

Aristotle's
Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle says that “some [ends] are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them” (NE, 1.1, 1094a4).

Name three examples of ends that are activities.

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Name three examples of ends that are products of activities that produce them.

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What does Aristotle mean when he says the following:
“Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities” (NE, 1.1, 1094a5)

“If, then there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good” (NE, 1.2, 1094a18–22)

Here, Aristotle seems to be treating ‘the good’ as equivalent to *that which we desire for its own sake*.

This does not mean that things which are merely *useful* are not good. Things that are merely useful are good, but they are not the good.

Aristotle says that “fine and just actions ... exhibit much variety and fluctuation, so that they *may be thought* to exist only by convention, and not by nature” (NE, 1.3, 1094b14–15, emphasis added). There are two ways of interpreting this passage.

First interpretation:

Aristotle might be saying the following: Given how much variety and fluctuation there is in what counts as a fine and just action, we ought to conclude that ‘fine and just actions’ are determined merely by convention, rather than by nature.

Second interpretation:

Alternatively, he might be saying the following: Because there is so much variety and fluctuation in what counts as a fine and just action, it is not surprising that people sometimes think that these things are determined merely by convention, rather than by nature (even though this is not really the case).

Which of these do you think Aristotle is actually saying, and why?

Consider NE, Bk. 1 Ch. 4, 1095a14–1095a30

The many and the wise agree on something and they disagree about something.

- a. What do they agree about?
- b. What do they disagree about?

“Let us resume our inquiry and state, in view of the fact that all knowledge and choice aims at some good, what it is that we say political science aims at and what is the highest of all goods 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 faring well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honour; they differ, however, from one another—and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor; but, conscious of their ignorance, they admire those who proclaim some great thing that is above their comprehension. Now some thought that apart from these many goods there is another which is good in itself and causes the goodness of all these as well. To examine all the opinions that have been held would no doubt be somewhat fruitless: it is enough to examine those that are most prevalent or that seem to be agreeable.” (NE, Bk. 1 Ch. 4, 1095a14–1095a30)

Consider NE, Bk. 1 Ch. 5, 1095b13–1096a5

Aristotle identifies three types of lives: (i) the life of gratification, (ii) the life of political activity, and (iii) the life of contemplation.

a. People who pursue the life of gratification treat happiness as identical with pleasure. But this life is more suitable for beasts than for human beings.

b1. People who pursue the political life might be treating happiness as identical with honor. Why, according to Aristotle, can't honor and happiness be one and the same thing?

b2. Alternatively, people who pursue the political life might be treating happiness as identical with *virtue* or *excellence* (See 1095b30). Why doesn't Aristotle think that virtue or excellence could be one and the same thing as happiness?

b1. The problems with saying happiness=honor:

- “... it is thought to depend on those who bestow honour rather than on him who receives it,” (NE, 1.5, 1095b25)
- “... men seem to pursue honour in order that they may be assured of their merit ...” (NE, 1.5, 1095b27)

b2. The problems with saying happiness=virtue:

- “... even this appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; ...” (NE, 1.5, 1095b31–33)

Consider NE, Bk. 1 Ch. 6, 1096a11–1096a16

The friends that Aristotle mentions at the beginning of chapter 6 are Plato and some of his followers. Plato tried to explain the universal good by talking about the *form* or *idea* of the good.

“We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own. Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers; ~~for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends.~~” (NE, 1.6, 1096a11–1096a16)

**PLATO IS DEAR,
BUT THE TRUTH IS
DEARER.**

Consider NE, Bk. 1 Ch. 7, 1097a15–1097a23

At this early stage, Aristotle is leaving open the possibility that there might be many chief goods for human beings. Soon enough, however, he will narrow things down to one.

“... if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action.” (NE, 1.7, 1097a22–1097a23)

“... honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves ..., but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of [honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue], nor, in general, for anything other than itself” (NE, 1.7, 1097b3–1097b6)

- Aristotle says that **happiness** (or the complete good) **is self-sufficient**.
- Note that this is not the same thing as saying that the happy person is self-sufficient (although there might be a sense in which that is true).
- Aristotle defines the self-sufficient as follows: “that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing” (NE, 1.7, 1097b15).

The **function argument**: NE, Bk. 1 Ch. 7, 1097b23–1098a16

Why does Aristotle think that the human being has a function?

He asks some rhetorical questions: “Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he naturally functionless? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these?” (NE, 1.7, 1097b28–32)

We cannot treat this argument as demonstrative. At best, it only yields a probable conclusion.



Complete the following argument:

- A flute-player is a good flute-player if he performs his function (of flute-playing) well.
- A tanner is a good tanner if he performs his function (of tanning animal hides) well.
- An eye is a good eye if it performs its function (of allowing someone to see) well.
- An ear is a good ear if it performs its function (of allowing someone to hear) well.

Therefore,

- A human being is a good human being if

Aristotle says that the function of a human being is “an activity of soul which follows or implies reason” (NE, 1.7, 1098a8).

What does this mean? And why does he think that *this* is the function of a human being, rather than something else?

Given the way Aristotle has defined the human function, are there any professions (e.g., butcher, baker, or candlestick maker) where it would be impossible to perform the human function excellently?

Notice Aristotle's statement that "the beginning is thought to be more than half the whole" (1098b7). You don't need to do anything with this statement, but it is worth noticing. (Despite the "is thought to be" phrasing, Aristotle definitely endorses this principle.)

Consider NE, 1.8, 1098b9–1098b29 and 1098b30–1099a4

Quite a few intelligent people have thought about the nature of happiness before Aristotle. Aristotle thinks that, if his own account is going to count as an advance on theirs, it had better agree with what those earlier people got right. For example, Socrates thought that we should pay attention to the goods of the soul, rather than either external goods or goods of the body. Given that Aristotle says that the goods of the soul are most fully goods, his own account agrees with that of Socrates.

Why is Aristotle's account in harmony with the people who said that happiness was identical with virtue? (Important: Remember that Aristotle does not think that happiness is identical with virtue, but he thinks that this idea somehow captures *part* of the truth.)

Consider NE, 1.8, 1099a5–1099a31

Why does Aristotle think that his own account is in harmony with the people who said that happiness is identical with pleasure. (Once again, bear in mind that Aristotle does not think this view is right but only that it captures a part of the truth.)

What does Aristotle think that the inscription at Delos is wrong about?

“Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing, and these attributes are not severed as in the inscription at Delos—

Most noble is that which is justest, and best is health; But pleasantest is it to win what we love.

For all these properties belong to the best activities; and these, or one—the best—of these, we identify with happiness.” (NE, 1.8, 1099a24–30.)

Consider Bk. 1 Ch. 9, 1099b9–1100a9

Why does Aristotle think it is a mistake to call children happy?

Consider Bk. 1 Ch. 10, 1100a10–1101a21

Why do you think that Solon said that we should call no one happy until that person has died? Does Aristotle agree with Solon about this?

Consider Bk. 1 Ch. 11, 1101a22–1101b9

In this chapter, Aristotle introduces the idea of posthumous harms and benefits—i.e., things that happen after we have died but which nevertheless matter for our well-being. The idea is that, if all of my friends and family members were to suffer a terrible fate, this would negatively affect my well-being *even if* they suffer this terrible fate sometime after I have died. Likewise, if all of my friends and family members were to have extremely good fortune, it would positively affect my well-being even if they have this good fortune after I have died.

What do you think of the idea of posthumous harms and benefits?
Does it seem plausible to you?