

Unit III C: The Role of Reason in Human Life (Aristotle) (Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1)

The basic question for this unit: If human nature consists in being rational, then what has reason or living rationally got to do with living as a human?

For Aristotle and Plato – the best lived life is the life devoted to philosophy. Philosophy as a way of life and not simply as a kind of intellectual inquiry.

Why?

We are by nature rational animals. So, being rational is constitutive of who we are. If happiness consists in perfecting our lives, living well. Then happiness involves living according to our nature. But that means living according to being rational. Philosophy is the highest form of rational activity. Hence a well lived life, or a happy life, requires living according to reason or philosophy.

Let's see how Aristotle will justify this conclusion:

End – that for the sake of which something is done

Partial End – an end which is also a means to another end

Final End – an end in itself which it not a means to another end

Means – that which is done/chosen for the sake of something else

Happiness: the final end of human life in the sense that we do everything that we do for the sake of happiness, and we choose happiness for the sake of nothing else. For Aristotle, happiness means “getting it together” as a human being.

Human activity is intentional – that is, it is goal oriented or purposive in nature.

That is we to attain various ends (goals) and must engage in other sorts of activities to get to those ends. What we do to get to an end is a means to the end. That for the sake which we do something is the end (goal) of that activity.

Example: I go to the store to buy bread. Going to the store is a means to getting bread. Getting bread is the end (goal) of going to the store.

Ends are partial is they are means to other ends. Ends are final is they are not means to other ends.

Example: Walking is a means to going to the store (end)

Going to the store is a means to getting bread (end)

Aristotle: we all desire happiness.

Aristotle notes that our activity is purposive in nature: we do some things for the sake of other things. So the question is: are there any things, states or activities that we pursue simply for their own sake and not for the sake of anything else. These ends are important because they are what

dictate the choices we make. We can all agree that we live for the sake of being happy. Happiness is the final end of human life. We do what we do for the sake of being happy. We don't pursue happiness for the sake of anything else.

Happiness (eudaimonia)

- 1) subjective sense of feeling good.

There is no basis for critiquing someone's judgment that they are happy, Happiness can change over the course of the day.

- 2) Living well –

Getting it together as a human being. Getting your act together. Getting your shit together.

Aristotle is interested in the second sense of happiness. While no one can be mistaken whether or not they are happy in the first sense, Aristotle does think that people can be mistaken that they are living well.

Aristotle notes that while we might all agree formally or nominally that we desire happiness, there is a great deal of disagreement about what sort of life would constitute happiness. Aristotle tried to provide a method for resolving these disagreement. Recall that when we define happiness as the final end of human life, we have something like a variable in math. The question is exactly what specific way of life will satisfy the conditions of happiness. To answer this Aristotle provide several formal characteristics of happiness, and then reviews various 'candidates' for happiness to determine which is adequate.

Formal characteristics of happiness – conditions of happiness that any “contender” for happiness must meet.

(1) final end of human activity – that for the sake of which we do all that we do and do not pursue for anything else. (so money cannot constitute happiness, since money is only a means to an end and never an end in itself)

(2) Self-sufficient – what constitutes happiness for an individual must be something that the individual can achieve for him/herself (for fame does not constitute happiness, since my fame is dependent upon the recognition that others gives me.)

(3) Distinctive to us as human beings – it's as humans that we aim to be happy – not as some other kind of thing. E.g., pleasure does not constitute happiness since the capacity for pleasure is not distinctive of humans but pertains to all sentient beings (animals).

(4) Lies in an activity and not merely something possessed: As the excellence of a flute player is found when the person actually plays the flute not merely in the skill to play the flute, so happiness lies in actually living and doing it well. Notice, then that we are happy precisely when we are living and doing it well. Happiness is not the final end of human activity in the sense that it comes after everything else that we do, otherwise we would never be happy, since death comes after everything else that we do. (Aristotle does not have a theory of personal immortality for people.)

Aristotle argues that the condition of happiness lies in the unique “function” of human beings: that which humans do best or uniquely – this is found in human nature. Happiness consists in living in conformity with our nature – living rationally. (Note that Aristotle does NOT say that wealth, fame or pleasure have no role in a happy life, just that none of them can constitute happiness as the final end of human activity.)

Rationality – the capacity for thinking and acting in terms of universal principles.

Theoretical reason – thinking in terms of universal principles (pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge) (highest activity of reason) philosophy

Practical reason – acting in terms of principles (using reason to guide practical activity)
Using reason as a guide for action.

Challenges to Aristotle:

One way to challenge Aristotle would be (1) to deny that there is any human nature and hence that there is any discoverable or objective basis for determining what manner of life constitutes happiness or (2) to say that Aristotle has misunderstood human nature. For example, the religious fundamentalist might say that human reason is completely depraved (because of sin) or simply incapable of knowing anything about God. So a Christian fundamentalist might say that we can live well only insofar as we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior. But for the fundamentalist, this requires an act of faith which not only transcends reason but is absurd to reason. Accordingly, a fundamentalist would say that Aristotle’s proposal that happiness consists in living a rational life is basically wrong -- if followed it will lead to eternal damnation and not eternal salvation.