AGAINST NAGEL – IN FAVOR OF A COMPOUND HUMAN ERGON

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In his "Aristotle on Eudamonia"[1] Thomas Nagel puts forth a rather interesting argument in favor of identifying rationality as the *ergon idion* of the human being. Although a compelling one, Nagel's case is neither wholly satisfactory nor convincing. This is in part, of course, because of Aristotle's own inability, as Nagel puts it, "to say unequivocally in what our eudaimonia consists, and how the line is to be drawn between its constituents and its necessary conditions." Clearly rationality is part of the human ergon. I will argue, however, that it is not alone the ergon idion which distinguishes the human animal. I will first sketch Nagel's argument, and then proceed to consider relevant parts of the *Nichomachean Ethics*[2] and present my case in favor of interpreting Aristotle as recognizing a complex ergon in the human animal.

Nagel begins by pointing out that the proper ergon of a human is that which makes it *human,* as opposed to anything else. It may appear, he writes, that a human is distinguished from a bat, cow, fig tree, or gorilla by zeroing in on that thing or those things which a human does and the others do not. How can this be, asks Nagel, pointing out that a being described only by features which it does not share with other species will be "not a human being but something else" — a "rarefied individual" as opposed to the "messy" being each human really is. Nagel suggests that if this is how the argument runs, we shall have to include not only more than just the contemplative exercise of the rational aspect of the soul in our account of the human ergon, but appetitive and even nutritive functions as well.

There are two lines of thought at work here. First, it is claimed that the rarefied picture of the human good is unsatisfactory as it does not describe a *human.* Perhaps to maintain the human animalness in the human ergon we need to allow interaction between that which makes us animal and that which distinguishes us from the rest of the animals. The suggestion seems to be that if our ergon is, and thus in a way we are, not rarefied we must be complex. Furthermore, if we (ergon and being) are complex, we must be more complex than we would be were we simply to "be" our rational faculty in its practical *and* contemplative capacities. (This, too, would be too rarefied? Nagel is unclear.) So Nagel apparently feels unavoidably pulled onto a slippery slope. That is, he does not seem to think that a case can be made for stopping at a variety of rational abilities in describing our ergon. His second move is, then, to say that if we begin to identify more than one thing in our ergon, we will be pulled into dangerous territory where every human function vies for election into the special group of things which comprises the human ergon. Problems involving the condition of autonomy rear their ugly heads and lead Nagel back to the question at issue, namely, what should be included in the human ergon?

The intent of Nagel's next move is a bit obfuscated by the direction which he takes at the outset (where he begins by talking about corkscrew-bottle openers and moves on to gods). He means, of course, to demonstrate the absurdity of the "conjunctive picture of the component capacities of the human soul" (with emphasis on "human"). It is the notion of hierarchy of capacities which finally enables Nagel to reach his conclusion. A hierarchy of capacities is just what it sounds like — every complex organism contains a variety of interrelated capacities, some of which function such that

they enable others to function, which allows functioning of the whole. The proper excellence of a single organism is the "optimal functioning of the total system" in its being. There is, in other words, a "circle of mutual support" between the capacities of any given organism — a circle to which we can point in identifying the good of that organism. The good of an organism will thus reflect a conjunctive ergon. BUT THIS IS NOT THE CASE FOR THE HUMAN BEING.

The "circle of mutual support" is not quite closed in the human being.[3] Here is an animal whose organic functions include rationality (and rationality of a particular sort or degree). Nagel's point is that all[4] human functions are organized in a fashion which allows rationality to be, and to be in a sense that does not involve supporting the other functions. In its theoretical (as opposed to practical) capacity reason distinguishes the human being as "the only creature capable of concentrating on what is higher than himself." Rationality is the ergon idion of the human being because it distinguishes itself from all other human capacities in an importantly different fashion. It alone "is" or is able to describe the human animal — an animal capable of transcending his animal status and approaching that of the unchanging, the divine.

So Nagel's claim is that the only (or at least a very good) way to answer the question regarding the good for humans results, of necessity, in a single ergon — that of theoretical reason. A look at what Aristotle has to say about the good for men will, I think, afford me room to disagree with Nagel in interesting fashion.

Just what the human ergon is arises as a particularly puzzling question mid-way through Book X of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. One gathers, in general, from Books I through IX that human flourishing is a function of virtue of character which involves the rational part of the soul's direction of the appetitive part. At the end of Book I Aristotle identifies those capacities of the human soul which it does not share with other animal, or plant, species. In the last paragraph of 1.93 Aristotle refers to two parts of the soul—one "that has reason to the full extent by having it within itself" and a second which has reason by "listening to reason as to a father." Interaction between these two "parts" of the soul may yield virtue of character. In Book X, on the other hand, Aristotle repeatedly suggests that the human animal *may* best be described by its rationality alone. If this is the case, human eudamonia cannot be what Aristotle takes nine books of the *Nichomachean Ethics* to describe. I think that if we look more closely at what is actually said in Book X[5] as regards rationality and the human animal, as well as what Aristotle has to say about the appetitive part of the soul at various places in the text we may see that it cannot be correct to identify rationality — theoretical rationality — as *the* ergon idion of the human being.

Aristotle (13.3) suggests the understanding (the rational faculty capable of theoretical study) as the identifying feature of humankind because it seems to him to be the "natural ruler and leader" of a person. At 13.38 the same notion occurs when he identifies each person with his understanding, "if he is his controlling and better element." It is crucial, I think, to note that each time he offers the understanding as candidate for human ergon Aristotle does so with reservation. He never says that a human *is* his rational capacity alone. Although Aristotle gives arguments in support of the excellence of the activity of study and can point to the human capacity for study, he is not willing to make the claim that the faculty which allows us to be able to study is in and of itself our defining faculty.

In fact, Aristotle's reservations here are so grave that he (more than once, see 13.37 and 13.32, for examples) stresses the idea that a life characterized by the rational faculty alone would be a superhuman or divine one. Aristotle believes that we should strive toward the divine life — a life which, if attained, would not be a human one. Each human is her

understanding, her "leading" or "ruling" faculty. An individual will only be living "her" life if she acts in a way which gives expression to this ruling faculty. There remains tension, however. For it is clear that Aristotle does not think the life of rational activity alone is a human life. It is one to which a human can, and ought, aspire — but one which can never be reached by a *human*.

The human animal is a social, a political, being. Eudamnia, *human* flourishing, is thus attainable through virtues of character. "In so far as he is a human being," (13.42), "... and [hence] lives together with a number of other human beings, he chooses to do the actions expressing virtue." Given the nature of the human animal it would be impossible for rationality alone to be the capacity by which humanness is identified and described. Some combination of virtues of character and thought may well make the happiest human. It should be clear, however, that excellence in understanding alone cannot make a happy human. If this is the case, understanding (the capacity for theoretical rationality) cannot be the ergon idion of the *human* species.

We are a social animal with a modicum of divine capacity. So Aristotle sees humankind.[6] Although virtue of thought is a better virtue, and it is one to which we can aspire, virtues of character are also virtues — lesser though they may be (see 13.41).[7] Yes, as the social beings we are, we should (if we desire to be eudaimon) exhibit virtue of character. Furthermore (13.37), "... as far as we can, we ought to be pro-immortal, and go to all lengths to live a life that expresses our supreme element; for however much this element may lack in bulk, by much more it surpasses everything in power and value."

If I have demonstrated anything up to this point it is, I hope, that Aristotle does not (as much as he might like to) accept a picture of the human ergon such as Nagel describes. Rationality alone is not the human being, even though the understanding (11.11) would seem to be that which each person most nearly is. How, then, are we to identify the human ergon without landing on the slippery slope which Nagel sidesteps with his notion of hierarchy of capacity? In other words, a human must "be" something more than his understanding. What more? And, how can we identify and isolate the missing ingredients from the range of possibilities which Nagel correctly recognizes? The key, or an important part of it, lies in Aristotle's belief that we "ought" to strive toward virtue of thought, that we are equipped to *desire* to do so.

In Book III (3.25) Aristotle sums up, "... what we decide to do is whatever action among those up to us we deliberate about and desire to do." In fact, "decision will be deliberative desire to do an action that is up to us; for when we have judged [that it is right] as a result of deliberation, our desire to do it expresses our wish." We will only act to best express our rational capacity if we desire to do so. Decision is neither appetite, emotion, nor wish (again, Book III). It is close to wish, however, in that we wish for an end and then decide to do what promotes that end. If we wish to flourish to the best of our abilities we will desire to have excellence, or virtue, of thought. The appetitive faculty of the soul, in other words, will desire that the rational part function excellently. Here lies the seed, the motivation, for a man's striving to be pro-immortal. Without the desire, there can be no identified end.

Desire, a function of the appetitive part of the human soul, strikes me as an integral part of the human ergon idion. Without desire, without motivation, a person would have no reason to attain a state of eudaimonia — whether by virtue of character or thought. In the case of virtues of character reason corrects what it identifies as incorrect desires. But why, ultimately, should one's rational faculty (or, one in one's rational capacity) care to correct misguided desires unless one wants or *desires* to act virtuously (and, to be truly happy)? Furthermore, why would a human being, who must strive to be her

"best" part, be moved to do so unless she so desired? Desire is essential in the human being — as important, it seems, as rationality. Whether we aim at virtue of character or thinking we will do so only if we so desire. Rationality alone will get us nowhere. Rationality alone is not even human.

Two deserving questions arise. First, does Aristotle say anything about desire which would serve either to discredit or support my suggestion? Second, how can I admit desire (which we certainly share with other beings) into the human ergon idion and yet avoid the slippery slope of which Nagel warns? Answers to these questions will complete my case against Nagel and show in favor of recognizing a composite human ergon.

As I have already indicated, Aristotle does admit a connection between reason and desire. The rational part of the soul is that which controls or guides the appetitive part (recall earlier references to Book I, and more recently to Book III). I do not suggest that Aristotle takes a Humean line here. The rational faculty is certainly not the slave of the appetitive aspect of the soul as apart from the rational aspect — where it is the rational that decides how to do while the appetitive identifies and selects (paths to) apparent pleasures. Whenever a human acts in a truly human fashion,[8] reason and desire are together at work.

One might, in an attempt to hang on to the simple, unitary, ergon, point out that Aristotle apparently distinguishes between rational and appetitive desire. If rational desire springs from the rational part of the soul, without reliance on the appetitive, then perhaps we do have room to argue that the human ergon is comprised solely of the understanding and its capacities. If Irwin is correct[9] rational desire will not foot the required bill. Rational desire, he explains, is for an object "believed to be good." It is called rational not because it springs from the rational faculty but because the rational faculty approves of it. On the other hand, appetitive desire is associated with biological needs and other similarly arising wants. What this means is that rational desire is desire appropriate for a human — desire for something which is truly pleasurable for a virtuous man. Again, it is not the case that rational desire is desire on the part of the rational faculty. Rather, it is desire functioning in harmony with the understanding. Desire springs from the appetitive part of the soul, not the rational — whether that desire is rational, appetitive, or emotional.

Aristotle's account of desire and understanding leaves the two quite separate capacities. However if they are, as I have suggested, intertwined in human life and action then it will be necessary to account for both of them in what we finally identify as the human ergon. A simple ergon will not do. Now we must consider if it is possible to admit desire into the human ergon without landing precariously on a dangerous slippery slope. Then, if we can account for desire and rationality to the exclusion of those other human "activities" which humans share with plants and other animals, will it be "too rarefied" a picture of the human animal which results?

The case for including desire is set. And, I believe, it is because of the way in which desire and reason intertwine in the human being that desire can (indeed must) be as much a part of the *human* ergon as understanding. If rationality "breaks the circle" as Nagel says it does, it will only actually do so — be able to do so — in the human animal if desire is right there giving it a shove, so to speak.[10] rationality could not break the circle were it not for desire. People are motivated by pleasure. Even the human who approaches a life of virtue in thinking must do so by use of his desire. Virtue in thinking and virtue in character, the two ways through which humans can at least begin to attain eudaimonia, are possible for people only because they are rational and desiring.

It is precisely because of the way in which desire and the understanding interact in humans that we can include desire

in a composite ergon without running the risk of sliding down the slope of which Nagel warns. We can keep Nagel's picture of the broken circle, but insist that desire is as essential for the breaking of the circle as is rationality. We might rewrite Nagel's thought, substituting "desire and reason" for "reason" as follows: "Human possibilities reveal that desire and reason have a use beyond the ordering of practical life. The circle of mutual support between reason and desire, activity, and nutrition is not completely closed." We retain Nagel's picture of the human animal's ergon as a limited one — one that does not include every little function of the entire organism. And we apparently have reason to draw a line between reason and desire on the one hand, and all other human capacities on the other.

Is this too rarefied a picture of a human? Nagel certainly would not think so. Rationality alone is not too rarefied for him. He is satisfied, given the particular nature of humans, that a limited ergon is precisely what Aristotle envisions for a human (as opposed to other plants and animals, perhaps). I stand less than convinced that Nagel is correct in his insinuation that nonhuman animals' ergons will be a sort of list of every feature of the species or kind in question (consider, again, 12.72). Whether or not this is the case it is certain that Aristotle excludes certain human functions (such as nutrition and growth) from the human ergon,. A rarefied ergon is precisely what Aristotle is after.

I would suggest that desire and rationality, in combination, should be included in the human ergon. Whether or not there is textual support in favor of including more than these two capacities is a question I will not address here. What I have attempted is to demonstrate that Nagel's argument is insufficient to prove that the human ergon be both simple and single. In short I have argued that our ergon is simple, but compound. Yes rationality is a key element in a human being. But it alone cannot "make" a *human.* To have a human being, we need have (at least) rationality and desire. Book X does not suggest that rationality alone comprises the human ergon. Rather in Book X we see that something more than rationality "is" the human ergon, and that this "something more" must include desire.

Notes

1. Thomas Nagel, "Aristotle on *Eudamonia*" in A. O. Rorty ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Nagel's argument is so short that I hardly think page references necessary. I draw, in particular, from pages 8 through 11 of his text.

2. All references to Aristotle are to Terence Irwin's translation (and numeration) as it appears in *Nichomachean Ethics,* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985).

Whether it is possible for two species to have exactly the same ergon is not a question I will directly address here. I think, in the end, that Aristotle might not allow such a possibility — see 12.72 where Aristotle says that animals differing in species have pleasures differing in species. If one's good is a function of one's pleasure, then different pleasures will certainly reflect at least slightly different goods. Nagel leaves open the possibility that rationality, the human ergon idion, might be shared by other beings. If these other beings are gods, one wonders what other thing they might have to distinguish them from the human species. At any rate, the problem at issue may disappear on the alternative account I provide in response to Nagel.

3. It may be that there are other beings whose "circle" of functions is not so tightly closed, either. Whenever this is the case, Nagel will have to argue that the being in question has a simple as opposed to a complex (or complete) ergon. The complete ergon is one which is simply a list of all a being's capacities or functions. The simple ergon is one which includes special functions, to the exclusion of others.

4. Nagel actually refers to "all other human functions," but I don't suppose it would be incorrect to say that rationality in part supports itself in a way similar to that in which the other human functions support it.

5. It is from 13.3 through 13.45 that Aristotle makes most of his remarks about the understanding—the faculty capable of theoretical study —as the identifying function of the human species.

6. That Aristotle himself was not prepared to describe or include women, let alone all men, in his account of the eudaimon and the path to eudamonia does nothing to discredit the spirit of his project. We may, without difficulty or distortion, dance over this particular historically and socially bound perspective.

7. It is interesting, and perhaps a point in Nagel's favor, that Aristotle (13.41) identifies the virtue of understanding as sepa-

rate from the compound formed by the interrelation of human feelings and rationality. Perhaps Nagel provides the account of separateness which Aristotle claims is "too large a task for our present project." One wonders whether this could in fact be so, however, since Nagel's account seems less than "large."

8. By "truly human" I mean one which distinguishes a human from a guppy or a yucca. In other words, an action which an adult human as opposed to a human child or mentally sophisticated primate might perform. (The divine "act," which Aristotle, suggests is the least active of actions—Book X—is not a "truly human" one.)

9. See Irwin's glossary annotations in his above-cited translation of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, p. 394.

10. Even the eudaimon happy through virtue of thought must continue to desire to be in the state in which he finds himself. Why continue to contemplate unchanging truths unless it is pleasant? The human animal, perhaps unlike a god, apparently must want to do what he does if he is to keep doing what he does—be it a highly virtuous act or not.

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