

Will Heegaard

Joseph Barnes

Philosophy 25A

November 29, 2009

Question: Aristotle #1

Aristotle's Happiness: A Critique of the "Highest End"

In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle attempts to explain how and why the human good is happiness. He first characterizes the human good as the highest end of human action. He writes that since every action "seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well described as that at which everything aims" (Aristotle, NE 1.1. 1094a2). However, Aristotle acknowledges that many different actions aim at many different ends: the end of medicine is health, the end of boatbuilding is a boat, the end of generalship is victory, etc... (Aristotle, NE 1.1.1094a9). To reconcile these claims, Aristotle imagines a hierarchy of ends, in which certain sciences are subordinate to others. For example, the science of bridlemaking is subordinate to the science of horsemanship, while the science of horsemanship – along with every other science of war - is subordinate to the science of generalship (Aristotle, NE 1.1.1094a13). In this hierarchy, "the end of the ruling science is more choiceworthy than all the ends subordinate to it, since it is the ends for which those ends are also pursued" (Aristotle, NE 1.1.1094a15). At the top of this hierarchy, then, is the human good. Supposing that "(a) there is some end of the things we pursue in our

actions which we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things; and (b) we do not choose everything because of something else, since (c) if we do so, it will go on without limit...; then clearly (d) this end will be the good, i.e., the best good (Aristotle, NE 1.2.1094a20).

After characterizing the human good as the highest end within a hierarchy of ends, Aristotle proceeds to argue that happiness is this good. He starts by claiming that “the best good is apparently something complete. Hence, if only one end is complete, this will be what we are looking for; and if more than one are complete, the most complete of these will be what we are looking for” (Aristotle, NE 1.7.1097a28). According to Aristotle, a complete end is that which is always choiceworthy and always chosen for itself, never because of something else (Aristotle, NE 1.7.1097a36). He differentiates between things that are choiceworthy in themselves and because of something else, and things are choiceworthy only in themselves and never because of something else, arguing that “happiness more than anything else seems complete without qualification, since we always <choose it, and also> choose it because of itself, never because of something else” (Aristotle, NE 1.7.1097b1). Since happiness best fits the criteria of a complete end, and since the highest end is that which is most complete, then it follows that happiness is the highest end.

Aristotle also assumes that the highest end is self-sufficient. He regards something as self-sufficient when “all by itself it makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing” (Aristotle, NE 1.7.1097b15). In other words, once you acquire something that is self-sufficient, you no longer need anything else. Aristotle believes that happiness, or eudaimonia, fulfills this second criteria. Aristotle’s eudaimonia is much different from modern perceptions of happiness in that

eudaimonia is not just a feeling, but concerned with your whole life and the lives of your children. It can be described as a combination of success and luck that can only be measured by looking at your life as a whole and its affect on the lives of those who follow. Similarly self-sufficiency is “not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife, and in general for friends and fellow citizens , since a human being is a naturally political <animal>” (Aristotle, NE 1.7.1097b9). Since Aristotle’s happiness best fulfills the criteria of self-sufficiency, it therefore can be considered the highest end of human action.

While Aristotle’s idea of happiness may be self-sufficient, there exist some serious objections to his argument that it is the most complete end. For an end to be complete, it must be always choiceworthy and always chosen for itself, never because of something else. While happiness does satisfy this criterion, other ends of action do as well, and in many cases more so than happiness. For example, if I am thirsty, I will drink a glass of water not because it will make me happy, but because I need water to survive. While I hope that being hydrated will lead me towards happiness in the future, I do not choose to drink water because I believe that doing so will help me achieve a happy life. Most of my daily actions aren’t predicated by a conscious aim towards the most complete end. Instead, they are subject to a multitude of immediate influences - time of day, the sentiments of others, the needs of my environment, etc – and a multitude of immediate ends. I may drink a glass of water to quench my thirst, to wash out a bad taste, or to procrastinate from doing homework. Most of the time, these immediate ends – necessity, cleanliness, pleasure – are more choiceworthy than happiness and have more bearing on my actions. Therefore, these ends are not subordinate to happiness as the “highest end.” They

also satisfy the criteria of a complete end: they are always choiceworthy and chosen for themselves. As long as such ends are chosen more for themselves than happiness, they are not subordinate. If most actions aim towards immediate ends that aren't subordinate to happiness, then happiness cannot be considered the "highest end."

In response to this objection, Aristotle might argue that while most actions have a specific end other than happiness, happiness is the only virtue chosen only for itself. Even though I drink a glass of water because I need to, doing so leads to happiness. Therefore, some fraction – even if small – of the end of drinking water is achieving happiness. Aristotle writes, "Honour, pleasure, understanding and every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves, since we would choose each of them even if it had no further result; but we also choose them for the sake of happiness" (Aristotle, NE 1.7.1097b4). By contrast, happiness as an end has no fraction dedicated to a more superior end. Since happiness is present as an end of more actions than anything else, and since happiness is never chosen for other ends, Aristotle could argue that it is most complete and therefore the "highest end."

In conclusion, Aristotle believes that happiness is the "highest end" of human action because it best fits the criteria of completeness and self-sufficiency. While Aristotle's eudaimonia is self-sufficient, it's harder to say whether it can be considered complete. He argues that a complete end is one that is always choiceworthy and always chosen for itself. Although happiness does fulfill these conditions, more immediate ends like necessity, cleanliness, or pleasure do as well. In addition, most actions aim primarily towards immediate ends rather than happiness. Therefore, relative to a specific action, happiness is not as choiceworthy as the more immediate ends to which the action aims. Although happiness is never chosen for anything but

itself, for most daily actions, happiness is not the primary chosen end. Since most actions are predicated in other, more immediate ends, happiness cannot be considered the “highest end” to which all other ends lead.

Works Cited

Aristotle. “Nicomachean Ethics.” Translated by Terence Irwin and Gail Fine. *Aristotle Introductory Readings*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996.