The Functioning of Happiness

by

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In book one, section seven of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle discusses happiness and the good. He begins with a general discussion of the good as it is found in various objects and activities. Aristotle contends that in each of these cases the good happens to be the end to which each object or activity is created or done. He then concludes that the highest end is the greatest good, and that happiness is this highest end. In an attempt to clarify himself and place his observations on a stronger footing, Aristotle offers the Functions Argument, a more rigorous formulation of the good.

The Function Argument begins by noting that something’s virtue, or being good, depends on the nature of the thing. The virtue or excellence found in an excellent house is of a different nature that the virtue found in an excellent musician or an excellent knife. What makes an object good is the ability of the object to do whatever objects of its type do, well. Aristotle calls the things that particular objects do, their function or characteristic action. For a house the function would be to provide shelter, for a musician to play music, for a knife the ability to cut. In general, an object’s function is the activity that the object does that is essential for being an object of that type. The good in something then, is just the ability of that thing to do its characteristic action well. In particular, the good of a person is the ability of that person to do their characteristic action well.

The logical next step in determining the good in humans is to determine their characteristic action. But before pursuing the human function, Aristotle motivates the investigation by stating that human beings, in themselves, must have a function. He does so by asking how craftsmen and laborers can have a function, if humans, in themselves, cannot. Obviously craftsmen and laborers have functions, the crafts and fruits of the labor, so humans must indeed have a function. Upon first look it appears as though Aristotle’s certainty in the existence of the human function is suspect. The argument he supplies is weak, and nothing else is offered in its defense. Is it obvious that craftsmen and laborers have functions, and what does that have to do with the function of humans in general? However, after considering Aristotle’s conception of humans as a whole, compelling reasons for his stance can be seen. According to Aristotle all substances or things have four causes, substance, form, efficient cause, and final cause. The causes are the nature or existence of objects. Substance is the matter that the object is made of, form the arrangement or essence of the object, efficient cause the creator, and final cause what the object is for or it’s function. It is then trivial to see why Aristotle would conclude that human beings have a function, all substances have a function. In fact, because they are natural, the function of human beings, that is their final cause, is the same as their form, or essence. Although it appears as though Aristotle glosses over an important premise to his Function Argument, it turns out that the existence of the human function, at least in the Aristotelian conception, is well founded.

Having established that there is a human function the next objective is to determine exactly what it is. We have seen that because humans are natural, finding their function boils down to determining their form or the essence of being human. Aristotle contends that the function of humans must have to do with the life of the rational part of the soul. He rules out growth and nourishment because it is shared with the plants and is therefore not particular to humans. Likewise, he rules out sense perception because of the fact that animals also have this capacity. The only thing left then, he concludes must be rational activity. According to Aristotle the characteristic action, or function, of human beings is living a life based on reason. Although I do not feel that Aristotle’s method in determining this characteristic action is extremely convincing, I believe that Aristotle’s conception of the human function is generally correct. According to Aristotle the function of the human is what it means to be human. When we ask what it means to be human many different ideas come to mind, falling in love, learning from mistakes, speaking and understanding language. It may be that the human function is a specific endeavor, such as scientific and ethical inquiry or pure logical thought. The common theme that runs through any such list is our capacity to analyze, comprehend, and respond to different stimulations, within our lives. When people are born with serious mental defects or somehow lose their capacity to reason, they are not seen as truly being human. Their lack of being involved actively in making sense of the world and their lives takes the human element away from them. Similarly, if someone were to leave every possible choice of action
up to pure chance, reasoning about nothing, we could not consider them as leading a proper human life. If none of a person’s actions were a result of decisions made by the individual, or based on some sort of reasoning by them, in what sense could they be considered alive? Aristotle holds that our characteristic function is to live a human life using reason. While it may be the case that the human function is not as broad as Aristotle sets it out to be, it certainly involves reason and living a human life.

Now that he has established that living a life in accordance with reason is the function of humans, Aristotle is in the position to determine the human good. Everything that is of a certain type of object participates in, or does, that type of object’s characteristic action. The difference between ordinary objects and good objects is that the good objects are able to do their characteristic action well. That is to say, that the characteristic action of a superior object is to carrying out their function well. When considering human beings, what makes a person superior, or good, is the ability to carry out their characteristic action, living in accordance with reason, well. Therefore, being able to perform the human function makes us good and, because happiness is the greatest good, makes us happy. Aristotle was able to reach the conclusion that living well in accordance to reason makes us happy because of two things. The first is the discussion directly prior to the Function Argument, in which he concludes that the good in things is in the ends to which they are done, and that happiness is the final end or greatest good. The other thing Aristotle relies on is the Function Argument itself, which establishes performing the human function well as the human good. We can see from the Function Argument and the setting in which it is introduced that Aristotle is justified in reaching his conclusion regarding happiness.

The Function Argument is a clear example of an instance where Aristotle puts somewhat speculative thinking and conjecturing onto firmer ground through reason and logical inferences.