

Aristotle on the Goodness of Unhappy Lives

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Abstract

For Aristotle, the happy life is the highest human good. But could even unhappy human lives have a grain of intrinsic goodness? Aristotle's views about the value of the "mere living," in contrast to the good living, have been neglected in the scholarship, in spite of his recurrent preoccupation with this question. Offering a close reading of a passage from *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9, I argue that, for Aristotle, all human lives are intrinsically good by virtue of fully satisfying the definition, and thus function, of their biological species. On the one hand, this rudimentary goodness is independent of whether the life is lived well or badly; on the other hand, it is ultimately outweighed by the badness inflicted on life by vice or extreme pain, so that the unhappy lives are, all things considered, not worth choosing.

Keywords

Aristotle, ethics, happiness, life, value

Introduction

In the ninth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the virtuous person "wishes to live and to be preserved," and rightly so, because "existing is something good to the good person [ἀγαθὸν τῷ σπουδαίῳ τὸ εἶναι];"¹ elsewhere in the same book, he notes that "living is choiceworthy [αἰρετὸν τὸ ζῆν], and for the good person most of all [μάλιστα], since being is good and pleasant for him."²

These two claims are broadly in agreement, but there is a subtle difference.³ Whereas the first suggests that living is good to the good person exclusively, the second implies that life might be worth choosing, albeit to a lesser degree than for the good, even for those who fall short of virtue. If even non-virtuous lives could be worth choosing to some degree, this worth would have to be conferred by something other than virtue, presumably by the value of “mere living” (ζῆν μόνον), in contrast to the value of “good living” (εὖ ζῆν).⁴ But does Aristotle think that the mere living has any intrinsic worth when it falls short of happiness, or even when it is vicious? Although the recent years have seen an increased interest in the relationship and intersections between Aristotle’s ethics and science, including his biology,⁵ very little has been said about the mere biological living, as distinct from the good living, from the ethical point of view.⁶ The objective of this article is to make a step towards filling this gap.

I attempt to do this by way of a close reading of a difficult passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9, where Aristotle seeks to establish a premise for one of his arguments that a virtuous person needs friends. He announces here explicitly that he will tackle a problem in ethical theory from a “more natural point of view” (φυσικώτερον).⁷ Whereas the argument itself, as well as its sister version in the *Eudemian Ethics* VII.12, have been discussed in the recent scholarship,⁸ the premise itself has received little attention. And yet it contains what is arguably the most concentrated take on the question of the value of human life in the entire Aristotelian corpus. “Living is of the things that are good and pleasant by themselves [τὸ δὲ ζῆν τῶν καθ’ αὐτὸ ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἡδέων],” Aristotle says, “because it is definite [ὠρισμένον γάρ], and the definite is of the nature of the good [τῆς ἀγαθοῦ φύσεως].”⁹ Hereafter he appends an important qualification (the ‘Qualification’): when we say that life is good, “we should not take” (οὐ δεῖ λαμβάνειν) lives that are vicious, corrupted or painful, since these lives are “indefinite” (ἀόριστος).¹⁰

Commentators have regarded this goodness-of-life claim (GoL claim) and its justification by reference to “definiteness” as obscure and have given it relatively little attention. The established reading of the GoL claim could be called a “restrictive” reading, insofar as it makes the inherent

goodness of being alive restricted by the degree of goodness that a life has by virtue of being lived well.¹¹ What speaks in favor of this reading are Aristotle's pessimistic claims about the value of unperfected human lives. In *Eudemian Ethics* I.5 Aristotle notes that pains, misfortunes or vice are enough to "make not existing at all superior to being alive" (ὥστε το μὴ εἶναι κρεῖττον εἶναι τοῦ ζῆν).¹² In *Politics* I.2, we read that an unjust human life is not only not good, but that it is the worst, when compared to that of other animals.¹³ But there are also more fundamental logical and metaphysical reasons for the restrictive reading that have to do with Aristotle's decisively teleological account of existence. Things exist, or live,¹⁴ to the extent that they have a specific form or essence; this essence is defined by a specific function (ἔργον) or end (τέλος) by virtue of which these things are good of their kind; so, humans are alive, properly speaking, to the extent that they achieve their human end, which is to live a flourishing life. If a life is half-virtuous, then it is half-good; if it is vicious, then it is void of any intrinsic goodness. So, the reason that the GoL claim applies only to the good lives is that unhappy lives do not, strictly considered, qualify as lives in the full sense. This account is also strongly suggested by the Qualification. Aristotle says that life is good because it is inherently something "definite"; the reason that unhappy lives are "indefinite" is precisely that these lives fall short of the human end, and are thus called lives only in an incomplete sense. It is the implicit corollary of this view that, to the extent that the humans who live these unhappy lives fall short of the human end, they fail to be humans in the proper sense, since human end defines the human essence.

I defend an alternative to the restrictive reading, which I call a "concessive" reading, in the sense that it concedes a share of intrinsic value even to some unperfected lives, and quite independently of whether they are lived well or badly. The concessive reading takes support from several claims in Aristotelian corpus which seem to attribute some intrinsic value to the mere living alone. I argue that these claims do not clash with the teleological ethics and ontology because Aristotle implicitly operates with two distinct levels of finality that can be called a "rudimentary" and an "advanced" finality. The rudimentary finality is a finality in a strictly natural or biological sense; in reference to the human species, it is an intermediate teleological state between the overwhelming lack

of perfection in case of the human brutes, and the complete perfection of flourishing human beings. The flourishing life reaches the advanced finality; this finality is achieved when the human nature is further perfected by habituation and the art of politics. To achieve the rudimentary finality, it is sufficient to exercise those capacities in the human soul that define the human essence; it is not necessary to exercise them *well*. A life that achieves the rudimentary finality deserves to be called a human life in the full sense, and, insofar as living as a way of being depends on living *qua* definite essence, those who are “merely” alive are alive in the full sense of that word. That living a life which deserves to be called human is good does not mean that every human life is worth choosing, all things considered. But, insofar as finality confers goodness, it does mean that every human life has a grain of intrinsic goodness that makes it superior to the lives of monsters or human brutes. Unlike these lives, every human life is good because it fits a definite box in the natural teleology.¹⁵

Thus, the attempt to clarify what Aristotle thought about the value of unperfected human lives is bound to imply a broader methodological reflection on how the biological and ethical domains of Aristotle’s thought—and especially the normative dimensions of each of them—are interlocked. One of the passages I shall quote below to support the concessive reading comes from the *Politics*, and it is this treatise that is perhaps most informative about the relationship between the biological and ethical normative domains, or between the value of “mere living” and “living well”. These values can be weighed against each other, they are not cashed out in two incommensurable currencies; living well is much better than the mere living. But even the mere living alone is a self-contained end of the city, which can be achieved prior and independently of another city’s end, namely to live well.¹⁶ I shall refine this preliminary sketch of the relationship between biological and ethical domains in the conclusion.

I start from an interpretation of Aristotle’s claim that definiteness is “of the nature of the good” (Part One). The justification of this claim derives from the fact that both definiteness and goodness are teleological notions. Next I discuss why Aristotle says that living is something definite but imperfect lives are indefinite (Part Two). In this section the grounds for the restrictive reading are spelled

out: painful and vicious lives are indefinite because they fall short of the human end. The remaining part of the article defends the concessive reading, starting from a review of the textual evidence in favor of the view that the mere living has some excellence-independent finality and goodness (Part Three). The next two sections reconstruct the philosophical justification for this view. One important consideration is Aristotle's definition of the human life in the immediate context of our passage: one is alive *qua* human, insofar as one perceives or thinks (Part Four). Neither pain nor vice frustrate these vital activities, and so even imperfect human lives have some degree of definiteness. Hence the Qualification itself needs to be qualified: imperfect lives are half-indefinite and half-definite because they fall short of the complete finality but achieve the rudimentary finality. This reading can be further supported by Aristotle's account of the human function from the first book of *Nicomachean Ethics* (Part Five). This account implies that there is a gap between exercising the human function and achieving the human end, insofar as it is possible to exercise the human function badly. The "mere" exercise of the human function corresponds to the rudimentary finality, whereas the good exercise to the advanced finality. Finally, I turn to the question whether the rudimentary goodness of human life can have any practical relevance (Part Six). I suggest in what sense can the mere living be good *for* the one who chooses it, and how much this goodness weights in comparison with badness that the life has on account of being lived badly. I conclude by spelling out the implications of this interpretation for the understanding of the relationship between the biological and the ethical discourse in Aristotle's philosophy.

Before I start, a terminological note is in order. There are two different Greek terms that correspond to the English "life" and both play an important role in Aristotle's thought: ζωή and βίος. Whereas these terms can be used interchangeably in some contexts of Aristotle's thought, in other contexts, for instance in the discussion of contemplative or political "life", Aristotle consistently opts for βίος but not ζωή. This likely reflects a difference in meaning of these words in general Greek, where βίος tends to refer to a narrated and characteristically human life, whereas ζωή to merely biological life. Indeed, there is an influential view going back to Hannah Arendt that the distinction

between these two terms plays a decisive role in Aristotle's political theory, where life in the sense of βίος refers to the distinctively human life consisting of words, deeds and actions, as opposed to the mere biological living in the sense of ζωή. This raises the question whether the difference between βίος and ζωή plays a role in the present discussion of the value of mere living, in contrast to the value of good living. I do not think it does. The most important reason is that, properly speaking, the term most relevant for our discussion is neither βίος nor ζωή but the verb ζῆν, to live.¹⁷ This verb has no greater affinity to ζωή than it has βίος; it is quite normal for Aristotle to say, for instance, that semens and fetations "live [ζῆν] the life [βίος] of a plant",¹⁸ which also demonstrates that there is nothing distinctively human about the term βίος.¹⁹

1. Why "definiteness" entails goodness?

One of the questions that concerns Aristotle in his discussion of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX is whether the good person needs friends. On the whole, Aristotle argues, the good person will indeed need friends, otherwise his life would be lacking in an important respect. After claiming that friends are worth having for the good person because they augment her opportunities for "observing decent actions" and make her own vital activity more "continuous", he examines the question again "from the point of view of nature". The whole argument has the grammatical form of a conditional sentence, the *apodosis* of which runs as follows:

...then just as for each his own existence is worth choosing [τὸ αὐτὸν εἶναι αἰρετόν ἐστιν ἐκάστω], so his friend's is too, or to a similar degree. But as we saw, the good man's existence is worth choosing because of his perceiving himself, that self being good; and such perceiving is pleasant in itself. In that case, he needs to be concurrently perceiving the friend—that he

exists, too—and this will come about in their living together, conversing, and sharing their talk and thoughts. (*EN IX.9*, 1170b8-13)

The idea that “for each his own existence is worth choosing” is formulated explicitly in the *protasis* of this sentence: “But if being alive is good and pleasant, and it seems to be, also from the fact that everybody desires it [ἐκ τοῦ πάντας ὀρέγεσθαι αὐτοῦ], and decent and blessed people most of all, since for them life is most worth choosing [αἰρετώτατος], and their vital activity is most blessed... .”²⁰ The most general term Aristotle uses to characterize the value of life is “worth choosing” (αἰρετόν). The continuation of the passage specifies that there are two attributes of life that make it worth choosing: goodness and pleasure. In the following interpretation, I concentrate on goodness rather than on pleasure, but since Aristotle consistently mentions the two side by side, a brief note on their relationship is in order.

As Aristotle makes clear in *Nicomachean Ethics X.5*, the value of pleasure depends on the value of the activity on which it “supervenes”: pleasures in good activities are good, pleasures in bad activities are bad.²¹ So the choiceworthiness of life on account of pleasure will ultimately derive from its choiceworthiness on account of goodness. But even the very fact that living is intrinsically pleasant seems to derive from its being intrinsically good. The reason why living is good is that it is something “definite”. This notion of definiteness, again, seems to be closely linked with another characteristic attribute of life, namely its naturalness; a few lines later, we read that “being alive is something naturally good” (φύσει γὰρ ἀγαθὸν ζωή).²² We know from Aristotle’s theory of pleasure that pleasure is an unimpeded activity of a “natural state”.²³ So the reason why living is intrinsically pleasant is, presumably, that it is something natural, which, as we shall be able to confirm shortly, also means that it is something definite, and hence good.

In the remaining part of this section, I reconstruct the steps needed to justify why definiteness confers intrinsic value: (i) “definiteness” is logically and metaphysically linked with “essence” and

“form”; (ii) essence and form are defined by reference to “function” and “end”; (iii) function and end are closely associated with the “fine” and the “good”.

(i) The association of the “definite” or “determinate” (ὀρισμένον) with goodness is an older Pythagorean and Platonic idea, which Aristotle repeatedly refers to and endorses.²⁴ It appears in a variety of philosophical contexts, including biological, physical and political treatises, and has its foundation in logic and metaphysics. In Plato’s *Philebus*, the characteristic feature of being “definite” is not to allow for more or less, as do the predicates ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ or ‘quick’ and ‘slow’, but to have a clearly defined, discrete form, such as the ‘equal’ or the ‘double’.²⁵ Aristotle follows this view insofar as he ties the form or essence of a thing, namely “what it is” (τὸ τί ἐστὶ) for a thing to be, to its “definition”.²⁶ Being defined (ὀρισμένον), or having a definition (ὀρισμός), is thus not only one of the many attributes of existing things; it constitutes their very being: for an x to be means for an x to be defined or definite, namely to have a specific essence or form of an x. The essential link between being and having a definition is brought out by the fact that its opposite, being “without definition” (ἀόριστον), is a privative notion, falling short of being, failing to have an essence.²⁷

In the context of metaphysics and natural philosophy, having a definition comes to mean that matter becomes defined by form, insofar as form actualizes some of the potentialities, rather than other, in the matter.²⁸ Even though “the ordered and the definite (τὸ ὀρισμένον) is far more apparent in the heaven” than in our sublunary sphere,²⁹ since the matter that constitutes the heavenly bodies is fully controlled by the form and is therefore free from chance and disorder, works of nature, similarly to the works of crafts, are, for the most part, also definite. If there is to exist a definite thing, a house or a man, the craftsman or nature must “define” or “limit” the matter in a precise and non-arbitrary manner so that it acquires the specific form of that thing. The notion of definiteness is thus closely associated with necessity and, in the specific case of generative processes in the sublunary sphere, with a hypothetical necessity.³⁰ In contrast to the heavenly realm of divine and eternal entities, which are governed by unconditional necessity, some natural processes fail to reach their “limit and end” (ὄρον καὶ τέλος), as evident from cases of freaks or other defective births, such as a man-headed

calf.³¹ These are cases when the “formal nature has not mastered the material nature,”³² or, as we might put it, when the form has failed to fully define the underlying matter. These indeterminate entities are, as we would expect, not only biologically defective but also logically undefined. We can only grasp what a man-headed calf is approximately and indirectly by referring to how it falls short of the related definite essences, that is, that of a calf and that of a man.

(ii) The above phrase “limit and end” points to the characteristic aspect of Aristotle’s account of form or essence, namely that it is defined by “that for the sake of which” (οἷ ἐνεκα), that is, its “end” (τέλος) or “function” (ἔργον): “All things are defined by their function [ἅπαντα δ’ ἐστὶν ὁρισμένα τῷ ἔργῳ], and the true being of each consists in its ability to perform its particular function [τὰ μὲν γὰρ δυνάμενα ποιεῖν τὸ αὐτῶν ἔργον ἀληθῶς ἐστὶν ἕκαστον]; of the eye, for instance, its ability to see, while if it cannot perform its function it is that thing in name only, like a dead man or a stone figure of a man.”³³ So, when nature defines or limits the matter, it does so with view to the end or function of that thing. The reason that “nature avoids what is unlimited [ἄπειρον]”³⁴ is precisely that “what is unlimited is without end, but the end is what nature always seeks.”³⁵ So, for instance, the human hand is matter suitably arranged in a definite way with regard to its function, that is, grasping; the function of the hand, again, is defined by the function of humans, of which the hand is a part.³⁶ The reason that the works of nature are for the most part “ordered and definite” (τεταγμένα καὶ ὁρισμένα) is due to fact that their process of development “follows what they are,” and it is “for the sake of this essence” that they develop the way they do.³⁷ This is consistent with the claim that there is something “natural and fine” in all animals, because “what is not haphazard but rather for the sake of something is in fact present most of all in the works of nature; the end for the sake of which each animal has been constituted or comes to be takes the place of the good.”³⁸

(iii) This last quote ties the notion of “end” closely with the “good”. But we should note that what the translator renders here as the “good” is actually καλός, that is, the “fine”. This rendering is motivated by doing justice to Aristotle’s emphasis on “goodness inherent in the nature of the thing valued.”³⁹ This translation also does justice to the close association of καλός in this passage with

finality. In fact, “good” (ἀγαθός) is associated as routinely with finality as the “fine”. A horse or cithara-player is the better the more it can fulfil the function of horse or cithara player.⁴⁰ In the hierarchy of goods, those that are ends, and hence chosen for their own sake, are always better than those that are chosen for the sake of a further end; happiness is the highest-good because it has the highest degree of finality.⁴¹

2. Why is living something “definite”?

Definiteness confers goodness; but why is living something definite? Most commentators have interpreted this claim by reference to Aristotle’s idea that living in the proper sense is an actuality rather than merely a potentiality.⁴² Actuality always defines some of the many potentialities inherent in the capacity, and insofar as life is an actuality of perception or thought, as has been established, it is thus always something definite. Some interpreters have suggested, in addition, that the definiteness of vital activities comes from the fact that each of these activities must have a definite object.⁴³ But the definiteness of activity or of its objects seem to yield too weak a criterion to explain why living is something definite. One problem is that it does not take into account whether the subject of living is itself a definite entity. We have noted above that the notion of definiteness is, as it were, built into the very definition of being. Living in the full sense must be the living of a definite living thing, that is, of an ensouled matter possessing a definite set of capacities that are by nature arranged in a definite manner in view of a specific end. For this reason, we can presume that, say, a life of a man-headed calf is an overwhelmingly indefinite life, in spite of the fact that it is an actuality of some sort; for a man-headed calf does not exercise, indeed does not have, any characteristic activity of a natural substance.

Another problem is that it is difficult to see how this reading fits with the Qualification, that is, with the claim that painful or vicious lives are “indefinite”. Assuming that Aristotle uses the word

“definite/indefinite” in the same sense in these two closely related contexts, an account of why life in general is definite should also be able to explain why certain forms of imperfect lives are indefinite. Sarah Broadie attempts to do this when she argues, quite plausibly, that pains “blur” or impede the actualizations of vital capacities,⁴⁴ and hence the life of pain will, on the whole, have a relatively lower degree of actualization, and in that sense will be less definite. But one may object that it is not at all clear, given the definition of human life as perception or thought, that pain makes us to be less fully alive. The very awareness of pain presupposes a kind of perception, so this conclusion is at least disputable. This reading will face even greater difficulties when considering the case of vicious life, which Broadie does not discuss. It is hard to see why vicious life should generally not consist of activities that aim at definite objects, or why it could not actualize the life capacities to the same extent that a virtuous life does. In *Metaphysics* IX.9, Aristotle talks both about a good and a bad actuality without suggesting that the bad actuality would be less of an actuality than the good actuality. Bad actuality simply actualizes bad potentialities, and a vicious life actualizes vicious capacities; but it does not necessarily actualize them to a lesser degree.

But perhaps it is possible to say, after all, that humans living imperfectly fail to actualize, in some sense, their distinctively human capacities, and to that extent they fail to be humans in the full sense. But then living is definite not because it is *an* actualization but because it is *the* actualization of the specific vital capacities of some definite thing. Insofar as essence is defined by the end, you can, strictly considered, actualize your vital capacities precisely to the extent that you can achieve the end. The end of the human life, as Aristotle defines it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, is the excellent exercise of rational or reason-related capacities of the human soul. And so *this* is what it means to be properly alive *qua* human. Living is, by definition, an achievement notion. Those who fall short of this end fail to actualize their potentialities insofar as they fail to live up to the form that defines the human species; and to the extent they fail to live up to it they also fail to live *simpliciter*, since living as a way of existing is an essence-dependent notion. The idea that there are degrees of life, and that these degrees of life are strictly coextensive with the degrees of life’s goodness, so that to live more

means to live better, and to live better means to live more, seems to be implied in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*.⁴⁵ It is also strongly suggested, *prima facie* at least, by the Qualification:⁴⁶

[Living is intrinsically good, because it is definite] but one should not take as example a life that is vicious and corrupted [οὐ δεῖ δὲ λαμβάνειν μοχθηρὰν ζωὴν καὶ διεφθαρμένην], or lived in pain, since such a life is indefinite [ἀόριστος γὰρ ἡ τοιαύτη], as are the attributes that belong to it. (The subject of pain, however, will be given clearer treatment in the sequel).

(*EN IX.9*, 1170a22-25)

The Qualification combines the following three claims: (1) pain, corruption and vice are certain “attributes” (ὑπάρχοντα) of life; (2) these attributes are indefinite and, (3) when they belong to a life they make this life indefinite. The (in)definiteness of life depends on the (in)definiteness of its attributes, that is, on what kind of life it is or how it is lived. Since pain, corruption or vice are indefinite, living which is painful, corrupted or vicious, is indefinite as well. And to the extent that the goodness of life is conferred by definiteness, these imperfect lives cannot be good.

There is useful evidence for the indefiniteness of vice and/or corruption⁴⁷ in the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle explicitly links virtue with definiteness and vice with indefiniteness.⁴⁸ This passage fits the conceptual links between definiteness, actuality and end as reconstructed above. Virtue is a kind of actualization (more precisely: “state,” ἔξις) of the potentialities inherent in one's character brought about by the process of habituation. As the intermediate state of character between excess and deficiency, virtue is tightly and narrowly defined by its two limits: the excessive and the deficient state. This essence of virtue is defined with regard to its end, that is, to “hit upon what is intermediate” in feelings or actions. Given this end, virtue must necessarily be precisely the kind of state that it is, that, the intermediate state. Vice, in contrast, is indefinite because it can go whichever way. Its indefiniteness means that it does not have its own essence, or that we

can define it derivatively as a privation or falling short of virtue. This is why vice does not have its own τέλος; it is just a falling short of the τέλος of virtue.

As for the indefiniteness of pain, Aristotle announces above that the case of pain “will be given clearer treatment in the sequel.” This probably refers to *Nicomachean Ethics* x.5, where he discusses the effect of pain on an activity: pain “destroys” the activity to which it belongs. He does not mention the notion of (in)definiteness in that chapter, but we can see on which grounds pain would be “indefinite”. Since Aristotle defines pleasure as the unimpeded vital activity of a living thing in its natural, uncorrupted state,⁴⁹ pain must be a falling short of this natural state caused either by a corruption of the underlying capacities or by externally induced impediments to their actualization. Similarly to vice, pain is thus essentially a privative notion: we can only define pain as the deficiency of a certain definite natural state.⁵⁰

Vice and pain make life to which they belong indefinite in the sense that they prevent it from completing its function or achieving its end. In order to make one’s life happy, the exercise of reason-related psychological capacities must satisfy two conditions: it must be “in accordance with excellence”,⁵¹ and it must be free from severe impediments.⁵² Vice and pain seem to frustrate the former and the latter condition, respectively: pain impedes the activities and vice corrupts them. Thus, Aristotle’s claim that vicious and painful lives are indefinite is consistent with, and follows from, the above reconstructed link between definiteness and finality.

Whereas the general course of this interpretation seems right, there remains one important question. Aristotle presupposes in step (3) above that it is the quality of life’s “attributes” that determines the quality of life. But it is not clear how far this determination goes. This depends on whether the value of life is exhausted by the value of its accidents or whether life also has something like an essential value, so that being alive is in itself something valuable. If the latter is the case, then the unhappy lives could still have a grain of intrinsic worth in spite of carrying a considerable deal of disvalue. What Aristotle would be saying in the Qualification, then, is not that vicious or painful lives are indeterminate *tout court*, but merely that they are not ideal examples of life being something

determinate. In the next section, I discuss some textual evidence in favor of the view that Aristotle did attribute some intrinsic value to the mere fact of being alive, independently of its quality. Then, I explain how such a view can be justified, that is, why even the bare human life is something definite, and hence good.

3. The mere living is worth choosing by itself

There are several passages or remarks scattered in Aristotle's texts suggesting that living has intrinsic worth independently of whether it is good or bad. I start with some implicit hints, and then turn to a more explicit passage from the *Politics*.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* IX, Aristotle remarks that “existence is worth choosing for everyone” (τό εἶναι πᾶσιν αἰρετόν),⁵³ that is, presumably, not only for virtuous persons. Another indication in the same direction can be found in Aristotle's discussion of friendship between parents and children. In comparing this friendship to the relationship between a king and his subjects, Aristotle notes: “Fatherly friendship is also like this, but the scale of the benefits conferred is different; after all, a father is responsible for his son's existence, for which there seems no greater benefit, and for bringing him up and educating him”.⁵⁴ This implies that life has some worth independently of having those attributes (such as good education) that are prerequisites for living well. Yet another piece of evidence is in *Rhetorics* I.6, where we find “life” as an item on the list of intrinsic goods: “for even though no other good should result from it, it is worth choosing in itself” (καθ' αὐτὸ αἰρετόν ἐστίν).⁵⁵ We can assume that Aristotle is referring here to the mere living, rather than good living exclusively, since the latter option would render the claim that “no other good should result from it” odd: good living is the highest good, and hence whether or not another good should result from would be irrelevant.

Another implicit piece of evidence comes from Aristotle's discussion, again in the *Nicomachean Ethics* IX, whether, and in what sense, virtuous person is a self-lover. Aristotle argues here that virtuous person will characteristically make certain choices that are informed by how he

weighs different goods against each other. “If the need be”, he will even sacrifice his own life “for the sake of his friends and his fatherland,” for he would choose (ἔλοιτ’ ἄν) “a year of a fine life over many years of a random life” (βιωσαι καλῶς ἐνιαυτὸν ἢ πόλλ’ ἔτη τυχόντως), since he will always allocate to himself the greater good, that is, the “fine”.⁵⁶ If we parse this as a choice between good living and mere living,⁵⁷ then Aristotle must presuppose that the mere living has at least some intrinsic value—otherwise the choice between good living and mere living would be moot. In those situations in which life-preservation conflicts with acting finely, the value of mere living will be outweighed by the value of a single fine deed done in its place, but the sacrifice of one’s life may still be a genuine loss.

Perhaps the most explicit and articulate indication in favor of the view that even the mere living has some intrinsic worth can be found in *Politics* III.6. Aristotle claims here that humans join political communities not only for the sake of “living well”, but also for the sake of “living by itself”, or “mere living”:

But human beings also join together and maintain political communities for the sake of life by itself [τοῦ ζῆν ἕνεκεν αὐτοῦ]. For there is perhaps [ἴσως] some share of what is fine in the mere living [τι τοῦ καλοῦ μόνον καὶ κατὰ τὸ ζῆν αὐτὸ μόνον], as long as it is not too overburdened with the hardships of life [ἄν μὴ τοῖς χαλεποῖς κατὰ τὸν βίον ὑπερβάλῃ λίαν]. In any case, it is clear that most human beings are willing to endure much hardship in order to cling to life, as if it had a sort of joy inherent in it and a natural sweetness [ὡς ἐνούσης τινὸς εὐημερίας ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ γλυκύτητος φυσικῆς] (*Pol.* III.6, 1278b 0-36; transl. according to Reeve, with modifications).

It is striking that Aristotle attributes a share in what is “fine”, that is, the intrinsic value that typically characterizes the quality of virtuous actions, to mere living, as explicitly distinguished from good

living. Aristotle is somewhat reluctant to grant this (“perhaps”),⁵⁸ and he makes an important reservation (“unless one’s life is too overburdened with hardships”),⁵⁹ but it is clear that he means to attribute some intrinsic value also to the mere living, rather than to good living exclusively. It is not necessary for life to be happy in order to have a share of the fine; it is sufficient that it is not utterly wretched. Along with having a share of the fine, mere living also has qualities that make it worth choosing from the subjective perspective of the one who lives it: it has an inherent “joy” and “natural sweetness”. This tallies with the above-cited claim from *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 that living is of the things that are naturally pleasant.

It deserves a special note that the justification of intrinsic value of mere living with reference to the “fine” dovetails with the claim from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that life is good because it is definite. There is a well-attested link between the “fine” and the “definite” in *Metaphysics* XII.3, where Aristotle lists the “definite” (ὀρισμένον) as a “kind” (εἶδος) of the “fine”, along with “order” (τάξις) and “proportion” (συμμετρία). If definiteness is a kind of the fine, it comes as no surprise that Aristotle claims on several occasions that fineness is as characteristic of the workings of nature as is their definiteness.⁶⁰ Insofar as the “definite” is a kind of the “fine”, we can understand the justification from the *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 as further explaining or specifying the claim from the *Politics*: mere living has a share of the fine insofar as it has one of its characteristic attributes, namely the definite. Whereas in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle does not spell out whether GoL should be read restrictively or concessively, in the *Politics* he is quite explicitly concessive, making clear that the intrinsic goodness is to be found even in the mere living.

I am ready to acknowledge that whereas this cumulative evidence is quite suggestive, it is not entirely conclusive, insofar as several of the above claims are open to an alternative interpretation. So, the claim that existence is worth choosing for everyone does not necessarily imply that existence is worth choosing for its own sake; for it may be worth choosing for another good that it entails but is different from it, such as pleasure. It may be further objected that the claim from the *Rhetoric* belongs to commonly accepted views that Aristotle is collecting in this work, and that it does not

necessarily reflect his own philosophical commitments. Finally, the passage from the *Politics* might not have any normative standing; Aristotle might merely be stating the obvious, namely that humans tend to choose living, no matter whether they are right to do so.

But I do not need to maintain that the above passages must necessarily be read in the way I have proposed. Rather, what I wish to maintain is that this is not only a possible reading of these passages in their own context, but that it can be further bolstered by showing that Aristotle has an implicit theory on the grounds of which he can attribute some intrinsic worth even to unperfected human lives. But can Aristotle indeed claim that mere living has a share in the fine or definiteness? Given the decisively teleological character of all these notions, this is possible only if we find an account on which the mere fact of being alive could be regarded as something definite, complete or final quite independently of how well or badly that life is lived. In the next section, I argue that Aristotle implicitly presupposes such a rudimentary, excellence-independent level of finality by his definition of the human life.

4. The definition of the human life

Since the unhappy human lives fall short of the human end, they also fall short of definiteness. But this does not have to mean that they are as overwhelmingly indefinite as the life of a man-headed calf. Indeed, there is indirect but strong evidence that even unhappy human lives are definite to some degree. Consider the definition of human life which appears earlier in the same passage:

Now people define [ὀρίζονται] being alive in the case of animals by capacity for perceiving [δυνάμει αἰσθήσεως], and in the case of human beings by capacity for perceiving or thinking [αἰσθήσεως ἢ νοήσεως]; but the capacity carries a reference to the activity, and the primary

level is that of the activity; being alive in the full sense [κυρίως] seems [ἔουκε] to be perceiving or thinking. (*EN IX.9*, 1170a16-20)

The definition of human life in *Nicomachean Ethics* ix has not received much attention.⁶¹ This lack of attention may be partly due to Aristotle's quick dismissal of "living" (ζῆν) as the candidate for the human ἔργον in *Nicomachean Ethics* I. Surely, Aristotle says, living cannot be the distinctively human activity we are looking for, since even plants live.⁶² But one should not miss the fact that in the context of our passage Aristotle is not talking about life in the most general and minimal sense, that is, the activity of the nutritive soul, but specifically about the *human* life.⁶³ The definition is brief and crude, and it is clearly supposed to establish just what Aristotle needs for his argument but there is no reason not to take it seriously; after all, it is the only available definition of the human life in Aristotle's ethical works. My plan for this section is as follows: (i) to discuss the relationship between this definition and other definitions of human life found in Aristotle's biological works; (ii) to propose that this definition should be read in light of the account of human function in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7; finally, (iii) to argue that vicious and painful lives fully satisfy this definition, and hence are definite.

(i) As befits the announced shift to a more naturalistic mode of explanation, the definition of the human life in *NE ix.9* is largely continuous with the accounts of human psychological capacities in Aristotle's biological works and in *De anima*. In *De Anima* III.9, "perception" alongside "thought" are those capacities of the animal soul that have to do with "discrimination" (κρίσις), in contrast to locomotion or nutrition.⁶⁴ Insofar as the "faculty of understanding and thought" (τὸ διανοητικόν καὶ νοῦς) is distinctive of humans or other rational beings,⁶⁵ we can see why Aristotle chooses perception and thought as the basic defining attributes of the human life.⁶⁶ In the biological works, perhaps the most useful parallel is the account of *scala naturae* in the *Parts of Animals*.⁶⁷ Whereas plants are alive in the minimal sense defined by nutrition and reproduction, animals have, in addition, a capacity for perception (αἴσθησις).⁶⁸ Even more complex are humans, "whose nature partakes not only of living

but, in addition, of living well”, since “mankind most of all partakes of the divine”.⁶⁹ This is a clear reference to the activity of thought.⁷⁰

The distinction between “living” and “living well” should give us a pause. Does “living well” coincide here with the notions of “living well” or “living finely” from the ethical or political treatises, that is, living in accordance with excellence?⁷¹ It does not. As argued by Mariska Leunissen, “well” in the phrase “living well” typically “indicates a more complex performance of the being’s life functions”, those functions that are not necessary “for the basic survival”.⁷² Elsewhere Aristotle notes that “living well” is not the exclusive preserve of humans, since even animals have higher functions that are not necessary for basic survival, and thus partake in “living well”.⁷³ So when Aristotle mentions “living well” as something distinctive for humans, he presumably means that humans partake in living well in a more substantial or honorable way than animals. But this does not necessarily mean that, in order to “live well” in the sense of partaking in rational activities, one also has to “live well” in the ethical sense of living “in accordance with excellence.” Rather, it seems that the notion of “living well” in the ethical sense falls within the range of “living well” in the biological sense, but has a narrower scope: it refers to an excellent exercise of those activities by virtue of which humans can be said to live well in the broader sense, that is, perception and thought, and thus be alive *qua* humans.⁷⁴

(ii) Let me return to the definition of human life in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9. As becomes clear few lines later, perceptual activity comprises two levels of psychic life. There is a first-order perceiving or thinking, and there is also a second-order perception or awareness (αἴσθησις or συναίσθησις) of these first-order activities: perceiving that one sees, perceiving that one hears, perceiving that one walks, perceiving that one thinks etc.⁷⁵ While Aristotle does not state this explicitly, the way he describes these activities suggests that the definition of the human life refers equally to activities at both levels, and that the first-order activities are typically accompanied by second-order perceptions of these activities. We are alive insofar as we think or perceive, but also insofar as we are aware of these activities. Is this second-order perception distinctively unique for human life, in contrast to animal life? When Aristotle discusses second-order perception in *De Anima* III.2, he seems

to understand it as an attribute that belongs to perception in general, rather than what would be distinctive for human perception alone. Likewise, in the present passage second-order perception plays a crucial role in Aristotle's argument that friends are necessary for happiness, but it does not make the difference between human and animal life.

So, presumably, what is distinctive for the human life must be found already on the first-order level of psychic activity. For this reason, several commentators⁷⁶ have proposed that instead of “perceiving *or* thinking” the text should read “perceiving *and* [καὶ] thinking”—as it appears in the parallel version of this definition in *Eudemian Ethics*⁷⁷—since the capacity for perception is shared by humans and animals. One so-far overlooked consideration in favor of sticking to the text is that the phrase “perceiving *or* thinking” could well reflect Aristotle's definition of human function as the “activity of the soul in accordance with reason, *or* not apart from reason” (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ λόγου).⁷⁸ These two kinds of activity refer, according to a well-established reading, to two different parts of the soul: a strictly rational part which possesses reason, and a non-rational but reason-responsive part.⁷⁹ When Aristotle defines human life in terms of perception or thought, he could have in mind these two kinds of activities. For it is the strictly rational part which thinks, and the non-rational (but reason-responsive) part which perceives.⁸⁰ Neither in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7 nor in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 does this amount to a concession that even a merely perceptual life, or life devoid of any rational activity proper, could qualify as human, but rather that the characteristically human activities are of two different kinds, owing to the peculiar composition of the human soul. Moreover, given this composition, even the purely perceptual activities of the human soul, or at least some of them, may be qualitatively different from the perceptual activities of non-rational animals, insofar as they are transformed by the cohabitation with the rational part of the soul.⁸¹

(iii) Vice or pain will would make life indefinite *tout court* if they prevent it from being a life of perception or thought in the sense just specified. If they do not cause this deprivation, then they will make a life to which they belong fall short of happiness, but not of the level of definiteness that derives from the fact that it is a recognizably human life. I limit the discussion here to the more

conclusive case of vice.⁸² There is an obvious reason why vice does not touch the rudimentary definiteness of life, namely that vicious activity is in fact possible only within the characteristically and distinctly human *modus operandi*; it presupposes the exercise of rational capacities.⁸³ The clearest indication for this is that vicious actions, just like virtuous actions, spring from “decision” or “rational choice” (προαίρεσις). In contrast to virtuous and self-controlled persons, who make good choices and act on them, and in contrast to akratic persons who make good choices but fail to act on them, vicious persons make bad choices, because vice “corrupts” (διαφθείρει) the “starting-points” (ἀρχαί) of their practical reasoning,⁸⁴ so that their practical reasoning rests on a wrong conception of the end of human action. Nonetheless, even these defective decisions are decisions in the full sense, insofar as the procedure that results in them is rational, including both rational desire and practical thought. “Decision is not possible without understanding and thought (ἄνευ νοῦ καὶ διανοίας);”⁸⁵ it is not only acting well that requires thought, but also acting badly (εὐπραξία καὶ τὸ ἐναντίον).⁸⁶

In order to appreciate the extent to which vice presupposes rationality, it is perhaps useful to compare it with the state of “brutishness” (θηριότης). In *Nicomachean Ethics* vii.1, Aristotle distinguishes three defective conditions of character: lack of self-control (ἀκρασία), vice (κακία) and brutishness. Just as there is a superhuman condition that exceeds virtue, embodied by heroes like Priam, there is a sub-human condition that exceeds vice, namely brutishness. This is a condition that is caused by an originally bad nature (φύσις μοχθηρά), disease or bad habits,⁸⁷ and psychologically characterized, in particular, by taking pleasure in things that are not pleasant “by nature”.⁸⁸ Aristotle offers a fairly heterogeneous catalogue of brutish states: ripping open pregnant women and devouring the infants; homosexuality; fearing the squeak of a mouse.⁸⁹ What is important in the context of our argument is that he sharply distinguishes brutishness from vice: it is a “different kind of state from vice (ἕτερόν τι γένος κακίας).”⁹⁰ One important reason for this distinction is that Aristotle associates at least some kinds of brutish conditions with the absence of rationality: “and of mindless people those who by nature are lacking in reasoning powers and live by their senses alone are brutish.”⁹¹ This agrees with his remark later on that brutishness is more alarming than vice: “for it is not that the

better part (τὸ βέλτιον)⁹² has been perverted, as in man—they have no better part.”⁹³ In contrast to vice, which is a corruption of reason, brutishness is a lack of it. Whereas you cannot be brutish *qua* human, insofar brutishness makes that life fundamentally indefinite, you can only live viciously *qua* human; and hence the vicious life must be definite.

5. Unhappy human lives as “mere” exercises of the human function

I have argued so far that even though vice and pain deprive human life of happiness, they do not in the least detract from its status of a definitely human life. This interpretation presupposes that human life can achieve two different levels of finality that correspond to two different normative domains: the rudimentary finality and the advanced finality. The advanced finality amounts to the highest end of human life, that is, happiness. The rudimentary finality amounts to a life that satisfies the definition of the human life. The advanced finality presupposes the rudimentary finality; but the rudimentary finality can be achieved independently of the advanced finality: it is possible to live a definite human life without necessarily living it well. The goodness that derives from how well the life is lived is, as it were, only an accidental—rather than an essential—attribute of the recognizably human life. If life is excellent, then this excellence adds a significant goodness to its rudimentary goodness; if life lacks excellence, then the overall goodness of life is exhausted by its rudimentary goodness. Whether life is lived well or badly makes a significant difference to the overall goodness of life, but it does not increase or diminish its rudimentary goodness grounded in the rudimentary finality.

We can note that the this distinction between two levels of finality is already implied in the definition of the human life. Since definition is the account of essence, and essence is defined with reference to function, this definition entails an implicit account of the human function. Insofar as this function does not make any reference to excellence, it must be broader than the account of the highest human end in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7. Even when your life is vicious, you do live a fully and recognizably human life, because you exercise the characteristic human function. But, of course, you still fall short of exercising the human function in the specific sense of exercising it “in accordance with

excellence”, or in a manner that constitutes happiness. This implies that it is possible to exercise the human function imperfectly, perhaps even badly, without diminishing the fact that the function being exercised remains the distinctively human function.

Whereas Aristotle’s account of human function in NE i.7 focuses, as befits the broader context of the discussion, on the advanced finality of the human life, it certainly does not exclude the possibility of the rudimentary level of finality. In fact, we can find, there and elsewhere, indications in favor of this distinction. In Aristotle’s discussion of practical wisdom in the *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.12, he notes that “our function is fulfilled [ἔργον ἀποτελεῖται] insofar as we have practical wisdom and virtue of character; for virtue makes the goal correct and practical wisdom makes the things promoting the goal [correct].”⁹⁴ When translating ἀποτελεῖται as “is fulfilled” or “is achieved” (Crisp), this suggests that without practical wisdom we cannot exercise our function at all. But ἀποτελεῖται connotes perfection; practical wisdom is necessary to fulfil our function perfectly or completely, but not to fulfil it at a more rudimentary level. This is confirmed by another occurrence of the same phrase, ἔργον ἀποτελεῖν, in *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6: excellence is what makes a thing able to “perfectly fulfil” (ἀποτελεῖ) its function, so that, for instance, it is “through the excellence of the eye that we see well”. This passage implies a clear contrast between exercising function in a minimal, rudimentary sense and exercising it *well*.

This distinction is even more explicit in Aristotle’s analogy between the function of practitioners of arts and the human function in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7:

If the function of a human being is the activity of the soul in accordance with reason, or not apart from reason, and the function, we say, of a given sort of practitioner and a good practitioner of that sort is generically the same [τὸ δ’ αὐτὸ φάμεν ἔργον εἶναι τῷ γένει τοῦδε καὶ τοῦδε σπουδαίου], as for example in the case of a cithara-player and a good cithara-player, and this is so without qualification in all cases, where a difference in respect of excellence is

added to the function [προστιθεμένης τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν ὑπεροχῆς πρὸς τὸ ἔργον], then ...
(*EN* I.7, 1098a 8-12)

Note that the function of a human being or of a cithara-player is at first defined without reference to excellence. Both a cithara-player and a good cithara-player play cithara, and thus exercise their ἔργον of cithara-players. Their activity is identical, insofar as it belongs to the same genus. The excellence of the good player's play does not make it an activity of a different kind; rather, the excellence is an *addition* to the bare exercise of function. This indicates that, in order to fulfil one's function in a rudimentary sense, the exercise of that function does not necessarily have to be impeccable. Even a poor cithara-player exercises her function, insofar as she meets certain basic conditions that define what cithara playing is, which is why she can justly be called a cithara-player. This is consistent with Aristotle's careful formulation that the human good "resides in the function" (ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ),⁹⁵ rather than that it is identical with the function.

A potentially disquieting consequence of this view is the extent to which it allows to divorce rationality from excellence. As Sarah Broadie has put it: if "a bad man who pursues wrong ends may be just as rational in his pursuit of them: just as logical, intelligent, sound in his calculations and grasp of empirical facts", then it is difficult to see how can one become better on account of becoming more rational.⁹⁶ A possible response to this worry, floated by Christine Korsgaard, is that Aristotle is using the notion of rationality in two different senses, descriptive and normative. Making a bad rational decision is clearly a rational failure, but this is a failure of rationality in the normative sense; as for the very fact of having made that decision, this is an achievement of the rationality in the descriptive sense. According to Korsgaard, Aristotle is "clearly" using rationality in the descriptive sense, rather than the normative, in his account of human function.⁹⁷ Given that Aristotle himself never draws this distinction, though, we perhaps should not be too confident of this. But the distinction seems to map quite well on our distinction between the rudimentary finality, defined by what humans do by nature, and the advanced finality, defined by what they do when their nature is perfected by the art of politics.

But if the level of finality that constitutes the goodness of mere living is merely descriptive, rather than normative, then we are confronted with the question whether this kind of goodness can ever have any normative or practical relevance. What does it matter, for the purposes of practical deliberation, that my living is good in the abstract sense of fitting a definite box in the natural teleology? In what sense can this life be choiceworthy or good *for me*, if it is lived badly? Or, perhaps, is it practically relevant in the sense that I *ought to* choose it? The question about the practical relevance of the rudimentary goodness of life questions is exacerbated by Aristotle's remarks mentioned in the introduction that at least some imperfect forms of lives would better not be lived at all. If the rudimentary goodness matters, should these lives not be worth choosing in spite of their imperfection?

6. The practical relevance of the goodness of mere living

The first point to make is that Aristotle's pessimistic remarks about the value of unhappy lives do not necessarily entail that mere living cannot have any intrinsic value at all. In fact, the claim that the vicious life does not deserve to be lived can be plausibly understood as an all-things-considered judgment that results from weighing the intrinsic goodness of mere living against the badness that this life has on account of being lived badly. The conclusion is that the badness conferred by vice outweighs the rudimentary goodness of life, but not that it cancels it or indeed diminishes it. Vicious lives are, on the whole, not worth choosing, but that does not mean that they are void of value altogether: they do have a grain of goodness, which amounts to the excellence- and vice-independent rudimentary goodness of life. Moreover, it is still possible, at least in principle, that the rudimentary goodness could make a real difference in less clear-cut cases, such as half-virtuous or half-vicious (ἡμιπόνηρος) lives,⁹⁸ or virtuous but painful lives. In these cases, where the badness of life is not as overwhelming, the rudimentary goodness of mere living could possibly tip the balance in favor of living rather than not living, should such choices be made.

It is also easily possible to find a place for the rudimentary goodness in Aristotle's classification of goods. When Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.8 that the virtuous person will in some

situations sacrifice wealth, honors and life, he seems to understand the value of mere living in the broad category of the so-called “middle-level ends”, such as honor or pleasure, that is, those that we choose “both for their own sake and for the sake of something else,” or that we choose even if “nothing resulted from them.”⁹⁹ Living is chosen for the sake of happiness, insofar as one can only live well as long as one is alive. At the same time, it is also something we pursue and keep for its own sake, as stated explicitly in the passage from *Rhetorics* cited above. As befits the status of middle-level ends, life should be abandoned in cases when it conflicts with happiness.

But it still remains to be seen in what sense the rudimentary goodness of life make life an attractive or compelling object of choice. Aristotle does not offer a clear answer to this question, but in the remaining part of this section I try to reconstruct, to some extent speculatively, what his answer could look like. It might be useful at this point to turn briefly to the views about the value of mere human living that we find later in Stoicism, since the Stoics were far more explicit than Aristotle about the value of mere living and what makes it a compelling object of choice. For the Stoics, the value of mere living is sharply distinguished from the value of good living; whereas the former is good in the full sense, mere living is merely a preferred indifferent: having more of life won't make us more happy, but, unless it makes us unhappy, we are justified in choosing it.¹⁰⁰ This value of mere living derives from the fact that life is something natural. For the Stoics, nature is a normative, providential force that creates and orders everything in the best possible, namely the rational way, for the sake of the whole universe. So the fact that being alive *qua* human is something natural means that it is something that might be even appropriate for us to do. Being a human, or living a human life, perhaps even a vicious life, is a role we have to play, like actors, as our contribution to the providential ordering of the cosmos.¹⁰¹ Exiting life without good reasons amounts to shirking the role that we were assigned by the rational God.

It seems that Aristotle's justification of the choiceworthiness of life is based, like in Stoicism, on conceiving the human life as a work of nature. In contrast to the Stoics, however, Aristotle did not understand the choiceworthiness of life in terms of a duty or appropriate action. We do not find any

parallels in his thoughts to the Stoic view that humans are determined by the god to play a certain specific cosmic role, and that we therefore ought to choose to stay alive in most circumstances. Rather, the view that the human life is something natural could make this life choiceworthy in more characteristically Aristotelian terms, namely as a source of pleasure. We have seen that both in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and in the *Politics*, Aristotle links the intrinsic goodness of life closely with its pleasantness. Even the mere living has some “natural sweetness”, which no doubt reflects the fact that life is “naturally good”. Since, as we said, Aristotle defines pleasure as “an unimpeded activity of natural state”, and since living *qua* human is an activity of a natural state, then even the mere human living is bound to be pleasant. So perhaps we can think of the pleasure of being alive as a corollary, and manifestation, of life’s rudimentary, natural goodness, and something that makes the mere living good for us.

But when we think about two main kinds of unhappy life, namely painful and vicious life, one may worry whether, or in what sense, these lives can really count as natural and pleasant. Here I can offer nothing but a plausible speculation remotely based on Aristotle’s texts. Firstly, how can the life of pain be pleasant? The answer is that it can be pleasant in the similar sense that a bad life can be good: by virtue of its attribute, namely painfulness, it is painful; but by virtue of being a life, it is pleasant. Since the human life is defined by thought or perception, this has to mean that one’s perception can be a source of pleasure even when it is perception of pain. This is possible if we grant that one can be pleased by the fact *that* one perceives independently of *what* one perceives. This thought could perhaps be further bolstered by drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between two orders of perception from his definition of the human life, so that the pleasure in the very activity of perception would be assigned to the higher order of perceiving *that* we perceive. This line of explanation is in principle also applicable to the case of vicious life. Vicious life will typically contain a great deal of vicious pleasure, that is, pleasure in vicious activities. But it is likely that not all of this life’s activities, including those that involve reason, such as action un-related activities of theoretical thought, will be vicious. More importantly, though, even the vicious activities may be a source of

natural pleasure precisely insofar as they presuppose the actualisation of vital capacities that define the human species. corresponding activities are natural.¹⁰²

7. Concluding remarks

I have proposed that the concessive reading of the GoL claim can be squared with Aristotle's pervasive teleological commitments in metaphysics and ethics. The mere human living is intrinsically good because it constitutes a definite level of finality, the rudimentary finality, that can be achieved independently of life's excellence. I conclude by revisiting the brief remarks made in the introduction about the relationship between Aristotle's natural science and his ethics. What implications does the distinction between the rudimentary and the advanced finality have for our understanding of the relationship between the scientific/biological, and normative/ethical domains of Aristotle's philosophy? One possible conclusion is that the distinction between two levels of finality speaks in favour of a sharp separation between the two domains. Insofar as it is possible to arrive at a full definition of the human species without referring to the human good, then the level of rudimentary finality corresponds to the purely biological perspective on humanity. This biological discourse does not have to wait on the ethical discussion to conclude its investigations. The ethical discourse with its advanced finality introduces normative considerations that are absent from the purely biological level of rudimentary finality.

There are two reasons why this conclusion should be resisted. One is that the biological perspective clearly extends all the way up to the normative domain of political and ethical treatises. The *Politics* can be regarded as a biological work in an extended sense, since humans are defined in the first chapter of the work as "political animals" and every *polis* is said to exist by nature. When it comes to the ethical theory, it has been claimed with a considerable plausibility that "biological facts about what it is to be a human being inform Aristotle's normative claims about the human good."¹⁰³

We can add that the account of the human good can be regarded, in turn, as the culmination of the

biological discourse about humans, insofar as it is by living in accordance with excellence that humans achieve their perfection qua members of their respective biological species. In other words, the biological perspective on humans cannot be reduced to the level of the rudimentary finality.

But there is also another reason against the sharp separation of biological and ethical perspective, namely that the normative domain extends all the way down to the realm of biology. If our interpretation is right, that the biological facts about what it is to be a human not only inform Aristotle's normative claims but themselves already have some normative standing. Aristotle nowhere suggests that we should sharply distinguish between a biological and an ethical definiteness, and hence exclude the rudimentary goodness from the ethical domain. So, rather than strictly assigning the rudimentary finality to the domain of biology, and the advanced finality to the domain of ethics, it might be more appropriate to talk about the distinction between a higher and a lower level of biological-cum-ethical goodness. Just as we become fully biologically perfect only when we become virtuous, so our life already has some rudimentary degree of goodness as soon as it conforms to the biological definition of the human species.¹⁰⁴

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Notes

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) IX.4, 1166a19. All translations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* follow Broadie and Rowe, unless otherwise noted.

² EN IX.9, 1170b3-5.

³ I take it that “choiceworthy” and “good” are broadly synonymous in these passages. In general, “choiceworthy” has a broader scope and includes “good”, “pleasant” and the “fine” (EN II.3, 1104b30; *Topics* 118b27). As we shall see below, all these are attributed by Aristotle to “life”.

⁴ This distinction appears repeatedly at various places in Aristotle’s corpus, and we shall discuss some of these occurrences as we proceed. A question might arise whether non-virtuous lives could not also be worth choosing on account of virtue-independent intrinsic goods such as health or honor, rather than barely on account of the value of mere living. In principle, the presence or absence of these goods could make an overall difference to the choiceworthiness of life, but this difference would still be located within the scope of “mere living”, insofar as none of these goods could make an unhappy life a good one.

⁵ Henry and Nielsen, *Bridging the Gap*, focus on the relationship between ethics and science in general; studies dealing with the relationship between ethics and biology include Lennox, “Biological Roots” and Leunissen, “Natural Science”. Several pieces in Geert and Kreft, *Aristotle’s Anthropology*, bear on these questions from the vantage point of “anthropology”.

⁶ We find only passing remarks in commentaries on the relevant passages (Joachim, *Aristotle*, 259-260; Gauthier-Jolif, *L’Éthique à Nicomaque*, 757-8; Broadie and Rowe, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 427; Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 298). These remarks bring out that commentators have been aware of the ambiguity in the available evidence, but no systematic attempt has been undertaken to come to terms with it. Perhaps the most useful glosses and references to relevant primary texts can be found in Schütrumpf, *Politik*, 449 and Dirlmeier, *Eudemische Ethik*, 170.

⁷ *EN IX.9*, 1170a13. For a similar move, see *EN IX.7*, 1167b27–1168a9.

⁸ Kosman, “Desirability of Friends”; Biss, “Aristotle on Friendship”; Whiting, “Philia”.

⁹ *EN IX.9*, 1170a19-20.

¹⁰ *EN IX.9*, 1170a 23-25.

¹¹ “One should not suppose, Aristotle says, when I say that life is among the things that are good and pleasing in themselves, that I am saying this about every life, but rather about that of worthy people” (Michael of Ephesus, *On Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 198; see also Whiting, “*Philia*,” 298).

¹² Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* [*EE*] I.5, 1215b 24-26. “Disease, extreme pain and calamity” are the things in face of which “one might have chosen not to have been born in the first place, if one had had that choice” (*EE* I.4, 1215b21-22). Translation closely follows Michael Woods.

¹³ 1253a 33-36.

¹⁴ Life is the way of being of the ensouled things (Aristotle, *De anima* [*DA*] II.4, 415b13).

¹⁵ This is not to deny that even the life of monsters or brutes is in accordance with nature in the sense that it is not a random product but is determined by some kind of natural necessity (for instance, *GA* IV.4, 770b9–18). (On this question see Johnson, *Teleology*, 199 and, in particular, Connell, *Female Animals*, chapter 10). But it lacks finality, and hence it fails to accord with nature in a sense that could confer value.

¹⁶ *Pol.* I.2, 1252b27-30; III.6, 1278b15-30; III. 9, 1280a31-34. Leunissen, “Biology and Teleology” has a good account of the relationship between ethical and biological “layers” in the *Politics*.

¹⁷ For a detailed criticism of Arendt’s and Agamben’s reading of Aristotle, see Finlayson, “Bare Life.”

¹⁸ Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* (*GA*) II.3, 736b13.

¹⁹ In biological works, βίος picks one of the four types differentiae of animals (see, for instance, Lennox, “Bios”).

²⁰ *EN IX.9*, 1169b26-29

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- ²¹ 1175b 25-28
- ²² *EN* IX.9, 1170b1-2.
- ²³ *EN* VII.13, 1153a14-15. Or is closely associated with that activity (*EN* X.4-5).
- ²⁴ *EN* II.6, 1106b27-35; *EN* X.3 1173a16.
- ²⁵ Plato, *Philebus*, 25a.
- ²⁶ Aristotle, *Topics* 102a3. See also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (*Met.*) 1031a12 and *De partibus animalium* (*PA*) 91a1.
- ²⁷ ἀόριστον ἢ στέρησις (Aristotle, *Physics* [*Phys.*] III.3, 201b26); see also *Met.* IX.9, 1066a15.
- ²⁸ Aristotle, *De generatione et corruptione* II.8, 335a21; *Phys.* IV.3, 209b4; *Met.* VII.11, 1036a29.
- ²⁹ *PA* I.5, 641b18-19.
- ³⁰ *Phys.* II.9.
- ³¹ *Phys.* II.8, 199b6.
- ³² *GA* IV.4, 770b16-17; see also *DA* III.9, 432b21-23.
- ³³ Aristotle, *Meteorologica* 390a10-13. For a very similar statement, see *Pol.* I.2, 1253a22-23. Other relevant passages include *PA* I.1, 640b32-641a4; *GA* I.23, 731a25-26; *DA* II.4, 416a5-6.
- ³⁴ πέρας is often used synonymously with ὄρος; for the view that πέρας is what “defines,” see *Phys.* IV.3, 209b -5.
- ³⁵ *GA* I.1, 715b14-16; see also *PA* I.5, 645a22-25.
- ³⁶ *PA* IV.10, 687a15-687b9.
- ³⁷ τῇ γὰρ οὐσία ἢ γένεσις ἀκολουθεῖ καὶ τῆς οὐσίας ἕνεκά ἐστιν (*GA* V.1, 778b 6-7).
- ³⁸ *PA* I.5, 645a22-25.
- ³⁹ Lennox, *On the Parts of Animals*, 126-7.
- ⁴⁰ *EN* II.6, 1106a16-20.
- ⁴¹ *EN* I.7, 1097b1-2.
- ⁴² *EN* IX.9, 1170a17-18. Aquinas ad loc.; Broadie and Rowe, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 427; Gauthier-Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, 757-8.

⁴³ Joachim, *Aristotle*, 260; Pakaluk, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 210-211.

⁴⁴ Broadie and Rowe, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 427.

⁴⁵ Having established that using a thing correctly (ὀρθῶς χρῆσθαι) means to use it more (μᾶλλον χρῆσθαι), Aristotle extends this idea to life as the use of the soul: “Now of a soul, too, thinking as well as reasoning is the only function of the soul, or is most of all its function. Therefore it is now simple and easy for anyone to reach the conclusion that he who contemplates correctly is more alive (ὅτι ζῆν μᾶλλον ὁ διανοούμενος ὀρθῶς), and he who most tells the truth lives most (καὶ μάλιστα πάντων ὁ μάλιστα ἀληθεύων).” <Aristotle, *Protrepticus*>, ap. Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* IX, 58.1-10 (Hutchinson and Johnson, *Protrepticus*, 57-8).

⁴⁶ The authenticity of the entire passage, and the parenthesis in particular, has been somewhat controversial (see Gauthier-Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, 757). I follow Bywater's edition which considers both the passage and the parenthesis as authentic.

⁴⁷ I take it that there is no significant difference between vice and corruption here; see *EN* VI.5, 1140b13-17; *EN* VII.6, 1150a1-3.

⁴⁸ *EN* II.5, 1106b24-35.

⁴⁹ *EN* VII.13, 1153a13-15.

⁵⁰ Gauthier-Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, 758 points out that the indeterminacy of pain follows implicitly from Aristotle's association of pleasure with determinacy at *EN* X.3, 1173a15-28.

⁵¹ *EN* I.7, 1098a17.

⁵² *EN* I.10, 1100b28-30.

⁵³ *EN* IX.7, 1168a 5.

⁵⁴ *EN* VIII.11, 1161a 16-18.

⁵⁵ 1362b 26-27.

⁵⁶ In the similar spirit, he notes that the great-souled person “does not risk himself for small things, or often, because there are few things he values, but for great things he does, and when he does he is unsparing of his life, as to whom there are some conditions under which it is not worth living [οὐκ

ἄξιον ὄν πάντως ζῆν]” (*EN* IV.3, 1124b8). Here the emphasis is less on the positive and more on the negative motivation for the fine choice, namely to avoid something shameful.

⁵⁷ This is not necessarily the only option to parse this choice, but it has a considerable plausibility; “random life” does suggest an unhappy life. This choice is, presumably, merely hypothetical, insofar as the virtuous person won’t ever chose the mere living over good living, just as she would never ever be able to live a “random life”.

⁵⁸ Note that ἴσως can also mean “indeed”, “doubtless”; the latter is the rendering of this passage in Rackham, *Politics*. This would strengthen our case.

⁵⁹ This qualification is important insofar as it applies not only to the all-things-considered choice-worthiness of life but to the very worth of mere living. There are extreme hardships that will deprive human life of any intrinsic worth whatsoever. Aristotle does not spell out what these extreme hardships amount to. I proceed on the assumption that this qualification still leaves a considerable space for a variety of lives that are properly unhappy but not wretched or difficult to the utmost.

⁶⁰ Consider, for instance, Aristotle’s exhortation to the study of zoology on the grounds that the workings of nature are “marvelous” (θαυμαστόν) and “fine” (καλόν) (*PA* I.5, 645a 23); they are also “ordered and definite” (*GA* V.1, 778b4).

⁶¹ Kietzmann, “Definition,” argued that Aristotle does not offer in his works any definition of human essence, but this is controversial and depends largely on how strict a logical form one expects that definition to have, and how exhaustive its content is supposed to be.

⁶² *EN* I.7, 1197b34-98a1.

⁶³ This account presumably also includes what Aristotle notoriously considers to be defective humans such as women (*GA* II.3, 737a27) or natural slaves (*Pol.* I.4, 1254a14-16). The borderline and controversial category is human brutes. I return to this question later in this section.

⁶⁴ 432a16-17.

⁶⁵ *DA* II.4, 414b18-19.

⁶⁶ A referee objected that living is for Aristotle “a precondition of thinking”. If this is so, then Aristotle may think that any thought-related human activity is good in a rudimentary sense, without necessarily committing to the view that living as its precondition is also good. But the point is precisely that, for humans, living *amounts to* thinking (or thought-related perception), not that it is its precondition. Humans who do not think are not truly alive qua humans.

⁶⁷ *PA* II.10, 655b37-656a9.

⁶⁸ This makes a significant difference, Aristotle emphasizes elsewhere, since the end of the animal life is then not exhausted by nutrition and reproduction, but includes knowledge (γνώσις) of some sort (*GA* I.23, 731a24-30).

⁶⁹ *PA* II.10, 655b37-656a9.

⁷⁰ For “thought” as the essentially divine capacity, see *PA* IV.10, 686a26-32; *GA* II.3, 736b27-29; for humans as thinking, see *PA* IV.10, 686a25-19; *GA* I.23, 731b1-2; *DA* II.3, 414b18; III.3, 429a6-7. The idea of humans as “rational animals” appears in *Pol.* I. 2, 1253a7-18.

⁷¹ *EN* I.4, 1095a19; I.8, 1098b21; VI.5, 1140a28.

⁷² Leunissen, *Explanation and Teleology*, 62.

⁷³ *DA* III.13, 435b19-21.

⁷⁴ These considerations raise a related question whether the natural goodness of human life exceeds the natural goodness of life of plants or animals. We cannot systematically pursue this question in this paper, but here is one possible answer: Human lives are indeed better, insofar as they are more definite than those other less complex forms or lives. This is plausible, for there are more conditions that the human life must satisfy, on account of the complexity of its psychic functions, in addition to the conditions that must be satisfied by plants or animals.

⁷⁵ *EN* IX.9, 1170a29-b6.

⁷⁶ Michael of Ephesus, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 195-6; Gauthier-Jolif, *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, 756.

⁷⁷ To be alive means “to perceive and to know” (τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ τὸ γνωρίζειν) (*EE* VII.12, 1244b25).

⁷⁸ *EN* I.7, 1098a7-8.

⁷⁹ *EN* I.13. Broadie and Rowe, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 277; Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 184.

⁸⁰ Aristotle does not explicitly characterize the activity of the non-rational (but reason-responsive) part of the human soul in terms of perception, but this is a plausible connection to make. Perception as the capacity that humans share with animals is non-rational (even though Aristotle appears to think that there are rational forms of perception, such as pleasure in the fine, see Coope, “Ethical Virtue”). The reason-responsive part is characterized in terms of its capacity to feel pleasure and pain, which is closely associated with perception (*DA* II.3, 413b22-23).

⁸¹ For recent versions of this “transformative” reading, see Rabbås, “Eudaimonia,” 100-101 or Cagnoli Fiecconi, “Human Psychology,” 64-5.

⁸² Given the available evidence, the discussion of painful lives would be more speculative. But, broadly considered, there seem to be good grounds to argue that pain does not necessarily deprive the human life of its characteristic share in rationality. It will impede the rational activities, but it won’t change their character.

⁸³ This point has been well made by Barney, “Vice,” 298-299.

⁸⁴ *EN* VII.6, 1150a1-2.

⁸⁵ *EN* VI.2, 1139a33-34.

⁸⁶ *EN* VI.2, 1139a34-35.

⁸⁷ *EN* VII.5, 1148b18. But it is the originally bad nature that seems to be the cause of brutishness in the proper and primary sense.

⁸⁸ *EN* VII.5, 1148b15-19.

⁸⁹ *EN* VII.5-6.

⁹⁰ *EN* VII.1, 1145a27.

⁹¹ *EN* VII.5, 1149a8-10. See Natali, “Nicomachean Ethics VII” or Kontos, “Radical Evil,” for this view.

⁹² That is, the rational part.

⁹³ *EN VII.5*, 1150a1-3.

⁹⁴ *EN VI.12*, 1144a6-8; transl. Irwin.

⁹⁵ *EN I.7*, 1097b27.

⁹⁶ Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle*, 48.

⁹⁷ Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*, 144.

⁹⁸ Akritic persons are “half-vicious” (*EN VII.10*, 1152a17).

⁹⁹ *EN I.7*, 1097b1-3. Richardson Lear, *Highest Good*, 9-11.

¹⁰⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers VII.102*.

¹⁰¹ For the idea of the human role, see, for instance, Epictetus, *Dissertationes II.9.1*.

¹⁰² An anonymous referee raised the following objection against the contention that life can be good independently of the goodness of its attributes. This objection is based on a parallel between the value of pleasure and value of activity. For Aristotle, whether a pleasure is a good depends on whether it is a good or bad pleasure. But this should presumably also hold for activities in general: if an activity of thought is good, then (and only then) it is a good. If human life is an activity defined by thinking, how can a life of bad thinking be any good? In response to this worry, it can be said that the parallel between valuation of pleasure and valuation of activity can be maintained even on the interpretation I propose because activity can be evaluated from two different perspectives: one relative to the quality of its attributes, and another relative to the significance that the type of activity has for the fulfilment of one’s function. An activity of bad thinking (or a pleasure in this activity) is bad because it lacks excellence; but it is good (and so is the pleasure in it) insofar as it is an activity that fulfils the human function, in contrast, say, to an activity of eating sweets.

¹⁰³ Leunissen, “Natural Science,” 231.

¹⁰⁴ The work on this article has been supported by Swiss National Science Foundation (project number 179994). My thanks to Elena Cagnoli Fieconi, Brad Inwood, Richard King and Máté Veres for

their extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees for their constructive suggestion as well as to the editorial team of this journal for the quick and transparent peer-review process.