

## Aristotle's Function Argument: A Defense

Jennifer Whiting

Aristotle thinks it is uncontroversial that *eudaimonia* is the highest good, or ultimate end, of human action (*EN* 1095a14-20).<sup>1</sup> He thinks that we all desire *eudaimonia* only for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, and also, that *eudaimonia* is that for the sake of which we do all things (*EN* 1097a30-b6; 1102a1-4). But Aristotle also thinks that this is uninformative; it does not tell us what the components of *eudaimonia* are and this is something about which there is much dispute (*EN* 1095a20-28).<sup>2</sup>

Some of Aristotle's contemporaries (and many of ours) are so impressed by the fact that different people enjoy different things that they follow Protagoras and adopt a subjectivist conception of *eudaimonia* according to which what seems best to each person *is* best for him. Others adopt an objectivist conception according to which what is good for a person is at least partly independent of his beliefs about what is good for him. On this objectivist view (but not on the subjectivist one) a person can mistakenly believe that something is good for him. So within the objectivist camp there are further disputes about which particular conception of *eudaimonia* is correct—some objectivists identifying *eudaimonia* with pleasure, others identifying it with honor, and yet others with contemplation or some combination of these goods.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle claims that we can resolve these disputes and give a clearer account of what *eudaimonia* is, if we appeal to the human *ἔργον* (or function). He argues that the good and the (doing well) (*τἀγαθὸν καὶ τὸ εὖ*) of a flute player or a sculptor or of anything which has a function is determined by that thing's function—a function which Aristotle says is peculiar to it (*EN* 1097b23-35). A good flute player has the virtue or ability which enables him to perform well; a good knife is sharp and able to cut well.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Aristotle thinks that a good man has the virtues and abilities which enable him to do well whatever it is the function of a man to do. Furthermore, Aristotle thinks that it is *good for* a man to have these virtues and to do these things; in fact, that man's *eudaimonia* depends on it (*EN* 1098a12-18).

Many commentators have thought this argument obviously mistaken and wrong-headed—primarily on the grounds that men do not have functions, and that even if they did, nothing about their good or *eudaimonia* would follow from their having these functions. But I will argue that these objections are based on misinterpretations of Aristotle, and that properly interpreted he presents an interesting and defensible (though admittedly controversial) account of the relationship between *eudaimonia* and human nature. If Aristotle's account *is* mistaken, it is mistaken in more interesting and ultimately more informative ways than commentators have traditionally thought.

## I

In general, Aristotle attempts to argue from claims about what it is to be a man (or the function of a man)<sup>5</sup> to conclusions about what is *good for* a man. Because he does so by appeal to the notion of a good man, commentators have often viewed his argument as consisting of two moves—first, the move from (a) what it is to be a *man* (or the function of a man) to (b) what it is to be a *good man*; and second, the move from (b) what it is to be a *good man* to (c) what is *good for* a man.<sup>6</sup>

The legitimacy of these moves is typically challenged by appeal to the following sort of examples. From an understanding of the function of a knife, it *may* follow that being sharp and cutting well make something a good knife; but it does not follow that being sharp and cutting well is *good for* a knife. Similarly, from an understanding of what it is to be a flute player, it *may* follow that some things (e.g., perfect pitch and a sense of rhythm) make someone a good flute player; but it does not follow that these things are *good for* someone who plays the flute. In a depressed economy, an unemployed virtuoso may wish that he had been tone deaf and had instead become a doctor.

So the fundamental challenge to Aristotle runs as follows. From an understanding of what it is to be a man, it *may* follow that a good man is one who has the virtues and abilities which enable him to perform characteristically human activities, though even this much is doubted. But it does not follow that having these virtues or engaging in these activities is *good for* any individual. Just as what makes someone a good flute player may fail to benefit him, so also what makes someone a good man may not be good for him. Suppose, e.g., that men are characteristically social or political animals. It does not follow that joining clubs or running for office is good for me, if I prefer to spend all my time reading Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

Aristotle, however, does not agree. He thinks that *if* men are characteristically social or political animals, then my exclusive preference for reading his *Metaphysics* reflects a mistaken judgment about what is good for me.<sup>7</sup> Our current problem is to see whether Aristotle can defend this objectivist view against the foregoing challenge. That challenge rests on three common, but I think mistaken, objections to Aristotle's argument.

The first objection attacks the move from (a) (the function of a man or what it is to be a man) to (b) (what it is to be a *good man*) on the ground that this requires that men, like bodily parts or craftsmen and their tools, have instrumental functions or virtues which presuppose their being good or useful for some further ends or purposes. But, the objection continues, men as such do not have instrumental functions or purposes, so the move from (a) to (b) is unwarranted.<sup>8</sup>

The second and third objections grant that men may have functions, not in the instrumental sense, but rather in the sense that there is some capacity (or set of capacities) which is peculiar to men and which distinguishes them from other animals. The second objection then attacks Aristotle's moves from (a) to (b) and from (b) to (c) on the ground that peculiarity is no recommendation. From the fact that some capacity (e.g., the capacity for prostitution) is peculiar to the human kind, it does not follow that a good man is one who exercises that capacity. Nor does it follow that it is *good for* men to exercise that capacity.<sup>9</sup>

The third objection allows the move from (a) to (b), and so allows that there may be a distinctively human set of capacities (including, e.g., the capacities for courage and

justice) which determine what makes someone a good man. It then objects to the move from (b) to (c) on the ground that *even if* a good man is one who exercises these capacities, it does not follow that it is *good for* any individual man to exercise these capacities; in situations of danger and scarcity, cowardly and unjust behavior may in fact benefit a man. The idea is that what makes someone a good instance of his kind is not necessarily good for *him*.<sup>10</sup>

Behind these objections lies a more general worry—namely, that Aristotle is attempting to move from purely descriptive and non-evaluative claims about what the human function *is* to explicitly normative conclusions about what is good for men and about how men *ought* to live—very roughly, the worry that Aristotle attempts to move from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’.

We have seen that these objections are typically supported by substituting references to things like knives and prostitutes for Aristotle’s references to men in (a) to (c). The legitimacy of the moves from (a) to (c) in the man-instance is then challenged by appeal to their illegitimacy in these substitution instances. But these substitutions are unwarranted. Aristotle explicitly makes distinctions which rule out the inferences from (a) to (c) in the substitution instances, while allowing them in the man-instance. Once we see how these distinctions rule out the illegitimate inferences, we will see that the foregoing objections are based on misinterpretations of Aristotle’s fundamental project. Aristotle does not suppose that men have instrumental functions or virtues. Nor does he attempt to move from a purely descriptive and non-evaluative account of the human function to normative conclusions. As we shall see, Aristotle’s account is normative ‘all the way down’.

## II

First, Aristotle distinguishes two senses in which we say one thing is for the sake of another (*DA* 415b20-21). One is the beneficial sense in which x’s occurring benefits someone. The other is the instrumental sense in which x is instrumental (or a means) to bringing it about that y, and it is a further question whether or not anyone is benefited in the process; it is simply a matter of causal efficacy. For example, hemlock may be instrumental (or a means) to killing someone. If no one is benefited by his death, we can say that his taking hemlock is *merely instrumental* to bringing it about that he dies. But if anyone is benefited by his death, we can say that his taking the hemlock is not merely instrumentally but also beneficially good for whomever it benefits.<sup>11</sup>

This distinction between the merely instrumental and the beneficial senses in which we say that one thing is for the sake of another is important because Aristotle claims that the notion of benefit is appropriately applied *only* to living creatures. He explicitly distinguishes love for friends from love for inanimate objects and says that while it is a necessary condition of friendship that I wish good to another for his own sake, it would be ridiculous for me to wish good to a bottle of wine; for it is only possible to wish that a bottle of wine be good in order to have it for oneself (*EN* 1155b29-31). A certain kind of sugar may be instrumentally good for fermentation; and a lengthy aging process instrumentally good for producing a mellow wine. But unless we introduce reference to the desires and interests of living creatures, these things will be merely instrumentally, and not also beneficially, good.

Restricting the class of beneficiaries to the class of living things rules out the infer-

ences from (b) to (c) in those substitutions involving inanimate objects such as knives. But this does not show that Aristotle will allow the inference in *all* substitutions involving animate creatures. He may want to rule out *some* inferences from (b) to (c) where living creatures are involved—namely, in the sort of inference from (b) what it is to be a good flute player (or a good prostitute) to (c) what is *good for* a flute player (or a prostitute).<sup>12</sup>

Now the class of flute players and the class of prostitutes do not constitute natural kinds. So Aristotle can rule out such inferences by claiming that the move from (b) to (c) is warranted only in substitutions involving natural kinds. But in order to show that this is not *ad hoc*, Aristotle must establish some connection between a thing's membership in a natural kind and what is beneficially good for that thing—or, since Aristotle takes membership in a natural kind to be an essential property (*Topics* 101b26-30), some connection between a thing's essential properties and what is beneficial for that thing. And this must be a connection which is lacking between a thing's membership in a non-natural kind (or a thing's accidental properties) and what is beneficially good for it. In other words, Aristotle must show that my belonging essentially to the human species determines at least something about what is beneficially good for me in a way in which my belonging accidentally to the class of flute players does not.

It is not hard to see that nothing about what is beneficially good for me follows simply from my playing the flute. Whether or not the characteristics which make me a good flute player benefit me will depend upon on the other desires and interests I happen to have. These characteristics may in fact benefit me, not simply *qua* flute player but also *qua* man, if playing is my sole source of support or personal fulfillment. But it will not follow *simply* from my being a flute player that these things benefit *me*. If I despise the flute, I may wish that I had been tone deaf so that my parents would not have encouraged me to develop this talent and I would not now be stuck giving music lessons when I would rather be doing philosophy instead. Because the potential benefits of playing the flute depend on what desires and interests I happen to have, they belong to the class of goods which Aristotle calls relative or conditional (τινί) and contrasts with unconditional or categorical (ἀπλῶς) goods.<sup>13</sup> And it is because the characteristics which make someone a good specimen of a non-natural kind tend to confer only conditional or relative benefits, that the inference from (b) to (c) is unwarranted in substitutions involving members of non-natural kinds.

If this interpretation is correct, then Aristotle suggests a connection between something's membership in a natural kind (or its essential properties) and what is unconditionally or categorically good for that thing. These unconditional goods are not unconditional in the sense that they are fixed entirely independently of the characteristics of the kind to which they are attached, but rather in the sense that they are fixed by characteristics which belong to each member of that kind simply in virtue of its being a member of that kind and not on characteristics such as particular desires and interests which may vary from one individual to another. These categorical goods are fundamental to Aristotle's project. Very roughly, his view is that for each species there is an ultimate end such that realizing that end (which Aristotle identifies with living a certain sort of life) is categorically or unconditionally good for any normal member of that species—that is, good for it whatever its actual interests and desires.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Aristotle's account of friendship suggests that he regards these cate-

gorical goods as intrinsic and non-instrumental in a way in which conditional goods are not. He claims that only virtuous persons wish well to one another for the other's own sake because they wish one another well for the sake of what each is essentially, and not (as in friendships for advantage or pleasure) for the sake of what each is accidentally (*EN* 1156a10-19, b7-24). This suggests that these categorical goods are independent of further ends and purposes, and so, intrinsically and non-instrumentally good in a way in which conditional goods are not. Now this is certainly a controversial view. But it is not the easy target that our initial objections take it to be.

### III

The first objection was that the inferences from (a) to (c) require that men have instrumental functions which presuppose their being good or useful for further ends or purposes. But we have just seen that this is not so. Aristotle can argue that the inferences from (a) to (c) hold only for individual members of (living) natural kinds to which categorical goods are attached. In other words, Aristotle can argue that these inferences depend upon there being some activities associated with each natural kind such that engaging in these activities is intrinsically and non-instrumentally beneficial for any normal member of that kind. So Aristotle's moves from (a) to (c) not only fail to require that men be viewed instrumentally; they actually require that men *not* be viewed instrumentally.

The inferences from (a) to (c) in those substitutions involving non-natural kinds fail precisely because the goods involved are merely instrumental and dependent upon the further purposes and ends of the members of those kinds. So it is the notion of an intrinsic or categorical good associated with each species which allows Aristotle to say that my belonging to the human species determines something about what is good for me in a way in which my belonging to the class of flute players does not. Of course, other things besides categorical goods may in fact benefit me—either because I have essential properties additional to those belonging to me as a member of this kind or because of certain accidental features of my environment or constitution.<sup>15</sup> But the fact that *some* claims about what is beneficially good for an individual *do not follow* from her belonging to a certain kind is no counterexample to the view that *some* claims about what is good for an individual *do follow* from her belonging to that kind.

We can now see that the second objection—that peculiarity is no recommendation—is also based on a misunderstanding of the term 'peculiar' (or *ἰδιον*) and its role in Aristotle's argument. In *Topics* i 4, Aristotle says that *ἰδιον* is sometimes used to refer to the essence (*τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι*) of a thing, and sometimes to refer to the necessary but non-essential properties of thing. Although Aristotle rarely uses *ἰδιος* to refer to the essence of a thing, this seems to be how he uses it in the function argument. For in that argument Aristotle talks exclusively about activities (especially rational activities) of the human soul. And Aristotle takes the soul of an organism to be its *essence* and not simply one of its necessary but non-essential properties.<sup>16</sup> In any case, Aristotle is not using *ἰδιος* as we would ordinarily use the word 'peculiar' to identify properties which are peculiar (in the sense of being unique) to the human species. If he were, he could not allow that contemplation is part of our good, for the capacity to contemplate is not unique to us; it belongs most of all to the gods. And similarly, he could not allow that *we* also share in contemplation, for then contemplation would not be peculiar (in the ordinary sense of the word)

to the gods either.<sup>17</sup> Only if we interpret *ἰδιόως* as referring to the human essence as a whole can we allow that contemplation belongs both to human and to divine welfare. On this interpretation, human and divine welfare will differ in so far as each is determined by a different conjunction of essential properties. But any individual conjunct of one may be shared by the other as long as there is at least one conjunct which belongs to one and not to the other. This interpretation of *ἰδιόως* as referring to the human essence as a whole enables Aristotle to rule out proposed counterexamples which involve capacities (like the capacity for prostitution) which are peculiar to us in the ordinary sense, but which are not parts of the human essence.<sup>18</sup>

I have now argued that Aristotle has the resources to rule out the illegitimate inferences from (a) to (c) in those substitutions involving inanimate objects and members of non-natural kinds. But this does *not* show that the inferences from (a) to (c) *are* warranted in substitutions involving living members of natural kinds. Aristotle must defend his claim that something's membership in a natural kind at least partly determines what is beneficial for that thing; he must, that is, answer the third objection.

#### IV

At this point, Aristotle might appeal to his view that membership in a natural kind is an essential property which an individual cannot lose without ceasing to exist. So the connection between membership in a natural kind and the capacity for benefit may simply be a consequence of Aristotle's view that there must be some stable and enduring entity which survives any change involved in coming to be benefited—i.e., something which sticks around to receive the benefit.<sup>19</sup> But Aristotle is not claiming simply that something must remain what it is essentially in order for it to be benefited. He is making the stronger claim that the ways in which a thing can be benefited are at least partly determined by the kind of thing it is and what its essential properties are.

Aristotle might defend this claim by appeal to the claim that the psychological structures and characteristic functions of a natural kind largely determine what is healthy for members of that kind. For example, the physiological structures and characteristic activities of a plant determine that exercising the capacity for photosynthesis is constitutive of a plant's health. So if we allow that healthy functioning is *good for* an individual, then these examples may show that at least *some* things about what is good for an individual are determined simply by the kind of thing it is. These things are what I have been calling the unconditional or categorical goods associated with natural kinds. Aristotle wants to argue that just as the characteristic structures and functions of plants determine that some things are categorically good for plants, so the characteristic structures and functions of men determine that some things are categorically good for men.

At this point, however, it is important to stop and examine Aristotle's argument with care. For this is the point at which many commentators suspect that Aristotle attempts to move from a purely descriptive and non-evaluative account of the function of an organism to explicitly normative conclusions about what is good for that organism. But that is not Aristotle's argument; he does not think that we can identify the characteristic structures and functions of an organism without introducing normative considerations. In other words, Aristotle does not think that we can give an account of the essence or the function of a kind without introducing some notion of what is beneficial for members

of that kind. This is what I had in mind when I said that Aristotle's account was normative 'all the way down'.

The primary evidence for this comes from Aristotle's teleology. As is well known, Aristotle distinguishes four types of cause—material, efficient, formal, and final—and argues that in the case of many things (especially natural ones) the formal and final cause coincide.<sup>20</sup> His idea here is not difficult.

The final cause of a thing is what that thing is for—the end (τέλος) for the sake of which it exists. This is usually some activity. For example, the final cause of an axe is the activity of chopping. The formal cause is the capacity (or set of capacities) which enables a thing to engage in that activity constitutive of its final cause or end. In the case of an axe, this is the capacity to chop. This capacity is the essence of a thing or what makes that thing a thing of its kind. So the formal and final cause of a thing coincide in the sense that the formal cause of a thing is the capacity (or set of capacities) which enables that thing to perform those activities constitutive of its end—i.e., the capacity to perform those activities for the sake of which it exists. So we cannot say what the formal cause (or essence) of something is without reference to its final cause or end.

The fact that formal and final causes coincide in this way is important. For Aristotle generally associates the final cause with the good of the organism (*Meta.* 983a30-b1, 1013b25-27) or with what is better for the organism (*Physics* 198b4-9), and hence, with something explicitly normative. So if we cannot identify or define the formal cause (or essence) of a thing without reference to its end or final cause, we cannot identify or define the formal cause (or essence) of a thing without introducing explicitly normative considerations.<sup>21</sup> These, of course, will help to answer the question about which of the many characteristics (or sets of characteristics) peculiar (in the ordinary sense of the word) to men constitute the human essence, and so determine what it is to be a good man. They will be those characteristics which are essentially related to the activities constitutive of our end. But this only serves to relocate the problem at the point where we ask which of the many activities (or sets of activities) peculiar to men constitute our end. If Aristotle has no independent method of answering this question—independent, that is, of what seems best to each person—then he is going to have a tough time defeating the subjectivist. His strategy of appealing to an objectively determined essence to generate an objective end or good will be undermined if there is no objective essence and each person's end is just what it seems to him to be.

## V

The fundamental claims on which Aristotle's position rests should by now be clear, even if controversial. They are first, that there are objective essences belonging to members of natural kinds, and second, that these essences (at least partly) determine what is beneficial for members of those kinds. In other words, Aristotle attempts to defeat the subjectivist by arguing that our essence is objective and not whatever it seems to us to be, and so, that our *eudaimonia* is objective and not whatever it seems to us to be. And Aristotle thinks that determining precisely what our essence is will also enable him to reject mistaken objectivist conceptions of *eudaimonia* such as hedonism and (in my view) Strict Intellectualism.<sup>22</sup> It is because he thinks that we are neither beasts nor gods that Aristotle denies that our *eudaimonia* consists solely in the pursuit of pleasure or exclusively in contemplation.

An adequate defense of Aristotle's position thus involves three tasks. First, he must argue that there are objective essences belonging to members of natural kinds. Second, he must defend the alleged connection between the essence of a kind and what benefits members of that kind. And third, he must give an account of the human essence. Moreover, since Aristotle wants to appeal to that essence to resolve disputes about *eudaimonia* and human welfare, he must have some method for determining what our essence is which is (at least partly) independent of our beliefs about human welfare.

Aristotle attempts his first task (that of defending essentialism) in several contexts—most notably, in *Metaphysics* iv 4 (where he attempts a dialectical argument against someone who denies the principle of non-contradiction) and also in his defense of the distinction between generation (or destruction) *simpliciter* and mere alteration. I cannot now evaluate the success of the arguments. Nor, barring the presence of a radically subjectivist opponent, do I think that necessary. The relevance of these arguments here is simply that they rest on *general* considerations about the possibility of rational discourse and change—considerations which are independent of our moral beliefs. So these arguments provide independent and non-moral support for Aristotle's ethical argument.

I have already suggested that Aristotle can attempt his second task by appealing to the life sciences where facts about the natures of various species are supposed to justify *some* claims about what is good or bad (in the sense of being healthy or unhealthy) for members of those species. For we are less inclined to be skeptical about biological benefit and harm. And even if we think that we must introduce *some* normative notions in order to determine what constitutes healthy functioning for a plant or animal, we need not deny the existence of a connection between the characteristic structures and activities of a living organism and what benefits and harms that organism. Here again, there is independent and non-moral (though not necessarily non-evaluative) support for Aristotle's ethical conclusions.<sup>23</sup>

Now what I want to suggest is that Aristotle can achieve some of the independence from our beliefs about *human* welfare necessary for his third task, if he applies to humans the *general* methods he uses to determine which of a plant's (or animal's) characteristics are essential to it, and which of a plant's (or animal's) activities constitute its end. That is, Aristotle must apply to humans, methods which are similar to (or the same as) those used to determine that, e.g., photosynthesizing is constitutive of a plant's health. These methods will presumably include the observation of behavior and the attempt to explain such behavior within his general teleological framework, an attempt which admittedly appeals to beliefs about the ways in which such behavior is related to the welfare of the relevant organism.<sup>24</sup> If Aristotle can use these *general* methods to establish that the exercise of some capacities is essentially human, then he can claim that the exercise of these capacities is essentially related to human welfare or *eudaimonia* in much the same way that exercising the capacity for photosynthesis is related to a plant's health. These capacities may turn out to be rational, linguistic, social or otherwise. But whatever they are, Aristotle can view the *method* of establishing what is good for rational beings as no less objective than that of establishing what is good for plants and non-rational animals.

So Aristotle need not rely on a mere analogy between a plant's health and a man's welfare. He can argue that each is a special case of the general notion of εὖ ζῆν (or *liv-*

ing well). *Eudaimonia* is simply the εὖ ζῆν of essentially rational animals, and so, is strictly parallel to the εὖ ζῆν of any other plant or animal.<sup>25</sup>

## VI

At this point, someone might object to Aristotle's assimilation of *eudaimonia* to the εὖ ζῆν (or welfare) of plants and animals. He might object that we can derive an adequate conception of a plant's welfare simply from an understanding of its physiological structures and activities only because we *identify* a plant primarily—or exclusively—with those physiological structures and activities which are definitive of health; these things exhaust the essence of a plant. So contributing to (or damaging) the health of a plant is the only way to benefit (or harm) it. The same presumably goes for most animals. But we do not think that contributing to (or damaging) a man's health exhausts the ways in which we might benefit (or harm) him. That is because we do not *identify* men primarily with the physiological characteristics definitive of health and Aristotle may not identify men with these at all.<sup>26</sup> Something else is thought to be essential to human nature—namely, rationality.

So far, Aristotle agrees. He thinks that men are essentially rational animals whose characteristic activity or *ergon* is to pursue intentionally their own good—or at least their own apparent or conceived good. But Aristotle denies that this undermines his attempt to assimilate *eudaimonia* or human welfare to the welfare of plants and other animals. Given the connection between a thing's essence and the ways in which it can be benefited, Aristotle thinks that a man's rationality (at least partly) determines what is beneficial for him.

But someone who accepts the main points of Aristotle's argument *and* his characterization of men as essentially rational animals may still be dissatisfied. He may object that this characterization of men as essentially rational is not sufficient to yield any interesting or substantive conclusions about human welfare, and so, will not help us to discover the components of *eudaimonia*. He may think that these components will be contingent on which goals and desires rational creatures happen to have and that these goals and desires can vary from one individual to the next. He may say that whatever we think about the welfare of non-rational creatures, the welfare of rational ones is subjective in the sense that a rational agent's welfare is determined by the beliefs and desires an agent happens to have.

We have seen, however, that Aristotle does not entirely agree.<sup>27</sup> He thinks that there are objective components of *eudaimonia* which are determined by human nature without being entirely dependent on the particular goals and desires individuals happen to have. Aristotle might defend this claim by arguing that whatever goals and desires a man happens to have, he has reason to cultivate rational agency by developing those virtues which enable him to pursue his goals (whatever they are) most effectively. For example, practical wisdom or the ability to identify the best available means to his ends will contribute to the effective pursuit of his goals. And temperance or the capacity to control his appetites and passions will make a similar contribution. Just as someone can perform certain actions which undermine a heart or a kidney's capacity to function effectively (by, e.g., eating and drinking too much or exercising too little), so also someone can undermine his capacity to pursue his goals effectively if he fails to develop temperance and practical reason. And Aristotle is entitled to claim that establishing the

connection between these virtues and effective rational agency is no less a matter of empirical inquiry than that of establishing the connection between the former actions and their effects on hearts and kidneys.

Similarly, Aristotle can appeal to the connection between a thing's essence and the conditions for its survival in order to argue that any essentially rational agent (whatever his actual goals and desires) has reason to preserve his capacity for rational agency. For remaining what he is essentially is a condition of *his* attaining those goals, or indeed, of *his* receiving any benefits at all. On Aristotle's view, someone who destroys his capacity for rational agency (by, e.g., taking excessive doses of hallucinogenic drugs) literally destroys himself. For even if someone else takes over and manages his life for 'him', Aristotle would say that it is not *he*, but rather someone else, who receives the apparent benefits of this overseer's efforts.

This case—or the case of someone who becomes what we call 'a human vegetable'—is analogous to the case where my friend who 'becomes' a god fails to survive that change, and so, is not strictly the beneficiary of any goods accruing to that newly existing deity. This analogy is important *if* practical intellect is part of the human essence. For practical intellect is essentially concerned with psycho-physical affections such as desire and anger. This means that even if my theoretical intellect could survive in a disembodied state, I (who am essentially human and so essentially composed of practical intellect) could not. So however singlemindedly Aristotle thinks I ought to pursue contemplation, he cannot recommend that I 'become' a disembodied intellect in order to do so. For there is a sense in which *I* would be no better off 'becoming' a god, than if I were to 'become' a beast or a vegetable. The general point is that *if* we are essentially rational agents, we have reason to preserve our rational agency simply as a necessary condition of attaining any of our goals, whatever they happen to be.

Of course this argument will not convince absolutely everyone. It will not convince a present-aim theorist whose goal is to live for the moment because he does not think of himself as existing over extended periods of time. Nor will it convince someone whose *goal* is to be intemperate or irrational. But Aristotle can reasonably reply that this goal is one that a rational agent, in so far as he thinks of himself as such, cannot coherently have. On Aristotle's view, each of these men—the intemperate man and the present-aim theorist—makes a mistake about who or what he is, and so, about what is good for him. Of course, if these men turn out to be right and Aristotle wrong about what we are, then Aristotle may have to abandon his own conception of *eudaimonia*. But the fact that he cannot convince people who do not think of themselves as rational agents existing over time that temperance and prudence are good for them is not an objection to Aristotle's view.

So far then, our objector may agree that any essentially rational agent has reasons to preserve and to cultivate his rational agency, whatever goals and desires he happens to have. But this shows only that temperance and practical wisdom are instrumentally valuable to any rational agent and these instrumental connections are not enough for Aristotle. For they do not show what the *components* of *eudaimonia* are. Nor do they justify the independent value Aristotle attaches to a man's own rational pursuit of his final good. In order to explain this, we must invoke Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* as a special case of the kind of welfare attributable to any plant or animal.

A merely instrumental connection between a heart's strength and its capacity to pump

blood does not show why a heart is better off beating on its own if a pacemaker could be doing its work instead. Nor does a merely instrumental connection between practical wisdom and *eudaimonia* show why *I* am better off running my own life, if someone else could do it for me. Suppose that my powers of practical reasoning are modest and that I occasionally suffer from weakness of will. Why should I not turn my deliberations over to a highly efficient life planning agency and then commit myself to the care of someone empowered to enforce its decisions? This might seem especially prudent, if I am thus able to satisfy a larger proportion of my first order aims and desires than I would otherwise do—or than most of my admittedly more self-reliant friends do.

But Aristotle would not agree. He does not view *eudaimonia* (as we might view happiness) simply as the satisfaction of all (or of a reasonable portion) of a person's various first order desires and aims. That person's role in bringing it about that his desires are satisfied or his aims attained is of fundamental importance.<sup>28</sup> We might put this point by saying that *eudaimonia* does not simply require that my desires *be* satisfied or that my ends *be* attained; *eudaimonia* requires that *I* satisfy my desires and that *I* attain these ends.<sup>29</sup> This explains why Aristotle says that *eudaimonia* is an *activity* of soul in accordance with virtue, and refuses to call a person *eudaimôn* if her various first order ends and desires are satisfied simply as a matter of luck or chance.<sup>30</sup> While *we* might be willing to say that such a person is *happy* and perhaps even that she lives well, Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* as a special case of the welfare of living things shows why he would not agree.<sup>31</sup>

Aristotle is relying on a conception of attaining one's ends which is fundamentally natural. A heart which, owing to some deficiency in its natural capacities, cannot beat on its own but is made to beat by means of a pacemaker is not a healthy heart. For *it*, the heart, is not strictly performing its function. Similarly a man who, owing to some deficiency in his natural capacities, cannot manage his own life but is managed by means of another's deliberating and ordering him is not *eudaimôn*—not even if he possesses the same goods and engages in the same first order activities as does a *eudaimôn* man. For *he*, the man, is not strictly performing his function. This is why Aristotle refuses to call slaves, who lack the capacity for deliberation, *eudaimôn* (*Pol.* 1260a12-14, 1280a31-35; *EN* 1177a8-9). On this naturalistic view, the connection between *eudaimonia* and rational agency is not merely instrumental. Aristotle's claim that *eudaimonia* is an activity of soul in accordance with virtue shows that he thinks that *eudaimonia* consists in exercising rational agency.

## VII

So far our objector, if he adopts Aristotle's naturalistic framework, may agree. But he is likely to complain that this still tells us very little about what *eudaimonia* or human welfare is. Surely it consists in the rational pursuit of one's own goals, but which goals are these? Could my *eudaimonia* consist in the deliberate pursuit of evil ends (e.g., in torturing children)? Or could it consist in the rational and calculating pursuit of sensual pleasure?

Aristotle does not think so. He thinks that a full account of human nature can show us not only that *eudaimonia* consists in the rational pursuit of our own conceived ends, but also something about what these ends are or ought to be. This is clear from Aristotle's discussion of friendship and self-love.

Aristotle thinks that only virtuous friends wish well to one another for the other's own sake. They do so because they wish well to one another for the sake of what each is essentially and not (as in friendships for advantage and pleasure) for the sake of what each is accidentally (*EN* 1156a10-19, b7-24). What does Aristotle mean by this?

Business associations are typical cases of friendship for advantage. Suppose that my friend and I are stockbrokers who wish well to one another in that respect in which we are friends. We each hope that the other will be successful in his pursuit of profit. But this does not show that each wishes well to the other *for his own sake*. For that depends not only on why each of us pursues profit, but also on each of us understanding where profit fits into the other's aims. Suppose that my friend values the money only instrumentally and as means to things which he values for their own sakes—e.g., as tuition for a philosophy course so that he can achieve contemplation. It is only if I wish him well in pursuing these ultimate ends and not simply as a profiteer that I wish him well for his own sake.

But there is a problem here. What if I, unlike my friend, make profit my ultimate end? Does this mean that any true friend who wishes me well for my own sake must wish me well in my pursuit of profit? Aristotle does not think so, for he thinks that when I pursue profit as an ultimate end, I do not even wish *myself* well for my own sake. This is clear from Aristotle's distinction between two kinds of self-love.

Aristotle says that the person who loves and gratifies the dominant part of himself—that is, his intellect (or rational part) is most truly a lover of self. But someone who places too high a value on money, honor, or pleasure, and so gratifies his affections and the irrational part of himself, is less truly a lover of self. For he assigns goods to the irrational part which is less truly him than the rational part, which is most of all (and perhaps even exclusively) who or what he is (*EN* 1168b25-1169a6). Aristotle thinks that like the intemperate man and the present-aim theorist, this person makes a mistake about who he is, and so, about what is good for him.

Aristotle thinks that we are essentially creatures who intentionally pursue our own good (or our own conceived good). So he thinks that there is a sense in which we must be pursuing what is really or objectively good for us, even when we deliberately pursue specific ends which are not in fact good for us. In such cases, we desire the good and are simply mistaken about what it is.

Suppose, e.g., that I believe that sensual pleasure is good (for me) and on the basis of this belief, make pleasure my ultimate end. Because I pursue pleasure *as good* (or on the basis of that belief) Aristotle thinks that *if* pleasure is not really good for me, then there is a sense in which I do not get what I am after, no matter how much pleasure I achieve in the process. It is as though I have captured Oswald believing that he is the killer of JFK. If someone else killed JFK, then whether or not I know it, I have not got what I want. And this, Aristotle says, is like getting nothing at all (*EN* 1164a13-16). Aristotle thinks it is like this with pleasure and the good.

In this sense, Aristotle may allow that a person can sincerely believe that he is *eudaimôn* and still be mistaken in that belief—something we would not be very likely to say about happiness. He believes that someone whose desires rest on mistaken beliefs about what is good for him will be better off if his beliefs (and desires) are corrected so that he has true beliefs about what is good for him, and so desires what is really good for him (*EN* 1129b4-6). And Aristotle thinks that this is true, no matter how objec-

tively satisfied he is with his present lot.

Now these things which are objectively good for a person, whatever his actual beliefs and desires, are the categorical goods which Aristotle thinks will benefit him simply in so far as he is essentially human. What these things are will depend on what the human essence is. If, as some commentators think, Aristotle identifies us exclusively with our theoretical intellects, then contemplation alone will be categorically good for us. And this is true even if virtues such as temperance and prudence are instrumentally valuable in our pursuit of contemplation. But if (as I think Aristotle believes) practical intellect is also part of our essence, then moral virtue will also be categorically good for us. Similarly, if the irrational desires are part of the human essence, then even certain sensual pleasures may also be categorically good for us. And these things will be categorically good for us and components of our *eudaimonia* in the same way in which photosynthesis is categorically good for plants. The fundamental difference between us and plants is that we intentionally pursue our categorical good and they do not.

### VIII

Before concluding, I want to point out just how ambitious Aristotle's project really is. He initially appeals to the human function in order to give content to our uncontroversial but uninformative account of *eudaimonia* as the ultimate end of human action. But much of his success depends on how much he is willing or able to build into his account of human nature in the first place. For as we saw, the specification of man simply as a rational agent does not get him very far. It may (given Aristotle's naturalistic framework) show that *eudaimonia* consists in the rational pursuit of one's own goals. But it does not show much about what these goals ought to be.

If Aristotle wants to show more about these goals, he needs a fuller account of human nature. For example, if (as Aristotle says) man is by nature a social or political animal, then this may show that friendship and political activity are components of *eudaimonia* (*EN* 1097b8-11, 1169b18-19; *Pol.* 1253a8-9). Similarly, if theoretical intellect is part of human nature, then contemplation will also be a component of *eudaimonia*. But Aristotle needs to be careful here—especially if he wants to argue against Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Co. that all the traditional virtues benefit a man. For Aristotle then needs some independent means of deciding which things are, and which are not, parts of human nature—that is, means which are not entirely dependent on views about what the traditional virtues or the components of *eudaimonia* are. This is crucial, if Aristotle's appeal to human nature is supposed to provide a way of *discovering* what *eudaimonia* is.

This is why it is important that in *EN* i, Aristotle appeals to his general teleology and to the independently plausible psychological theory of the *De Anima* in order to establish that man is essentially a rational animal. But the further Aristotle strays from these independently plausible teleological and psychological theories, and the more he tries to restrict the contents of *eudaimonia* by filling in the account of human nature, the more suspect his conclusions become. We may not agree that reading Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is good for me if I prefer to spend my time playing basketball—or that an occasional cocktail party or political appointment is good for me if I prefer to devote all of my time to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. But whatever we think of these more specific conclusions, Aristotle's general identification of what it is to be human with rational agency is not altogether implausible—at least not to those of us who would prefer to trust our hearts

to pacemakers than our deliberations and the pursuit of our ends to another, no matter how benevolent and wise he happens to be.<sup>32</sup>

University of Pittsburgh

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although I believe that 'happiness' is an appropriate translation of *eudaimonia* in the sense that each refers to the ultimate end of human action and allows for both subjective and objective conceptions of that end, I leave *eudaimonia* untranslated because I believe that contemporary conceptions of happiness tend to be subjectivist in a way in which Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* is not. On this point, see Kraut, 1979b, 167-197.

<sup>2</sup> On Aristotle's distinction between the components of a thing and the necessary conditions for its existence, see *EE* 1214b6-28; *Pol.* 1328a21-b4 and 1239a34-39, and Greenwood 1909, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> I include hedonism (and other conceptions of *eudaimonia* which identify *eudaimonia* with some subjective psychological state such as pleasure) among objectivist conceptions of *eudaimonia* in so far as they claim that pleasure (or some other subjective psychological state) is good for us independently of our belief that it is so—that is, in so far as they allow that someone may (like Antisthenes) mistakenly believe that pleasure is not in fact good for him, and so, mistakenly avoid pleasure. The fact that different things please different people does not undermine the claim that pleasure, whatever its source, is objectively good.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle does not explicitly mention the function of a knife or of any other artifact in the Nicomachean version of the function argument, but he argues by induction from the functions of artifacts to the function of the soul in the Eudemian version (*EE* 1219a1-5). This may support the view that the Eudemian version is earlier and that by the time he wrote the *EN* Aristotle was aware of, and sought to avoid, some of the objections discussed in this paper. But we must suspend judgment on this issue for now. (For a brief comparison of the Nicomachean and Eudemian versions of the function argument, see Cooper 1975, 145-146n.) I introduce the knife example at this point because many commentators believe that Aristotle is explicitly committed to it, and, indeed, relying on it.

<sup>5</sup> For the view that what a thing is is determined by its function, see *Meteor.* 390a10-13 where, incidentally, Aristotle uses the example of a saw.

<sup>6</sup> Although I will eventually argue that Aristotle thinks that there is really only one move here, i.e., the move directly from (a) to (c), commentators have often represented Aristotle as making two moves here, and so, have attacked the general move from (a) to (c) in different ways—some by attacking the move from (a) to (b), others by attacking the move from (b) to (c). So for the sake of argument, I will begin by speaking as if there are two distinct moves here, even though I doubt that Aristotle distinguished them in this way. On Aristotle's view, there is no real distinction between (a) and (b) because what it is to be an F (or the function of an F) and what it is to be a *good* F (or the function of a *good* F) are the same.

<sup>7</sup> These examples are not intended to suggest that Aristotle takes the function argument to yield results at this level of specificity; the activities of joining clubs and reading the *Metaphysics* should be regarded as determinate examples of the more general determinable types of activity in which *eudaimonia* consists. On this point, see Irwin 1985, 98-99.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Hardie 1980, 23-24. For statements (though not explicit endorsements) of this objection, see also Suits 1974, 23-25 and Siegler 1967, 37.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Clark 1972, 273, Clark 1975, 14-17, and Nozick 1971, 288-289. (Nozick does not explicitly discuss Aristotle.)

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Glassen 1957, 319-322 and Wilkes 1978, 555-556.

<sup>11</sup> 'x' and 'y' can be taken as referring to events or activities. The idea here is that only in the case of living organisms is the good performance of the function for the sake of (i.e., beneficial for) the performer of that function.

<sup>12</sup> Here Aristotle can allow that something is good for x *qua* flute player, but not good for x *qua* man. So if x is essentially a man and only accidentally a flute player, that thing will be only accidentally (and not essentially) good for x. In this case, x will belong to the class of what Aristotle calls 'conditional' or 'relative' (τινί) goods and distinguishes from unconditional (ἀπλῶς) goods. See next note.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., *EN* 1152b26-27, 1155b23-27, 1157b26-28 with 1148b15-19; *EE* 1235b30-34, 1228b18-22. Cooper 1980, 317, describes this distinction as follows: 'A thing is good absolutely if it is good for human beings as such, taken in abstraction from special and contingent peculiarities of particular persons: these peculiar-

ities may provide additional interests, needs, and wants and on the basis of them one can speak of additional, possibly divergent, things as good for this or that particular person.'

<sup>14</sup> If Aristotle admits the possibility that there are members of natural kinds which are defective in the sense that they lack certain essential properties of that kind (e.g., mentally defective and non-rational members of the human species) then these categorical goods may not be good for them. He can say, as he does about pleasure at *EN* 1148b15-19, that because of such defects, what is good (or pleasant) *for them* does not coincide with what is unconditionally good (or pleasant). On the issue of essential properties which do not necessarily belong to any member of the species, see Irwin 1980, n5.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that if Aristotle allows that there are qualitatively distinct individual essences which, however, belong to a single kind, then he may be able to argue that individual members of a single species can be benefited in substantially different ways without abandoning the connection between a thing's essence and the ways in which it can be benefited. But nothing in my argument depends on attributing this controversial view to Aristotle.

<sup>16</sup> Here it is important to note that I am not claiming that *ἄριστος* means 'essential', but only that it is used here to refer to what is essential. Perhaps 'proper' would be a less misleading translation than 'peculiar'.

<sup>17</sup> See Kraut 1979a, 469-471.

<sup>18</sup> At this point, someone may object that taking what is *ἄριστος* to man as referring to the human essence as a whole conflicts with Aristotle's explicit claim that nourishment and growth are not parts of our good. But Aristotle can deny that there is any conflict here, if he appeals to his distinction between necessary but non-essential properties and essential properties, or alternatively, between the necessary conditions and the components of a thing. (See n2.) He can then argue that our nutritive and reproductive capacities are necessary but non-essential properties of us, while our capacities for moral virtue and contemplation are components of our essence.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle clearly regards this point about change as relevant to the capacity for receiving benefit. For he argues that it is possible to wish someone well for his own sake and out of concern for what he is (*οἷός ποτ' ἔστίς*) only on the condition of his remaining who (or what) he essentially is (*EN* 1159a8-12). Just as one can wish the greatest goods for one's friend only in so far as he remains a man, one can wish goods for oneself only on the condition of remaining oneself. For no one would choose to possess all goods on the condition of becoming another—not even if he were to become a god (*EN* 1166a20-24). For he would not survive that change and these goods would accrue rather to some newly existing deity.

<sup>20</sup> See *Phys.* ii 3; and *De Anima* ii 4 where Aristotle argues that the soul is the formal, final and efficient cause of the living body.

<sup>21</sup> See Sorabji 1964, 289-302.

<sup>22</sup> Following Keyt 1980, 138-157, I take 'Strict Intellectualism' to be the view that contemplation is the sole component (as opposed to necessary condition) for *eudaimonia*. I argue that Aristotle rejects this view in Whiting 1986, 70-95. But nothing in my present argument depends on which particular objectivist conception of *eudaimonia* Aristotle adopts.

<sup>23</sup> This argument will not work against someone who rejects Aristotle's general teleological views. It will not, e.g., convince someone who restricts the notion of benefit to rational evaluators and makes all benefits relative to the attitudes of such evaluators. But that does not mean that this is not Aristotle's view. There is no reason to assume that he expected his argument to convince opponents who rejected his teleological and essentialist premisses. What is important for Aristotle is that some people do accept these premisses and others can be persuaded to accept them on grounds which are independent of their views about morality.

<sup>24</sup> See Irwin 1980, 35-53 and 1981, 193-223.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle sometimes seems to restrict the capacity for *εὖ ζῆν* to rational, or at least to higher animals. See *PA* 656a5-10; and *Pol.* 1280a31-34, where he denies *εὖ ζῆν* even to slaves. If this is his considered view, then *εὖ ζῆν* is not a general conception of living well applicable to *all* living things. Nonetheless, there does seem to be some notion of what is beneficial for any living thing and *eudaimonia* can still be viewed as a special case of that—i.e., as a special case of the general notion of welfare applicable to any living thing.

<sup>26</sup> See Cooper 1975, 144-180.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle may allow that some of what benefits a rational agent may be contingent on what goals and desires she happens to have and that these goals and desires can vary from one creature to the next. This will presumably occur as our descriptions of what benefits individuals become increasingly specific and is compatible with there being things which benefit *any* rational agent at higher levels of description.

<sup>28</sup> Nagel 1972, 252-259 (rep. in Rorty 1980) calls this 'the condition of autonomy'. (See *EN* 1099b18-25

and *Pol.* 1323b24-29.) The importance of autonomy stems not so much from the practical benefits of self-sufficiency as from Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* as an *activity* of the agent's soul.

<sup>29</sup> If these desires or goals are personal (as opposed to impersonal) then it may be conceptually true that the *only* way for them to be satisfied or attained is by *me*.

<sup>30</sup> This does not mean that someone cannot be deprived of *eudaimonia* by luck or by chance. Even if someone must be responsible for his *eudaimonia*, he may not be responsible for his failure to achieve *eudaimonia*. This asymmetry of responsibility is not necessarily objectionable; we often attribute responsibility to people for acquired skills which, however, can be lost through accidents, as in the case of the young pianist who was pushed in front of an oncoming subway train. But this leaves Aristotle a problem of explaining why someone should cultivate his powers of rational agency even if, as a result of misfortune, his own *eudaimonia* should fail to result.

<sup>31</sup> See n1 above.

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to audiences at Rice University, UCLA, and the University of Pennsylvania—and to Richard Boyd, David Brink, Leon Galis, Phil Mitsis, Steve Strange, Gisela Striker, and the referees of this journal—for their comments on previous versions of this paper. I would like especially to thank Terry Irwin for repeated criticism and encouragement.

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