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Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: Best Good

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes, “perhaps we shall find the best good if we first find the function of a human being” (1097b25). For Aristotle, this “best good” is the only purely non-instrumental good, happiness. He believes that for every thing that has a function, there exists a corresponding “highest” or “best” good that can be achieved. The way this best good is achieved is through its function performing with excellence (virtue). The function of a human being, according to Aristotle, is the activity of a soul expressing reason. Happiness, therefore, is the best good of a human being, and can only be achieved when a person’s soul is actively expressing reason in accordance with virtue.

For Aristotle, all human actions have some end, and every end can be classified as some type of good. These goods, according to Aristotle, have either instrumental or non-instrumental value to them. Instrumental goods, on the one hand, are goods that are not chosen for their own sake, but rather, for the sake of others. It is these instrumental goods that fall subject to an infinite regress of desires, because if every good were desired for the sake of another, one would never be able to give an account for what they are ultimately aiming to achieve. For example, one might say that they are going to the gym in order to become healthy, and that they desire to be healthy so that they can live a longer life, and that they desire to live a longer life so that they can read more books, and that they desire to read more books so that they can attain a high

paying job, etc. etc. Without a “final good” at which all these actions and desires ultimately aim, one is left without any explanation of why such actions are being pursued in the first place.

A non-instrumental good, on the other hand, is a good that is always chosen for its own sake. It is self-sufficient, stable, and is “choiceworthy in itself, never because of something else, [and] is complete without qualification” (1097a30). Aristotle believes that this non-instrumental good is a “final” or “complete” good of all human actions, and that this ultimate end is happiness. Happiness, therefore, is what Aristotle believes to be the “best good” for all humans. It is what all other human goods are aimed towards, as well as the only human good that is good in itself and not pursued for other goods.

In order to give an account of what happiness is, Aristotle presents four traditional views—pleasure, honor, wealth, and virtue— and shows why each seems to be incompatible with what the final good is (distinctively human, non-instrumental, self-sufficient, and stable). Pleasure, for instance, is found to be the most animal-like life available, indistinctive to humans, and that people who choose this life are “completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life of grazing animals” (1095b19). To be honored is to be dependent on other people’s opinions, and since people’s opinions fluctuate, honor becomes dependent, unstable, and therefore is also unlike the final good of happiness. Wealth is determined to always serve as a means for other things, rather than pursued for its own sake, and thus is deemed an instrumental good, incompatible with the non-instrumentality of the best good. Virtue is considered too passive a quality to be happiness, for Aristotle argues, “someone might possess virtue but be asleep or inactive throughout his life; or, further, he might suffer the worst evils and misfortunes; and if this is the sort of life he leads, no one would count him happy” (1096a1).

After struggling to define what happiness is, Aristotle determines that if every thing or activity has a function, then the highest good of that thing is to perform its function in the best possible way (virtuously). For example, the human eye has the function of seeing, and the highest good that it can achieve is excellent vision. In the case for humans, Aristotle believes that if he can determine what the human function is, he can then accurately determine what is needed to achieve its highest good (happiness).

He considers the opinions that the distinctively human functions are the activities of “living” and “sense-perception,” but he soon concludes that “living” is a quality shared with plants, and “sense perception” is a quality that is shared with animals. Thus, neither activity is distinctively human. He then ultimately determines that rational activity is the uniquely human quality, and so the human function must be the soul engaging in rational activity. And, if the highest good of a thing is when it is performing its function with excellence, then the highest good of a human can only be achieved when the soul is virtuously engaging in rational activity. In other words, happiness is the soul engaging in rational activity in accordance with virtue. While virtue is a necessary component in the attainment of happiness, it is not a sufficient cause for happiness due to the facts (as seen earlier) that someone can either possess it while asleep or inactive, or have it and experience misfortunes and evils.

Aristotle, then, becomes convinced that the human function is an activity of the soul engaging in rational activity in accordance with virtue because it fulfills three main criteria: 1) it is active, 2) it is virtuous, and 3) it is unique to humans. By having an “active” quality, Aristotle is restricting happiness to a human activity, one that is not capable of attainment while in a sleeping or inactive state. By having a “virtuous” quality, happiness is attained by performing the human function with excellence. The human function is always the activity of a soul expressing

reason, but unless it is doing so virtuously, happiness cannot be achieved. Lastly, because the human function is different from that of a knife or a plant, the human function must be “distinctively human” and differ from the functions of other things. Happiness, therefore, is the “best good” of a human being, and can only be achieved by the activity of a soul expressing reason in accordance with virtue.