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The Human Function Argument

Aristotle argues that the human function is activity of the soul that expresses or requires reason. This argument is found in *Nicomachean Ethics* approximately between Bekker lines 1097^b24 and 1098^a9.

1. *Humans must have a function, or else they would be idle, which is absurd.* Aristotle directly asks the reader if humans might have no important overall function other than a chosen occupation in society but suggests that this would not be expected of nature. Terence Irwin used the word *idle* in his 1985 translation when phrasing this disjunct of Aristotle's question.
2. *Each human body part has a function, so the whole human must likewise have a function.* This premise appears parallel to Aristotle's argument that many goods serve higher goods within a hierarchy 1094^a10 . Aristotle is invoking the concept a hierarchy to consider functions of body parts. Each part has a function that serves a larger part with a different function, and so it seems that the largest unit, the human body itself, must have a function.
3. *The human function is unique to only humans themselves.* Aristotle does not seem to consider that unique human features could simply be superfluous; he simply states as a goal that he is looking for a unique function.
4. *Human function is not growth and nutrition because these aspects of life are shared with plants.* It is sensible to make this exclusion if one accepts the third premise.
5. *Human function is not sense perception because this aspect of life is shared with animals.* Fulfilling a function like this would constitute a life of gratification, which Aristotle rejected earlier 1095^b16 .
6. *The part of the human soul with reason is unique to humans.* This is simply the remaining feature of human life that Aristotle considers here.
7. *The bare capacity of reason is insufficient to constitute a life function.* Aristotle presents a

short analysis of the rational part of the soul, dividing it into two parts, a part that uses reason and a part that obeys reason – the latter part which he is rejecting here as a possible function. He sees life as supported by activity and not just the capacity to do something.

8. *Therefore, the human function is activity of the part of the soul that expresses or requires reason.*

In seeking the human function, Aristotle has first shown that there is a human function 1 and 2 and narrowed down the human features that may be a function 3 through 7 before reaching his conclusion 8 .

Aristotle has formulated an economical and clear argument, but the passage that contains it fails to connect all the premises to other parts of the text to lend them supporting arguments. Aristotle extended his approach of starting from what is commonly believed to even this human function argument which is crucial to the whole work. As a result, many readers may be left unconvinced.

The third, fourth, and fifth premises comprise a major questionable area. The third premise, *The human function is unique to only humans themselves*, was indirectly introduced as a goal in what Aristotle was looking for in terms of a function, without explanation of why the human function must be unique. Does Aristotle think in unsupported anthropocentric terms and feel it was not questionable to ascribe a special function to humans? Or does Aristotle have an ecological view and think that every different type of organism has a special function to support the whole community of flora and fauna? It is likely that Aristotle subscribes to the common belief that there is something unique about humans, and he does not see fit to support it. The project in *Nicomachean Ethics* is to find human happiness as an end in itself, so Aristotle does not aim to establish how humans function in relation to the world or an ecosystem.

The fourth premise, *Human function is not growth and nutrition because these aspects of life are shared with plants*, is problematic. It does not follow that a function cannot be based on a type of activity just because another thing shares in that activity. Two things can share a function but have different methods of obtaining resources to perform this function. To invoke ecology again, plants, as producers, obtain nutrients from the soil, and animals, as

consumers, obtain nutrients from plants or other animals; in either case the function of nutrition is served by different activities. It is not clear why humans cannot have nutrition and growth as their function just because they obtain nutrition differently from plants.

The fifth premise, *Human function is not sense perception because this aspect of life is shared with animals*, is troublesome in the same way as the fourth. Does Aristotle think that animals have no function because different kinds share in sense perception? In such case, do only humans have a function? Or perhaps Aristotle would ascribe functions to animals based on their unique features, which may turn out to be different levels of sense perception or different bodily features, but this possibility is unclear at this point since he is only considering major modes of living. Would all animals have the same function since they do share in sense perception? We cannot discern from this assumption what Aristotle believes to be the relevant facts about nature. It is possible that Aristotle is conflating all differences of features with functions.

Differences in features can clearly indicate either different functions or different ways of achieving the same function. If a pruning knife is compared to a steak knife, the different features found will indicate different functions. A pruning knife is designed to cut plant material while a steak knife is designed to cut meat; even though each could perform the other's function, neither could perform the other function as well. This kind of comparison is what Aristotle had in mind when comparing plants, animals, and humans. However, compare a regular screwdriver to an electric screwdriver and you will find major differences, though they each perform the same function; the electric screwdriver often functions better than the regular screwdriver. If this were the appropriate mode of comparing life forms, then it might be found that plants and humans have the same function of nutrition and growth but humans can perform this function better with their added abilities to search for nutrition in different places while a plant is rooted to one spot in the soil.

Plato presented a story concerning survival in *Protagoras*, beginning in Stephanus section 320c. The story claims that animals are able to survive by a variety of special physical abilities or features, with each type of animal having a unique set of abilities, but humans have insufficient physical abilities, requiring them to produce clothing, shelter, and tools.

Humans are able to survive only by using wisdom. So this story also notes the difference between animals and humans that Aristotle writes about; we will connect wisdom and reason here because rational ability is required to obtain and use wisdom. Since reason is used for survival, it is quite possible that the human function is simply to survive. And since nutrition and growth, sense perception, and reason all work together for human survival, it is possible that the human function encompasses all three of these aspects of life, not just the third one.

This criticism against the human function argument may be summarized as follows:

1 There is no evidence that humans must have a unique function apart from other life forms. 2 There is no evidence that sharing life activities precludes two different life forms from sharing a function. 3 It is incorrect to assume that things with different features necessarily have different functions. 4 Reason serves the same purpose as growth nutrition and sense perception, so it is possible that the human function may be shared with other life forms. 5 Therefore, Aristotle's human function argument may have incorrect premises leading to an incorrect conclusion.

As suggested above, Aristotle is following conventional wisdom when assuming that there is something special about humans. Indeed, approximately at line 1095^b2, Aristotle states that he is working from common beliefs to begin his inquiry of the *Ethics*. Since conventional wisdom also seems to hold that humans cannot even survive without reason and wisdom, it is likely Aristotle would consider the possibility that reason is a tool for survival and thus the human function is merely survival, so this criticism is on Aristotle's terms.

How could Aristotle respond to this criticism? It may turn out that this criticism can be used to enhance his point. Nowhere does Aristotle contradict the idea that reason is used for survival. He would of course agree that human survival depends on reason: In *Politics* Book I, Chapter 2, he says that by nature humans must form communities, which is the work of political science. Since political science requires reason and humans require political science for survival, Aristotle clearly understands reason's role in human survival, so the critic of the function argument should see that he and Aristotle are on common ground already.

The remaining question at this point is why elevate reason to the exclusion of other

survival factors when defining human function? First, the critic has succeeded in pointing out that growth nutrition and sense perception are inadequate for survival. These factors perform poorly, so of course special attention must be given to reason; reason is the capstone of human features that works for survival. Second, the critic should consider why Aristotle develops a human function argument in the first place.

The human function argument is sandwiched inside Aristotle's argument about finding the human good. The human good in turn will lead to an understanding of what human happiness should be, and discovering the nature of human happiness is the goal of Book I of the *Ethics* in which the human function argument appears. Aristotle wants to find the aspect of human life that is capable of bringing happiness, and he has already sharpened his focus with an earlier discussion of types of happiness beginning around line 1095^b15. There he cited common beliefs to reject the completeness of happiness found in the life of gratification, which is the life of gratifying sense perception in the manner of an animal. Aristotle has found that complete human happiness is not possible with a focus limited to growth nutrition and sense perception, thus human happiness must be found elsewhere. This sharpening of focus for finding happiness should be seen as guiding the subsequent human function argument. The human function argument fulfills the need of finding the aspect of life that can provide human happiness, and this aspect of life is reason.

This defense against the criticism of the human function argument may be reformulated as follows: 1 It is consistent to allow that an aspect of life used for survival may also determine a life form's function based on that aspect's presence or absence. 2 Human function will determine human happiness. 3 Human survival and thus happiness hinges on reason. 4 Human survival alone cannot be based on growth nutrition and sense perception. 5 So human happiness cannot be based on growth nutrition and sense perception. 6 So both human happiness and function will be based on reason.

We have found that Aristotle has good reasons for identifying the human function as the activity of reason. The larger argument of Book I makes it clear why this should be so. However, the criticism of the human function argument points out its inadequacy to stand alone since the argument provides little evidence for some of its premises and rests only on certain common beliefs without making a strong connection to the supporting evidence.

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