

WELLBEING IN ARISTOTLE

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In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle begins his investigation by exploring the nature of the end of all action. In the very first sentence of the work he says "Every art and every enquiry and similarly every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim." (1094a1-3)

It is easy, says Aristotle, to find verbal agreement between people regarding that good because they all consider it to be happiness (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle says "Let us resume our inquiry and state in view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what it is that we say that Political Science aims at and what is the highest of all good achievable by action. Verbally, there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy" (1095a13-19). But there is no agreement between people with regard to what the good is. Some think it is pleasure, others wealth, others honour and so on, for each what happens to be most desirable to them.

As is well known Aristotle's general method of approach to a new subject relies on the *endoxa*, namely the respected opinions of society. But in this case, as he informs us, there is much and radical disagreement on the accepted even the respected positions within society on the subject of what *eudaimonia* is. For this reason, far from finding the truth in the respected opinions of society, Aristotle cannot use them even as his starting point. Thus we find him turning to argument, a metaphysical one at that, in order to be assisted in his endeavour to determine the nature of the good at which human action aims. This is the well known function (*ergon*) argument. My concern in the present article is to study the steps of this argument in order to reach an understanding of its conclusion. From the outset, Aristotle tells us that the argument will not determine precisely what the nature of *Eudaimonia* is but it will delimit its range, and narrow it down to a domain that is common to all agents. Thus, he ends his argument by concluding: "Let this serve as an outline for the good; for we must presumably sketch it roughly, and then later fill in the details" (1098a20-22).

1. Do Human Beings Have a Function?

Aristotle introduces the function argument by referring to the notion of the *ergon* of a human being:

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man ... if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one can lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? (1097b22-33).

One of the most important issues regarding the function argument is the understanding of the use of the term function, or *ergon*, here, by Aristotle. Recent commentators have understood this term as referring to the Aristotelian essence. In particular, Reeve, in his book *Practices of Reason* claims that by "function" Aristotle means essence, as that which gives the definition of something (p. 123):

All these things, in fact, are determined by their function, and the true being of each consists in its ability to perform its particular function, of the eye, for instance, in its ability to see; while if it cannot perform its function it is that thing in name only, like a dead man or a stone figure of a man. Nor is a wooden saw, properly speaking, a saw but merely a representation of one. (*Meteorologica* 390a 10-14)

I believe there is good reason not to take *ergon* in the present context to mean essence. It might turn out to be the case that by the *ergon* of a human being Aristotle means the essence of a human being. But if this is so it is something we need to discover rather than assume to be the case on terminological grounds. The reason why I believe Aristotle does not intend us to take '*ergon*' to mean essence is that in the very introduction of the notion of *ergon* he questions whether a human being has an *ergon* (1097b28). Aristotle could not be wondering whether a human being has an essence, given that human beings, and biological substances in general, are the *par excellence* substances within the material world, and the primary examples of entities with essences. It could not be that Aristotle means 'essence' by '*ergon*' and then question whether the paradigmatic substances have an *ergon*, namely an essence.

The association of *ergon* or function with a human being has been taken by several commentators to indicate the introduction of a teleological account of human nature in Aristotle's *Ethics*. Urmson, in his book on Aristotle's *Ethics*, attributes such a position to Aristotle and speaks critically of it in the context of contemporary

thought: "This purposive view of nature is, of course, frowned upon nowadays by theorists of scientific method, though if we are honest, we may find it hard to claim that it is entirely absent from our own thought" (p. 20). In the same line of thought, Alistair McIntyre, in his very influential book *After Virtue*, attributes to Aristotle an essentialist position regarding the determination of the human good. McIntyre says:

On Aristotle's account matters are very different. Even though some virtues are available only to certain types of people, none the less virtue is attached not to men as inhabiting social roles, but to man as such. It is the *telos* of man as a species which determines what human qualities are virtues. (McIntyre, p. 172)

In opposition to the Aristotelian thought so interpreted, McIntyre himself develops a theory about the good of a human being which is based, not on essentialist metaphysical positions, but on the role of a human being in society. The good for man is determined by the goals of the society in which he belongs, and the virtues of a human being are determined by the social role that each individual has within the context of his or her society. Thus, McIntyre concludes:

Although this account of the virtues is teleological, it does not require the identification of any teleology in nature, and hence it does not require identification of any teleology in metaphysical biology. (McIntyre p.183)

McIntyre considers his teleological position of the virtues as an improvement on the Aristotelian position: on the one hand it preserves the teleology of Aristotle, but on the other, it frees this teleology from metaphysical biology.

The attribution by McIntyre of metaphysical biological teleology to Aristotle's determination of the human good, is, I believe, misguided. Aristotle does employ teleological notions in his explanation of the nature of things in the world, but not every occurrence of function as final cause amounts to the introduction of what Aristotle calls biological teleology. The *par excellence* basis of teleological accounts of properties or of the nature of things is in the case of artefacts, on the one hand, and parts of substances, on the other. Aristotle's definition, for example, of a saw, determine the nature of the saw in terms of its use in society (*Physics* 200b5). The role to which an artefact is put in society is the determining factor for what that artefact is. It determines the function of the artefact, and hence, its nature. With parts of substances, a fundamental principle in Aristotle's metaphysics is the principle of *homonymy*, according to which, parts of a substantial whole acquire their identity through the role they have in the whole. For example, if a finger is severed from an organism, the detached finger is only homonymously a finger. The detached finger has the name of a finger but not the definition and consequently, the severed finger is not a real finger: " for they [the parts] cannot exist if severed from the whole; for

it is not a finger in any *state* that is the finger of a living thing, but the dead finger is a finger only homonymously" (*Metaphysics* 1035b23-25). Aristotle claims that the severed finger has a different definition from the functioning finger, because the severed finger has lost the capacity to function as the live one does with regard to the activity of the organism: "it is not a hand in *any* state that is a part of a man, but the hand which can fulfil its work, which therefore must be alive; if it is not alive it is not a part" (*Metaphysics* 1036b30232).

Aristotle's Homonymy Principle commits him to the determination of what a part of an organism is in terms of the function that that part has within the organism. This is a paradigmatic case of teleological explanation in nature. But does this account apply to the organism as a whole?

Aristotle's explanation of substances in the world rests on his well known doctrine of the four causes. The four causes are the material cause, namely what a substance is made out of; the efficient cause, namely that which brings about the creation and the substance; the formal cause, namely the form of the substance and essence, as given by its definition; and the final cause of the substance, namely that which determines the end of the substances' being. It would appear that the existence of an end or final cause in the substance introduces teleology in the substantial realm. But in the case of substances, Aristotle, importantly, allows that the *final* cause be the same with the *formal* cause, namely, that the *end* of a substance be the *essence* of that substance. Thus in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says: "What is the material cause of man? The menstrual fluid. What is the moving cause? The *semen*. The formal cause? His essence. The final cause? His end. But perhaps *the later two are the same*." (1044a34-b1, my emphasis)

This is an extremely important position in Aristotle's metaphysics, because the identification of the final cause with the formal cause has the effect of putting a stop to the teleological explanation at the level of each substance. Substance for Aristotle is the end in terms of which its own nature is to be explained. There is no further context, there is no further point of view from which the nature of the substance is to be understood and determined. A substance for Aristotle cannot be part of another substance, and belong to it in an organic way. Substances are ends in themselves, and Aristotle says so in the *Physics*, where he says "We, too, are ends of a sort" (194a34-5). The implications of this metaphysical position are paramount within moral philosophy because they show that for Aristotle, human beings are ends in themselves. They do not serve functions over and beyond themselves set by contexts external to their being. Therefore, if we are to talk of the *ergon* or function of a human being, we will not look for it outside that human being, in the way that we do with parts of substances or artefacts, where the context lies in the whole organism or society. With human beings, function has to be understood in the terms of the context of the human being himself or herself namely, in terms of their capacities and potentialities. It follows that teleology enters in a rather innocuous way in Aristotle's moral philosophy. The search for the function of human beings does not amount to their subjugation to causes

over and beyond themselves.

It should not be thought that this creates a problem for Aristotle, of the sort mentioned by McIntyre, namely, that the good for human beings must be determined by the biological nature of the species as opposed to being affected by the social context the human beings live in. I said above that human beings are ends in themselves rather than cogs of a greater system, whether that be a natural system or a social one. But this must be distinguished from whether the social context can play a role in the form and shape that the good for human beings will take. Human beings are social animals, namely their life and practice involves communion with other human beings. But this does not mean that the social forms of life determine *what* human beings are, or that it explains the nature of human beings as the end of these beings. Social life can enter and affect the shape of the human good in other ways than being the end that determines the nature of human beings. It can enter the moral domain through the capacities and practices of human beings. Here, particular forms of social life are the result of human capacities rather than the determining factor as the end of human nature. In Aristotle's scheme, the social form of life is for the sake of the human being, rather than vice versa. This integral part of human activity will play a role in the determination of the human good, so that we will not expect that the human good will be determined entirely on the basis of the biology of the human species. But when we are concerned with teleological explanation the normativity direction is what is of primary interest to us; and the point that I am making here is that the normativity direction is from human capacity to the social form of life, rather than vice versa.

To the degree to which social practices will enter into the determination of the human good as ways in which human capacities realise themselves, it would not be possible to determine the human good merely on the psychological traits of human beings, anymore than it would be merely on the biological traits of the species. In that sense, I am not in agreement with Terence Irwin's conclusion in his article "The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics" in which he says the following:

The doctrine of the soul as the form of the living organism explains Aristotle's conclusion that happiness will be realisation of the soul; the function argument, then, summarises the account of the human soul and essence which we have surveyed in the *De Anima*. ... His ethical theory is based on his psychology and therefore his metaphysics; the starting point of ethics is a feature of human agents which is part of their soul and essence, as understood by Aristotle's general theory of substance. (pp. 48-50)

What is it that will lead us from the psychology of human beings to the determination of the good for human beings? Every psychological property of humans can find various different applications or ways of fulfilling itself. As we shall see, psychological dispositions will need guidance before they can reach what

is really good for humans. Psychology, even enhanced with metaphysics, cannot deliver us ethical theory, and in this particular case, the human good. Nor can that be attained merely from practice within a social context, as many incompatible practices can arise from the same set of psychological dispositions. What we need in order to reach the human good is something more than the biological, psychological and social capacities and dispositions of human beings. To that we shall presently turn.

2. The Function of a Human Being

Aristotle's function argument proceeds by attempting to identify the human activities that would characterise the function of a human being. He says:

What then can this be? Life seems to be common even in plants, but we are seeking what is *peculiar* to man. [My emphasis.] Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but *it* also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle ... and as this too can be taken in two ways, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term. ... the function of man is an activity of soul in accordance with, or not without, rational principle. (1097b33-8a8)

Aristotle does not find the answer in the activities that are common between human beings and other forms of life. He says that what he is looking for is a function that is peculiar (*idion*) to a human being. The notion of a function being peculiar to a human being has exercised commentators, because on the one hand, the term *idion* is a technical term in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and on the other, its technical use does not fit the context in which it is put in the function argument.

Jennifer Whiting argues that the term here refers to the essence of a thing, in our particular case, the essence of human being (p.37). She gives as evidence passages in Aristotle where the term *idion* can be used to refer to the essence of a thing. Although she admits that it is not a common usage of the term, she holds that this is the way Aristotle is using the term in the function argument. Yet, I do not see how this could be supported. What Aristotle is saying is that what is peculiar to human beings is an activity of soul in accordance to the rational principle. He has thereby excluded from being peculiar to human beings such activities as are common between human beings and other animals, and in particular the life of nutrition, of growth and of perception. According to Aristotle, these are certainly integral activities of the human soul and as such they would included in an account of the essence of a human being. Since they are excluded here, whatever it is that Aristotle is talking about in the function argument as being peculiar to a human being, it could not be the essence of a human being as it would be a very incomplete account of the essence of human beings.

A more frequent line of interpretation is that by restricting the domain of the functions to the rational activities of human beings, Aristotle is referring to the life of contemplation. This interpretation has been objected to by pointing out that the contemplative life is not exclusive to human beings, as it is shared by Aristotle's God as well. In an attempt to account for this objection while retaining this interpretation of the term *idion*, Kraut, in his book *Aristotle on the Human Good*, has suggested that what Aristotle means here is that the contemplative life is peculiar to human beings within the animal kingdom; thus God is excluded from this domain (p. 316).

John McDowell, in his article "The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics" renders the notion of what is peculiar to an F as "what it is the business of an F to do" (p. 366). In the same spirit, Sarah Broadie, in her book *Ethics with Aristotle*, takes Aristotle to be talking about rational activity being peculiar to human beings in the sense of being most truly what human beings are. She adds that if other species are also characterised by the very same activities which most truly characterise ourselves, then, maybe for Aristotle the species in the domain of ethics simply differ from the species within the domain of biology. In this way, although we would be in the same ethical species along with God, we would belong to separate species within the biological classifications (p. 35).

I believe that the inclination to interpret Aristotle's talk of what is peculiar to human beings as a reference to the contemplative life is exaggerated. It is true that Aristotle does introduce reason at this point, but it is not true that he is making a specific reference to the contemplative life. On the contrary, what he says is that the function of man is an activity of soul in accordance with, or not without the rational principle. This expression does not refer exclusively to a life of contemplation. On the contrary, very much in the spirit of the rest of Aristotle's approach to ethics, it refers to an integrated human activity, within which reason plays a role. This involves all aspects of practical activity. Roger Crisp offers an interpretation of "activity of the soul in accordance with excellence" (1098a16-17) according to which "excellent activities themselves include or involve all intrinsic goods" (pp. 113, 119). The activity of contemplation is but a mere sub-group of the totality of these activities, and should not therefore be thought of as playing a prominent role in the present Aristotelian demarcation of the function that is peculiar to human beings.

3. The Role of Reason in the Human Good

Let us now reflect on the role of reason in the determination of the human good. We have seen that Aristotle is building the function argument so as to reach to discovery of the good for human beings through the determination of the function of human beings. In this respect we must come to understand the role that reason has to play in the determination of the good for humans. So far, Aristotle has singled out the function of human beings that is peculiar to them, and which has turned out to be activity of the soul in accordance with the rational principle. Aristotle's reasoning has

been that just as in the case of the flute player we look for the good in the function peculiar to the flute player, thus in human beings too, if they do have a function, we should look for their good in their function. But we shall need a stronger reason than the analogy with the arts if we are to be in a position to connect the human function with the human good. I believe such a connection is possible to be made on the basis of what Aristotle tells us in Book 1 Chapter 7 of his Ethics; it needs to be extracted it from his doctrine of the naturally pleasant as he does not comment on it directly in connection with the role of reason within the human good.

What I am proposing is that we look at the way that reason functions for the determination of the naturally pleasant and be guided by reason's role there in understanding the way that reason functions in the determination of the human good with respect to the activities of the soul. Aristotle says on pleasure:

Pleasure is a state of *soul*, and to each man that which he is said to be a lover of is pleasant; ...Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of what is noble find what is pleasant things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. 1099a7-15

What is Aristotle telling us here? He is making a distinction between the naturally pleasant and the phenomenally pleasant. And he is further saying that the phenomenally pleasant is characterised by internal conflict as opposed to the naturally pleasant, which is not so characterised. First, it should be explained that the conflict that Aristotle is talking about here is not a type of practical incompatibility in the realisation of pleasures. He is not talking about difficulties that arise because e.g. the concert is scheduled to take place at the same time as the lecture and therefore one cannot enjoy both pleasures due to a time conflict. What he is talking about are the type of conflicts that we have already encountered in Plato's Republic namely, conflicts about one and the same object of desire or aversion; for instance, in the case an appetitive desire for more drink and rational aversion towards that drink because of considerations of health and well being. What Aristotle is telling us then, is that phenomenal desires are not mutually compatible; they do not harmonise with one another but rather are in conflict with one another; they fight one another and compete with one another. On the contrary real pleasures are not in conflict with one another but rather are compatible and mutually harmonious. Internal coherence, therefore, is the criterion of objectivity in the domain of the pleasures, since it characterises only real pleasures.

Let us take this criterion and apply it to the domain of the good. What the introduction of reason effects in the activities of the soul is to secure that there would be internal harmony and coherence between the objectives of the activities of the soul so that they do not fight and compete with one another. Corresponding to the distinction

between the phenomenal and the real pleasures, we can make a distinction between the phenomenal and the real good, which Aristotle does make in his *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113a 20-22, where he does repeat that the apparent goods are in competition with one another. The introduction of the rational principle in the activities of the soul will secure that conflicts will be singled out and addressed by the soul, so that the pursuits of the soul will not lead to internal conflict. Again by conflict we do not mean practically confronted conflict, but internal conflict with respect to desires and aversions for one and the same activity. That is why Aristotle says that the human good is activity of the soul in accordance with, or not without, the rational principle in order to point to the guiding role that reason plays in the souls' pursuit of the good. The activities of the soul which are in accordance with reason will therefore avoid internal incompatibility and will be characterised by harmony and cohesion. Such a domain of activities will be pursuing real goods in so far as the internal conflicts will have been sorted out by the involvement and intervention of reason in the pursuits of the good.¹

It is well known that the criterion of internal coherence is not a sufficient criterion for objectivity, in so far as coherence is no guarantee for uniqueness. Alternative conceptions of the good could be internally coherent, which is why coherence is normally associated with relativism rather than with realism. Indeed, Aristotle needs further arguments and metaphysical as well as epistemological commitments in order to then use coherence to secure objectivity in the domain of the good. I have argued elsewhere — in my work *The Golden Age of Virtue: Aristotle's Ethics*, Chapter 5, "Phronesis, Epistemic Truth" — that Aristotle's theory of the epistemic foundations of science (and of domains of knowledge outside the scientific one such as the moral one) is such as to presuppose that the *endoxa*, namely the opinions that have come to be believed as true and to be respected in a society, are true unless they conflict with one another. Given this presupposition, coherence is sufficient for truth. I have further discussed possible metaphysical positions that would support such an epistemological commitment in my article: "Socratic Moral Realism: An Alternative Justification" (especially p. 135-140). I will not here address this issue again, as I am not concerned to show how the test for coherence, combined with other metaphysical and epistemological theories, can be argued to secure objectivity. My concern here is that Aristotle uses the coherence criterion for objectivity, explicitly, in the domain of pleasures and in the domain of beliefs, and I am claiming that he is implicitly using it the domain of the good. What this means is that the introduction of the principle of reason in the activities of the soul that constitute the human function secures for Aristotle that the moral agent will not be pursuing phenomenal good, but will be after the real goods.

¹ For an alternative rendition of the meaning of the expression '*meta logou*', see Gomez-Lobo's "The Ergon Inference" (pp. 179-180).

4. Is there a Fallacy in the Function Argument?

We saw at the beginning of the Function Argument that Aristotle is interested in reaching the good for a human being by first determining the function of the human being. The good for the human being would then be found in the good performance of this function. Aristotle says:

Just as flute player, a sculptor, or any artist, and in general, for all things that have a function of activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man....

... and if we say a so-and-so and a good so-and-so have a function which is the same kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of excellence being added to the function (for the function of the lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well). ...the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence. (1097b25-1098a17)

What Aristotle is trying to establish here is that the good performance of a particular function is not a different skill than the performance of that function, but rather pertains to the performance itself; namely, the quality of the performance. In the case of the flute player, the good performance of his skill is not a different type of *skill* than a mediocre performance of that skill. The average and the good flute players exercise the same skill but do it qualitatively differently. Similarly, in the case of the human being, the exercise or the function of a human being, namely, activity of the soul in accordance with reason, will differ qualitatively between people. But Aristotle's point is that the difference does not indicate the possession of a different skill or the exercise of a different function, but the exercise of the same very skill or function, only better. Thus, if the function of a human being is the activity of the soul according to reason, then the good exercise of this function would involve the use of reason in all the activities of soul where reason pertains towards identifying conflicts, comparing, contrasting, harmonising the compatible, and setting apart the incompatible, and in general aiming towards a coherent domain of desires, aversions, pursuits and attainments in the activities of the soul.

The derivation of the good for human beings from the good performance of the function of human beings has been criticised as a fallacy in reasoning by P. Glassen, in his well know article "A Fallacy in Aristotle's Argument about the Good" (Philosophical Quarterly 1957). Glassen says the following:

From the statement that the function of a good lyre-player is to play the lyre well, or in accordance with excellence, what follows is, *not* that the *good* of

a lyre-player is playing the lyre in accordance with excellence, but rather that the *goodness* of the lyre-player consists in playing the lyre in accordance with excellence. (p. 320).

Glassen's point is the following. If the lyre-player performs his function well the outcome of this good performance is whatever the lyre-player is good at, namely the outcome is the goodness of the lyre-player. But, says Glassen, there is no reason for us to take the goodness of the lyre-player as that which is good for the lyre-player. What the lyre-player is good at might be completely independent of, and irrelevant to what is good for the lyre-player. There are many examples one can contrive to show the independence of the good performance of a function by an agent from what is good for that agent.

I believe Glassen is right in making the distinction between the goodness of an agent in performing a function, and what is good for that agent. I further believe that he is right in saying that for Aristotle's argument to go through a connection is needed between the goodness in the performance of that function and what is good in the human being. Where I disagree with Glassen is that such a connection is missing from Aristotle's argument. Though not explicitly stated, I have tried to show above that the explanation of what the role of reason is, in terms of its use in the case of pleasures (and in the case of beliefs), provides the link in the case of the function argument between the good performance of the function of a human being and the good for that human being.

The connection is the following. The introduction of reason into the activities of the soul secures the internal cohesion in the activities and pursuits of the human soul. I have shown above that for Aristotle the coherence between pleasures, or by extension, between the goods pursued by the soul, is what secures that the phenomenal pleasures or the phenomenal goods have been excised and the remaining ones are the real pleasures and the real goods. The good performance of the human function, namely the conformity of the activity of the soul to reason, will secure that only real goods are pursued by the soul in its choices of human actions and objects of pursuit.

But let us reflect on this result. The good performance of the human function, namely the activity of the soul in full accord with the principles of reason, will secure that the agent in question will be pursuing the really good activities. The good performance of the human function is, as Glassen has pointed out, the *goodness* of a human being. But we saw that the good performance of the human function leads precisely to the pursuit of what is really good, as opposed to what is phenomenally good, for the human being. Therefore, the good performance of the human function leads to the pursuit of real goods by the human being. Thus the goodness of a human being (in Glassen's terminology) is precisely the attainment of what is good for a human being. Hence Aristotle's function argument does succeed in demarcating what is good for a human being, which consists in the good performance of the function of a human being (of the activity of the soul in accordance with reason),

thereby securing the pursuit of real goods for the human being. Aristotle's function argument is not subject to a fallacy, but succeeds in reaching the result it set out to deliver. Glassen's argument did point to a potential gap in the steps of the argument, but there is sufficient theoretical material in Aristotle's argument to fill in this gap.

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