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Question 8

In this paper, I will examine Aristotle’s general outline of the human good, given in Book I, Chapter 7 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he characterizes virtue as a function of human beings. I will begin by recounting his argument before speaking on its merits, mainly considering whether it is trivial or not. I will then examine in detail his premise that humans alone are rational creatures and offer a possible objection on the grounds of evolutionary theory. Continuing with the rationality premise, I will discuss whether such a statement can ever be made and reflect on the role of scientific thought in different branches of philosophy. Ultimately, I will argue that general statements, such as the rationality premise, offer little of value to ethical theory, which is more concerned with practicality. I will end by discussing the role of ancient ethical systems in informing decisions in modern society.

**Part I: The argument**

While exploring his idea of the “best good”, similar to Plato’s Form of the Good, Aristotle states that it may be necessary to first understand the function of a human being. He believes that performing one’s function well must necessarily lead to this best good. To support this approach, he cites the concept of becoming skilled at a profession or hobby. A flautist, he says, only becomes a *good* flautist when they perform their function well, their function being playing the flute.

What then, Aristotle says, is the general function of humans? Since humans must have their own function, distinct from other living things, he begins searching for any unique aspect of the human condition. Our function cannot be to simply eat and grow; plants and animals also have this goal. Additionally, we cannot only exist to perceive with our senses; animals again can do this. He identifies reason as the defining characteristic of the human experience, and therefore the unique function of humans. He references the hobbyist again, stating that a harpist becomes an *excellent* harpist when they perform their function, playing the harp, well. If this is the case, then the good human must be one that uses reason well. And good reasoning, according to Aristotle, is really the same thing as acting virtuously. Therefore, well-functioning humans are ones that use reason to perform virtuous actions. At this point, Aristotle has laid the groundwork for his account of the human good.

**Part II: Criticism of the argument**

From this passage alone, I am not convinced that the overall structure of this argument has any substance. Many philosophical arguments can be synthesized into a few sentences and make intuitive sense, at least at a high level; Aristotle’s argument does not fall under this category. If one wished to live their life according to Aristotle’s teachings in this passage, they would have no guidance for how to act. His goal with this passage, however difficult, is to lay the groundwork for the traits that make up a good life. Instead, Aristotle seems to dance around the point; this argument can best be synthesized as “a virtuous person is one who has performed virtuous actions.” I do not think that this is necessarily a trivial point to make, but this sounds more like a premise than a conclusion. Aristotle leaves very little room to dispute this conclusion because it is such a general statement. If I was reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* for the first time, I would feel that Aristotle needs to devote some time later in the work to specifying what actions are considered virtuous.

**Part III: An obligatory discussion about evolution**

For a more interesting criticism, I would like to explore one of the premises that Aristotle implicitly makes during his argument: that humans are the only living things on the planet that think rationally. This is a notion that is often used to describe the uniqueness of the human condition, and which usually leads to questions about our purpose for being alive; if we are the only beings on Earth who can think rationally, it follows that there should be a reason for us being endowed with this gift. For this reason, Aristotle assumes that humans must have a function, which he then tries to deduce in this argument. However, I think it is not a foregone conclusion that humans are the only rational creatures in the world; at the very least, some additional explanation is needed for that premise to be acceptable.

Since philosophical questions about the human condition have existed for as long as humans have, many of the foundational arguments on these subjects were made in ancient times. Contemporary philosophy courses often neglect to consider how discoveries in evolutionary theory has changed our conceptions of these ideas. At least from the subset of Western philosophy that I have studied at Pitt, many ancient philosophers lived in societies which believed that humans were created by some number of deities. Being influenced by the cultures of their respective societies, these philosophers were able to claim that humans are an entirely unique class of beings without dissent. As a result, they ascribe an order to the world that may not necessarily exist without the help of a divine creator. The contributions made to evolutionary theory over the past few centuries suggest that humans are instead a product of randomness and chaos.

The fundamental idea of evolutionary theory (as it relates to humans) is that we are distant relatives of chimpanzees, from whom our genetic makeup diverged at some point between four and thirteen million years ago (Choi). Aristotle speaks of rationality in a very refined sense; he takes it to mean the power to reason about one’s actions and make decisions based on a coherent line of thought. Given what is now known about humans’ evolutionary origins, there are two possibilities that I have identified for how humans could have developed the rationality that Aristotle describes.

First, both humans and chimpanzees could have been rational creatures before this genetic split. In this case, humans’ faculty of ‘reason’, as Aristotle sees it, is less of an innate capability and more of a reflection of humans being better suited for survival than chimpanzees. For example, humans and chimpanzees can both learn how to use tools, but it may be the case that humans’ brains are better suited for this specific type of knowledge (Froats). What Aristotle identifies as reason could instead be characteristics of the human brain that have come about from natural selection. Regardless, under this hypothetical, the original faculty of reason is shared by humans and animals, meaning it cannot be part of the unique human function that Aristotle describes.

The second, more interesting possibility is that humans developed the capacity to reason at some point after splitting off genetically from chimpanzees. If this is the case, it seems obvious that humans did not instantly possess the refined sense of reason that Aristotle describes. As such, the first humans that differed from chimpanzees would not have had the brainpower to meet the criteria of Aristotle’s unique humans. Instead, it is more likely that they had almost the same mental capabilities as chimpanzees, except with enough extra brain tissue to make them slightly more capable of surviving. This then implies that at some point along the chain of evolution, humans developed enough brain power to cross the threshold of possessing Aristotle’s faculty of reason. The idea of a threshold is always troubling in philosophy, and, in this case, further complicates discussions on rationality. In this case, a threshold of rationality means that Aristotle would have to be much more specific when identifying the traits that distinguish reason from instinct. Otherwise, there is no clear definition for what reason actually is in humans.

**Part IV: The rationality premise’s practicality**

After going through a criticism of this passage on the grounds of evolutionary theory, I feel that it is necessary to discuss whether Aristotle (or anyone, for that matter) can reasonably make such a definitive statement on a subject as ethereal as rationality. In the previous section I argued, in essence, in favor of marrying philosophy with the scientific method. Too often in philosophy, readers are expected to accept loosely defined concepts as fixtures of an argument. These loose definitions are the reason for philosophical arguments that do not stand the test of time. Aristotle says that humans are rational beings, but he does not define the concept of rationality, instead expecting his readership to know what he means from context. Such concepts are made for an idealized world in which there is little nuance; they often do not hold up when faced with counterexamples.

But is it correct to turn philosophy into a field based on hypothesis and observation, instead of deduction? Again, I think some nuance is worthwhile in this discussion. There are philosophical problems that cannot be aided by scientific observation. One famous doctrine that immediately comes to mind is Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* argument for a distinct self; hypotheses and observations cannot support or refute this argument because it itself is beyond the realm of science. Ethics, by contrast, exists in the real world. As such, I believe there should be some concession to the realities of life when developing a doctrine of ethics. This is not to say that every ethical system must be based in consequentialism, but instead that philosophers should incorporate some level of practicality when making claims about ethics.

**Part V: Conclusion**

Ultimately, I am not Aristotle’s biggest fan, much to the chagrin of many Pitt philosophy professors with whom I have taken courses. I do acknowledge that he, along with other ancient philosophers such as Plato, laid much of the groundwork for later individuals to contribute to philosophy. However, from my (very limited) experience studying Aristotle’s works at Pitt, I have been troubled by a common theme throughout, that everything must have some sort of structure, and nothing can be explained by chaos. His quest for the meaning of a good life certainly can inspire others to search for their own meaning, but the rigidity with which he pursues a definitive answer to the question does not help individuals to make ethical decisions in their own lives. At this point in my life, at least, I value flexibility highly when considering ethical dilemmas, because life is complicated enough that no individual doctrine can be used across all situations.

I have recently found my personal ethics influenced by the NBC show *The Good Place*, a series about how people are placed into the afterlife based on an entirely utilitarian calculation of the value of their actions on Earth. Towards the end of the series (slight spoiler warning), the show attempts to tackle the difficulty of making ethical choices in modern society. “These days,” one of the show’s main characters explains, “just buying a tomato at a grocery store means that you are unwittingly supporting toxic pesticides, exploiting labor, contributing to global warming” (Schur). The sheer complexity of the world today is why Aristotle’s philosophy does not stand the test of time. In fact, it cannot be applied to the entirety of contemporary society because it was not developed with all members of Ancient Greek society in mind. It was instead created for an educated, elite class of men who did not have to concern themselves with some of the ethical dilemmas that other members of their society had to face. Overall, I may be too harsh in my criticism of Aristotle, but I do not believe it controversial to state that his pursuit of a universal ethical doctrine is flawed because it does not encompass a broad scope of situations.

Works Cited

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