Eudaimonia Notes

Apparently Intellectualist Account at X.7

Aristotle appears to argue, at X.7, that eudaimonia consists in the activity of contemplation in accord with its proper virtue, theoretical wisdom. Aristotle writes that complete eudaimonia is the activity of contemplation in accord with theoretical wisdom in a complete life, and that the life of activity in accord with the other human virtues is eudaimon only in a secondary way (deuteros). This suggests that eudaimonia, in the truest sense, consists in contemplation. Aristotle appears to offer two arguments for this. First, Aristotle argues from the divinity of contemplation. The life of the gods is a life exclusively of contemplation, and this life seems to be completely eudaimon, so it seems that complete eudaimonia consists entirely in contemplation. Second, Aristotle argues from the marks of eudaimonia. If we understand the concept of eudaimonia and its situation in a network of related concepts, we understand that eudaimonia is complete and self-sufficient. We also understand intuitively that eudaimonia is largely up to us in the sense that it depends minimally on a supply of external goods, and is pleasant. Contemplation appears to be complete, self-sufficient, up to us, and pleasant. So it seems contemplation is the best candidate for eudaimonia.

This intellectualist interpretation appears to commit Aristotle to the implausible view that we eudaimonically should commit moral atrocities to promote contemplation. If eudaimonia consists entirely in contemplation and not at all in such otherwise virtuous activity as courageous action, just action, or temperate action, then our acting so virtuously itself contributes nothing to our achieving eudaimonia, and our acting viciously itself does not at all undermine our achieving eudaimonia. For example, consider Pakaluk's Murderous Philosopher, who murders his wealthy aunt such that he can continue funding his research with the inheritance he collects. An intellectualist conception of eudaimonia is committed to judging that the Murderous Philosopher's life is (instrumentally) made more eudaimon by his murdering his aunt. But we intuitively think, not only that the Murderous Philosopher does moral wrong, but that to do so wrong is "to be burdened with evil that puts eudaimonia out of reach". In other words, we think the Murderous Philosopher does not live and do well.

This interpretation is unsatisfying also because it fails to make adequate sense of Aristotle's use of the terms "teleia eudaimonia" and "eudaimonia deuteros". Literally, the terms mean "end-like eudaimonia" and "eudaimonia in a secondary way". Aristotle writes in I that there is consensus in using the term "eudaimonia" to describe the highest good, or the ultimate end. Then, that eudaimonia is end-like is entirely trivial, and eudaimonia could not be otherwise, so the qualification is entirely meaningless. An alternative translation of "teleia eudaimonia" is as "complete eudaimonia". Aristotle writes in I that something is complete iff it is always sought for its own sake and not for the sake of some further end. But Aristotle also thinks that if we understand the concept of eudaimonia and its situation in a network of related concepts, we will understand that eudaimonia is complete in this sense. In other words, that eudaimonia is complete is an entirely formal claim. Then, again, that eudaimonia is complete is quite trivial, and eudaimonia could not be otherwise, so the qualification seems meaningless. If Aristotle meant that contemplation is eudaimonia in the truest sense, it would have been better to describe contemplation as unqualified eudaimonia, and Aristotle in fact uses "unqualified" in this way in other parts of the Nicomachean Ethics. Further, if Aristotle meant this, then the description of "eudaimonia deuteros" seems unmotivated. In other words, Aristotle has nowhere else indicated that there is a second sort of eudaimonia, so the description of "eudaimonia deuteros" is at best a consolation for the aristocrats that comprised Aristotle's audience. So it seems unlikely that Aristotle meant by "teleia eudaimonia", "eudaimonia in the truest sense".

More plausibly, Aristotle intends only to establish that contemplation has a privileged place among the activities that constitute eudaimonia. Aristotle argues that contemplation is a divine activity, and that it bears the "marks of eudaimonia", but it does not necessarily follow that eudaimonia consists entirely in contemplation. Such an inclusive conception of eudaimonia is consistent with Aristotle's discussion of eudaimonia in I and of the virtues in II-VI. In I, Aristotle concludes from the function argument that eudaimonia is activity of the rational part of the soul in accord with the virtues proper to it in a full life. The rational part of the soul includes the subpart which is responsive to reason, and the subpart which itself reasons. The former is governed by the virtues of character and the latter are governed by the virtues of intellect. In II-VI, Aristotle discusses the virtues of character and the virtues of intellect in detail. If Aristotle thought that eudaimonia consisted entirely in contemplation, then the conclusion in I is mistaken, or at least requires qualification, and the discussion in II-VI seems irrelevant. If contemplation only has some sort of privileged place among the activities that constitute eudaimonia, then the eudaimonic value of contemplation could be commensurable to that of other virtuous activity, so Aristotle is not committed to the view that we eudaimonically should commit moral atrocities to promote contemplation. Then, Aristotle's distinction between "teleia eudaimonia" and "eudaimonia deuteros" is a decomposition of eudaimonia meant to justify the greater eudaimonic value of contemplation over the other activities. Eudaimonia itself is the conjunction of the two, which are distinguished only for the purpose of argument.
(Correction: the marks of eudaimonia are the following six: completeness, self-sufficiency, leisurely (in the sense that it is not

made necessary unlike, for example, brave action), up to us (in the sense that it requires only a minimal supply of external goods), pleasant, and continuous.)

This interpretation is unsatisfying because it fails to take seriously Aristotle's injunction that we "go to all lengths" to immortalise ourselves. Aristotle seems to afford contemplation lexical priority over the other activities that constitute eudaimonia, not merely afford it some sort of privileged place among them. Then Aristotle's eudaimonia is still objectionably insensitive to morality. Further, there seems to be little meaningful difference between a composite eudaimonia consisting in contemplation and the other virtuous activities (if contemplation is afforded lexical priority) and "teleia eudaimonia" consisting entirely in contemplation. These two conceptions of eudaimonia would always agree in considering one life more eudaimon than another solely in virtue of the former's containing greater contemplation. So it is not clear why Aristotle should maintain a conception of eudaimonia that seems composite only in a very weak sense.

I argue with Lawrence that Aristotle in X.7 specifies a circumstantially-unconstrained eudaimonia and in I and II-VI discusses a circumstantially-constrained eudaimonia. In other words, Aristotle in X.7 specifies the eudaimonically best life under the eudaimonically best circumstances and in the earlier books discusses the eudaimonically best life for a person given the circumstances of his life. Then, Aristotle's view is that the eudaimonically best life for a person given some circumstances is a life of activity (of the rational part of the soul, including both subparts) in accord with virtue (of character and of intellect) in a full life, but the eudaimonically best life given the eudaimonically best circumstances consists entirely in contemplation since under such circumstances, one would not be called upon to exercise the other virtues. The latter is the life of the gods, who are not called upon to do just acts, or courageous acts, or temperate acts, for example, since the gods have no need to make contracts or return deposits, have nothing to fear, and have no base appetites to overcome. This interpretation is consistent with Aristotle's political program and purpose in the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle argues in X.9 that politicians as legislators should make laws that habituate persons to acting in accord with virtue such that they may achieve eudaimonia in their lives. Presumably, the politician should also endeavour to bring about circumstances in society such that citizens' lives go eudaimonically best. So knowledge of both circumstantially-constrained eudaimonia and circumstantially-unconstrained eudaimonia are important to the politician. On this interpretation, Aristotle's injunction that we should "as far as we can" immortalise ourselves means that, as far as is humanly possible, given that humans are imperfect and social beings and hence are called upon to exercise the human virtues, we eudaimonically should engage in contemplation. So Aristotle's eudaimonia is not objectionably insensitive to morality. Aristotle would say that the Murderous Philosopher humanly cannot (but physically can) murder his aunt to fund his research. To do so would undermine his circumstantially-constrained eudaimonia and leave both sorts of eudaimonia further out of reach for him. Aristotle's use of "teleia eudaimonia" and "eudaimonia deuteros" then, while perhaps still less clear than would be hoped, describes a meaningful distinction.

On this interpretation, Aristotle's account is unsatisfactory because it fails to clarify the nature of human possibility and/or divine contemplation such that their role in the eudaimon life for humans is sufficiently clear. Aristotle's injunction that we engage in contemplation as far as humanly possible is not sufficiently clear because the "humanly possible" remains obscure. It is natural to think that, given Aristotle's discussion in the earlier books, that our acting is "humanly possible" if it is in accord with the virtues. So the human virtues serve to constrain our action, and within these constraints we should maximise contemplation. But it is not clear that "maximise contemplation" does any meaningful work here. If the requirements of human virtue leave only one life path that is entirely in accord with human virtue, then that contemplation is maximised in such a life is trivial. Another worry is that Aristotle's injunction, so understood, would require that an agent forgo a large quantity of contemplation if and just because doing so just barely falls foul of the human virtues. This seems inconsistent with Aristotle's extremely favourable discussion of contemplation. One response is to argue that eudaimonia is not so codifiable, so the demand for some rule to determine the eudaimonically best composition of our lives is unfair, and the details of this composition will be determined by practical deliberation in accord with practical wisdom. But Aristotle has not made the nature of divine contemplation sufficiently clear that we can so deliberate. "Should I save the person bleeding to death in front of me or be god for the afternoon?" (Lawrence, 1993, p.18) It is not clear at all how we could even begin to answer this question. So Aristotle has not made adequately clear how eudaimonically best to live.

But Aristotle's account is not unsatisfactory by Aristotle's own lights. The aim of the Nicomachean Ethics is practical not theoretical, and Aristotle has made eudaimonia sufficiently clear for practical purposes. Aristotle addresses the Nicomachean ethics to the aristocracy. It seems that Aristotle intends the work to guide their action in two ways. First, Aristotle argues in X.9 that politicians as legislators should make laws that habituate persons to acting in accord with virtue such that they may achieve eudaimonia in their lives. Second, presumably, Aristotle thinks that politicians should strive to bring about the eudaimonically best sort of circumstances. Then, Aristotle's aim is not to argue that the aristocrats he addresses should structure or compose their lives in some way or another. And it certainly is not to argue that these aristocrats should abandon the life of politics for the life of philosophy. So Aristotle's project is accomplished by first offering and defending an account of circumstantially-constrained eudaimonia and the virtues to guide legislation which aims at habituating citizens to virtuous

action, and second by offering and defending an account of circumstantially-unconstrained eudaimonia as a specification of the sort of circumstances politicians should strive to bring about.

Argument from Divinity

Aristotle argues that contemplation is complete eudaimonia because the life of the gods consists exclusively in contemplation and their life seems most eudaimon.

The argument from divinity seems inadequate because we could doubt whether the eudaimon life for humans is the same as that for the gods. Ultimately, we should reject the argument from divinity because it is objectionably contingent on Aristotle's theology.

Aristotle also writes that contemplation is the divine element in humans so it is the superior element in humans, and that contemplation is in some sense most truly human. This hints at the idea of a hierarchy of capacities which appears to be the operative idea in the function argument at I.7.

Argument from the Marks of Eudaimonia

Aristotle argues that contemplation is complete eudaimonia because contemplation bears the "marks of eudaimonia". In the first half of I.7, Aristotle makes "formal" claims about eudaimonia, that Aristotle apparently thinks are uncontroversial, and flow from our understanding the concept of eudaimonia and its situation within a network of related concepts. Eudaimonia is complete in the sense that it is sought for its own sake, and most complete in the sense that it is never sought for the sake of any further good, but other goods that are sought for their own sake are also sought for the sake of eudaimonia. In other words, we think that the highest good is good in itself and not as an instrument to or a component of some further good. Eudaimonia is self-sufficient in the sense that a eudaimon life lacks nothing, i.e. it is not made better by furnishing it with some further thing. In other words, we think that the highest good is sufficient to make a life as good as possible. We also think intuitively that the eudaimon life is pleasant and that eudaimonia is up to us in the sense that our achieving eudaimonia is only minimally dependent on our supply of external goods. Aristotle argues that contemplation, more than any other activity, bears these "marks of eudaimonia". Contemplation is more complete than the other activities in the sense that other activities such as political activity bring about good consequences but contemplation does not. Contemplation is more "up to us" in the sense that other activities such as just action require a supply of external goods, such as resources to dispense with and persons as recipients. So it seems that contemplation is the strongest candidate to be eudaimonia.

The argument from the marks of eudaimonia appears to involve a mistake. Aristotle writes that contemplation alone seems to be sought for its own sake, since unlike other activities, contemplation has no consequences. If this means that other virtuous activities are valued instrumentally, i.e. sought for the sake of some further end, this contradicts Aristotle's claim in II.4 that virtuous activity is sought for its own sake. In II.4, Aristotle argues that an action is virtuous only if the agent knows that this action is virtuous, chooses the action for its own sake, and the action flows from the agent's stable character. This is intuitively plausible, we think that a person could "accidentally" do "virtuous" actions, for example, if a person aimed to hurt another by speaking hurtfully but by some quirk of the other's psychology such speech was received as kind encouragement. We also think "virtuous" actions are not so if done for the wrong reasons, for example, if a person does a courageous action but only with the intention to win the admiration of others. So it seems plausible that an action is virtuous if it is chosen for its own sake, not for the sake of some further good that it is instrumental to. Aristotle's claim that contemplation alone seems to be sought for its own sake seems both in tension with earlier statements and intuitively implausible.

So the phrase "for its own sake" must be understood differently in each of the two contexts. In the context of II.4, Aristotle means that virtuous activity is intrinsically valued. In the context of X.7, Aristotle means that virtuous activity is so virtuous because of its consequences. In other words, virtuous action is sought for its own sake, but it is because an action (other than contemplation) has certain sorts of consequences that it is virtuous. For example, we act justly when we choose to do something just for the sake of doing something just, rather than for the sake of, for example, winning admiration, but something is just in virtue of it having the consequence that each relevant person receives what he deserves.

The argument from the marks of eudaimonia seems implausible because contemplation seems far from self-sufficient. A human life consisting exclusively in contemplation seems to be an extremely austere and impoverished one. We think a human life would go better if it contained also friendship, humour, and other virtuous activity, even if this meant forgoing some contemplation. It seems then that contemplation does not fit the conceptual mold of eudaimonia. If a life of contemplation is made better by other virtuous activity, then the conjunction of contemplation and such virtuous activity seems better than contemplation alone. So contemplation alone is not the highest good.

Aristotle would reject that contemplation is not self-sufficient since the gods have a life consisting exclusively in contemplation, and we think their lives complete. The life of the gods would not be made better by other virtuous activity because the gods

have no need for such things as courageous activity, just activity, or temperate activity. The gods have no such need because they have nothing to fear, no counterparts to deal justly with and no need to make promises or contracts, and no base appetites to resist. This suggests that contemplation is sufficient for the gods but not for humans, since humans as social and imperfect beings need these further activities. In other words, if not for these human limitations, contemplation would be self-sufficient. Then, Aristotle in X.7 appears to be offering an account of a sort of unconstrained eudaimonia, i.e. an account of living and doing well if unconstrained by human limitations. This is consistent with Aristotle's political program and purpose in the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle argues in X.9 that politicians as legislators should make laws that habituate persons to acting in accord with virtue such that they may achieve eudaimonia in their lives. Presumably, the politician should also endeavour to bring about circumstances in society such that citizens' lives go eudaimonically best. So knowledge of both circumstantially-constrained eudaimonia and circumstantially-unconstrained eudaimonia are important to the politician.

Apparently Inclusive Account at I.7

Aristotle in I.7 appears to conclude from the function argument that (unqualified) eudaimonia consists in (all) activity of the rational part of the soul in accord with virtue (of character and of intellect) in a full life. Aristotle's argument for this is apparently disjunctive. The good for something seems to depend on its essential function. A thing's essential function is the purpose it serves that makes it the sort of thing it is. For example, a carpenter's essential function is practicing carpentry since it is in virtue of a carpenter's practicing carpentry that a carpenter is a carpenter. Intuitively, it seems that the good for the carpenter qua carpenter consists in his practicing carpentry well. It seems that there is an essential human function too, and this human function is the thing humans do in virtue of which we are humans. Since humans share the function of nutrition and growth with plants, this cannot be the essential function of humans. If this were the essential function of humans, then humans are humans simply because humans engage in nutrition and growth, but then plants would be humans too. Since this is absurd, nutrition and growth cannot be the essential human function. Since humans also share the function of sense perception and locomotion with animals, this cannot be the essential human function too. Aristotle understands the human soul as having three parts, a nutritive part, a locomotive part, and a rational part, and thinks that the essence of a thing is closely related to its soul. So if the essential human function is neither nutritive nor locomotive, it must be rational. Then, eudaimonia, the good for humans, consists in reasoning well, i.e. activity of the rational part of the soul in accord with virtue. Aristotle writes that the rational part of the soul consists of two subparts, one that is responsive to reason and another that itself reasons. The former is governed by the virtues of character while the latter is governed by the virtues of intellect. So eudaimonia consists in activity of both subparts in accord with both sorts of virtue. This interpretation makes sense of Aristotle's subsequent discussion of the virtues of character and the virtues of intellect in II-VI.

But the disjunctive argument is simply unsound. The conclusion of the function argument, interpreted as a disjunctive argument, is simply false. Man's essential function simply is not reasoning. Suppose that some being, like man, reasons, but does nothing else. This being would not be human but some "rarefied individual". So we are not humans in virtue of our reasoning alone. Further, humans share the activity of contemplation with the gods, so it seems that the disjunctive argument is committed to excluding contemplation from the essential human function. But Aristotle would be reluctant to do this since he thinks, at minimum, that contemplation is an important component of eudaimonia, it is "complete eudaimonia" whereas the other activities are merely eudaimonia in a secondary way. Where the disjunctive argument seems to go wrong is in the false implicit premise that, because the human soul has a nutritive part, locomotive part, and rational part, the essential human function is either nutrition and growth, or sense perception and locomotion, or rationality. Consider, for illustration, Nagel's combination corkscrew and bottle opener. By an analogous argument, since the combination tool shares the function of removing corks with ordinary corkscrews, this is not its essential function, and since it shares the function of opening bottles with ordinary bottle openers, this is not its essential function. If we then accept the implicit premise that its function is either the former or the latter, we are led to a contradiction. This premise is unacceptable because it rules out the correct description of this combination tool as having a conjunctive purpose: to remove corks and open bottles. It seems the disjunctive function argument is led astray in the same way.

If the function argument simply dispenses with the false implicit premise that the human function is either nutrition and growth, or sense perception and locomotion, or reason, it seems to yield a conjunctive eudaimonia. The human function is not simply nutrition and growth, nor is it simply sense perception and locomotion, nor is it simply contemplation, so it seems to be the conjunction of these. This claim has some intuitive appeal. We think that humans are complex creatures that share parts of our nature with animals and parts with the divine, so it seems natural to think that the essential human function will be as complex as we are, and will involve these different natures.

But a conjunctive eudaimonia is implausible because it implies that human reasoning and human digestion stand "shoulder to shoulder" as parts of man's function and the good for man. In other words, human digestion is just as important to our being human as human reasoning. Were we unable to digest food, we would be just as much non-human as we would be if we were unable to reason. This is absurd because we think that there are some things we do that are more important to our being

human than other things we do. While the conjunctive argument correctly recognises that humans are complex creatures with a multitude of functions, it fails to capture this complexity because it takes the human function to be the mere conjunction of the things that humans do rather than a coherently structured complex whole, which better reflects the complexity and nature of human beings.

Then, the function argument should be interpreted as premised on the idea of a hierarchy of capacities. Humans are complex beings and not simply some conjunction of different natures, so the different activities of a human are not simply separate activities going on in parallel in one being, but are coherently structured with relationships to one another. In humans, all activities appear to form a circle of mutual support. For example, sense perception and locomotion support our nutrition and growth by enabling us to get food, and nutrition and growth support our sense perception and locomotion by supporting our good health. Practical reason also supports such activities. But the circle of mutual support is not entirely closed, and all other activities appear to support contemplation directly or indirectly but contemplation does not appear to support any other activity. So contemplation, in a sense, sits atop the hierarchy of human activities, it seems to be what human life is ultimately about.

This interpretation makes sense of both the further stipulation in I.7 that if there are multiple virtues, eudaimonia consists in activity in accord with "the best and most complete" of these, and the odd claim in X.7 that contemplation is most truly human. On this interpretation, the stipulation at the end of I.7 is intended to restrict eudaimonia to the single activity of contemplation in accord with the single virtue of theoretical wisdom. Aristotle's claim that contemplation is most truly human in X.7 also makes sense as a claim about the activity that human life is structured around, and what human life is ultimately about.

Apparent Restriction at I.7

Aristotle in I.7 appears to pre-empt or allude to an intellectualist account of eudaimonia in stipulating that if there are multiple virtues, eudaimonia consists in activity in accord with "the best and most complete" of these.

One difficulty with this interpretation is that such a restriction does not seem to follow from the function argument.

Aristotle's stipulation could be interpreted differently to escape this difficulty. On the alternative interpretation, "the best and most complete" virtue refers to complete virtue, not theoretical wisdom. This interpretation draws on material earlier in I. In Aristotle’s discussion of subordinate and ruling ends in I.1, Aristotle tells us that “the ends of the ruling sciences are more choiceworthy than all the ends subordinate to them, since the lower ends are also pursued for the sake of the higher”, and “it makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions or something else apart”. But “it is after all not obvious what is meant by saying that one action or activity is for the sake of another, in cases where the first does not terminate in a product or outcome which the second can then use or exploit.” (Ackrill, 1980, p. 18) “What immediately suggests itself instead is a relation like that of part to whole, the relation an activity or end may have to an activity or end that includes or embraces it.” (Ackrill, 1980, p. 19) “One does not putt in order to play golf as one buys a club in order to play golf […] It will [nonetheless] be “because” you wanted to play golf that you are putting […] but this is because putting [is a] constituent of […] golfing […] not because [it is a] necessary preliminar[y].” (Ackrill, 1980, p. 19) Aristotle also tells us in I.7 that A is more complete than B if, though A and B are sought both sought for their own sake, B is also sought for the sake of A. (1097a31-33) Hence, for example, eudaimonia is more complete than brave action since, even though both eudaimonia and brave action are sought for their own sake, brave action is also sought for the sake of eudaimonia, but the reverse is not the case. When Aristotle, on this reading, describes total virtue as “most complete”, because all other individual virtues are constituents of total virtue, hence for the sake of total virtue, but total virtue is not a constituent of (or otherwise “for the sake of”) any individual virtue, and virtue (total or otherwise) is sought for its own sake, so total virtue is “more complete” than any other individual virtue. This interpretation is confirmed later, at I.9 and I.13, where the term "teleia arete" (complete virtue) is used, clearly in reference to total virtue, and not sophia or any single virtue. (1100a5, 1102a6) The “best and most complete virtue” clause at I.7 need not pose any difficulty for an “inclusive” account of eudaimonia.