotle offers any argument at all, it must be a sort of inductive argument. If things 1, 2, 3, ... *n* have property P, then so must thing *m*, since it is similar in the relevant respects to things 1, 2, 3, ... *n*. **Questions:** Do you think the step from (3) to (4) is in good standing? How is a human being similar to a painter, a harpist, or a bodily part, in the ways that are relevant to the argument? Moreover, why should we think that if human beings have a function, they must have *exactly* one function? Couldn’t human beings have many functions insofar as they are human beings? If so, how should we define the good for a human?

By a process of elimination, Aristotle concludes that the human function is “the activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason” (1098a7). Ultimately, Aristotle wants to defend the following view:

Aristotle’s view of the good: The highest human good is the activity of the soul (i.e. the mind) in accordance with *virtue* over the course of a person’s life.²

¹Terence Irwin doesn’t think that Aristotle is trying to make an argument here. The reason is that the putative argument would be too weak. However, if he is not making an argument, what justifies him in thinking that there is a human function? That claim is too central to his view for Aristotle just to take it for granted.

²Aristotle probably had a very particular conception of the soul as an immaterial thing. For our purposes, however, we will understand the soul as simply the mind, and will avoid taking a position on whether it is material or immaterial.

Let's see how he arrived at that conclusion.

Aristotle seems to think that, for every kind, an *excellent* member of that kind is one who performs the function of that kind in an excellent way. From this and the thesis that the function of humans is the activity of the mind or the soul in accordance with reason, he concludes that the function of humans is to excel at the actions of the mind in accordance with reason. Being someone who so excels is the highest good that someone can aspire to, insofar as she is a person.

What does that have to do with virtue? Aristotle thinks that each function is performed well (excellently) by being performed in accordance with the virtue proper to that kind of function. So if the human good is to excel at the actions of the mind in accordance with reason, that good is to be achieved in accordance with a certain virtue. Finally, Aristotle thinks that such virtue must be the best and the most complete that people can aspire to have, in the sense that it must be a virtue that includes all other virtues that people can have and are relevant to the fulfillment of the human function, e.g. a virtue that includes bravery, generosity, temperance, etc.

This gives us a clearer idea of Aristotle's view, but there are still many questions he hasn't answered: what is virtue, and what is a life in accordance with virtue? Why should we think that a happy life is a life in accordance with virtue? How can we achieve the highest good, namely, a life in accordance with virtue? We'll now consider some of his answers to these questions.

2 Aristotle's defense of his account of the good

Before, Aristotle had agreed with the common opinion that the human good was happiness. Now he argues that this hypothesis matches the account of the good that he just offered. He does this by arguing that happiness understood as activity in accordance with virtue fits well with certain opinions held by his contemporaries:

- Aristotle's view agrees to some extent with the view that happiness is either virtue in general or some particular virtue, since according to Aristotle happiness requires the exercise of virtue. However, no virtue by itself (nor virtue in general) is identical to happiness: happiness requires *acting* with accordance with virtue, and not merely possessing the virtue. Someone who was virtuous but never acted would not be happy, according to Aristotle.³
- Some people think that happiness must involve pleasure, in that someone who is happy must experience pleasure. Aristotle thinks that his view can also account for this opinion: he thinks that actions in accordance with virtue are *pleasant by nature* or pleasant in themselves. So someone who acts in accordance with virtue will be pleased by her own actions. **Question:** Do you think that actions in accordance with virtue are pleasant in themselves? Compare them with actions that are pleasant to some but not all people, e.g. playing golf. Can you think of an example of another thing that is pleasant in itself?
- Happiness also needs external goods. Aristotle held that a person lacking in beauty or who wasn't born in a rich family could not be happy. Accordingly, he thought that such a person

³How could someone be virtuous without acting virtuously? One possibility is that the person in question is such that, if she had the opportunity to act, she would act virtuously, but is never actually presented with the opportunity to act. For instance, there may be someone without use of her limbs, who would act virtuously if she could act. Unfortunately, because she can't act, according to Aristotle she could not be happy (unless we count merely thinking as a kind of action that can be virtuous).

could not regularly act in accordance with virtue. This particular view seems false, but there seems to be some truth to the claim that happiness requires some external goods. Can you think of examples of those external things?

3 Happiness and Virtue

We are now at a very important point. We have discussed many theoretical considerations in favor of Aristotle's views, and we have examined the question what is the good from a *metaphysical* perspective. However, Aristotle himself pointed out that our current study is not so much concerned with knowledge of facts as it is concerned with actions. This is what concerns us now. Before, and mostly as a preliminary, he was asking what the highest good is; now he is asking how we should live, how to be virtuous, how to be happy.

Aristotle thinks that most of us can be happy, and in fact that happiness can be "cultivated" or acquired by means of some sort of learning process. Not everyone can be happy because not everyone will be in the conditions that would allow her to cultivate virtue and perform virtuous actions.

As we already saw, Aristotle may be thinking of people who are not wealthy or beautiful, but we can formulate a more reasonable version of his point. Think of a person who only sees violent and non-virtuous actions since childhood. Perhaps his parents beat him, his teachers in school are not very interested in their jobs, and the rest of the children in his school are in similar circumstances. If most of the actions this person sees early on are violent and non-virtuous actions, it's very unlikely that this person will come to learn to be virtuous. Based on which examples could he learn to be virtuous, and how could he be able to distinguish virtuous from non-virtuous actions in the first place? Aristotle seems to have a point that it must be very difficult from someone in these circumstances to come to be virtuous (though, of course, this doesn't mean it's impossible).

Question: Since Aristotle thinks that to be happy is to live a life of virtuous actions, he must think that this person can't be happy. Do you agree with this judgment, or do you think that this shows a flaw in Aristotle's view? Why?

Aristotle also thinks that it's not enough to act virtuously once or twice. Happiness is not instantaneous (i.e. it doesn't last just for a little bit). For him, it only really makes sense to ask whether you had a happy life:

[T]he happy person has the [stability] we are looking for and keeps the character he has throughout his life. For always, or more than anything else, he will do and study the actions in accord with virtue, and will bear fortunes most finely, in every way and in all conditions appropriately, since he is truly 'good, foursquare, and blameless'. (1100b18)

And since it is activities that control like, as we said, no blessed [i.e. happy] person could ever become miserable, since he will never do hateful or base actions. For a truly good and prudent person, we suppose, will bear strokes of fortune suitably, and from his resources at any time will do the finest actions, just as a good general will make the best use of his forces in war, and a good shoemaker will make the finest shoe from the hides given to him, and similarly for all other craftsmen. (1101a34)