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Essay

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„Is happiness the thing at which all actions aim?“

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Thomas Zinner

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Matt Dougherty, BSc MA MPhil PhD

Introduction

By reading Aristotle, especially the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we clearly come to the perspective that acting morally right leads to happiness and allows individuals to flourish. When we engage in morally right actions, we are not only fulfilling ethical obligations but also promoting our own well-being and personal growth. The pursuit of actions aligns with our desire for a flourishing life, suggesting that true happiness is the final end or the chief good and can be found in doing what is morally right. This essay will examine the connection between the aim of actions and happiness based on the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* from Aristotle.

The question this essay tries to answer is:

Is happiness (*eudaimonia*) the thing at which all actions aim?

The aim

If we want to answer this question and determine happiness as the final aim to which all actions thrive, we first must prove that there even is a final aim and show how aims work itself. For that matter I'd like to start with a strong passage from Aristotle to break down and analyze it:

“So if what is done has some end that we want for its own sake, and everything else we want is for the sake of this end; and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (because this would lead to an infinite progression, making our desire fruitless and vain), then clearly this will be the good, indeed the chief good.”¹

In this passage of the text determines the end of something as the purpose of it. The end is always something that we aim at. An end can generally be something we desire either for its own sake or for the sake of something else. To separate these two kinds of ends we must split them up in a lower end, the one for the sake of something else and the higher end which is desirable for its own sake. The example with money shows this in the best possible case. We want money to do things with it. For example, to buy tools. Tools to build a chair. A chair to sit in and rest. Resting to be happy. If we desire something for its own sake and do not use it for something else it is the final end, the chief good. It must be something that is desirable for its own sake but also the end of all other desiring. We only want other stuff that aims and leads to this final end. If not, the process would go on for infinity. In the first place it is not sure, that such a final end has to exist as a chief good. Why couldn't it go on for infinity? Well, because for Aristotle the good for a person is whatever he desires for its own sake. For him this is happiness and flourishing as the Greek word “*eudaimonia*” describes.²

Happiness

While knowing what could be meant by aiming at something and determining the final end, we still don't really know what Aristotle means with happiness (*eudaimonia*). As the analyzing writer he was it is easier to thin the possible answers by disqualifying the obviously wrong ones first.

Aristotle proves multiple possible answers to the question what happiness could be wrong. It can't be pleasure because happiness is more than just temporal emotions. It is a state of art how to live a good life and goes beyond the feeling of pleasure. It also can't be honor. Because it comes from other people in form of recognition and can be taken away too. How can happiness

¹ (Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1094a, 19-24)

² (Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1095b)

be controlled by other people or an external force in general? If you really have a flourishing life (in terms of the Greek eudaimonia), then it can't simply be taken away from you from the outside. So, we must disqualify honor too. Possession of virtues would seem right. But under a second thought it is struggling. To be virtuous needs to have more than only the moment of possession. Having a virtue is not enough and not flourishing. It means that you could be virtuous while being passive, for example while sleeping. But you must train it and actually act in a virtuous way. The last possible answer he brings in is wealth. In fact, wealth is the weakest in all of them. It simply fails because wealth can never be for its own sake. The only reason someone would desire wealth is to do something with it. So, it fails the first premises that the final good must be good for its own sake, which we discussed while determining the aim and chief good.³

What else can be there to answer our question to define happiness? In fact, there is nothing new needed. We must refer to what we were discussing in the beginning already. The good for a human being must be final and self-sufficient, at least in terms of aiming at an end. Final means to be desirable for its own sake and self-sufficient means that it is self-sustained and does not need some other element, like people that recognize you or external forces that it depends on. (Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. 1097a-1097b)

Functions

For this thought we need to think about what things can fulfill. Aristotle follows Plato when saying that everything has a function that can or even must be fulfilled. The purpose of the function is what is good for it. And what's good for it is whatever allows it to fulfill its function. To fulfill all these criteria to fulfill its function is what is virtuous in the end. The same thing can be used for humans.

There is just one simple problem again. We don't know yet what the function for human beings is. And as we work with Aristotle it is easier again to tell what it certainly is not, to reduce the possible answers. The first argument is that the function must be unique for humans. Nutrition and growth can't be it, because it must be something that can only be done by humans. Growth can also be done by plants and animals and so it fails. Perception could be a good guess. To hear, see and smell a lot of things could be the function of humans. But in the same argument as before, this is also done by animals and not unique by humans.⁴

“If we take this kind of life to be activity of the soul and actions in accordance with reason, and the characteristic activity of the good person to be to carry this out well and nobly.”⁵ At this point Aristotle found something unique that only humans have. So, we can determine the function for humans and to act virtuously means to act in line with your rationality. This leads to the conclusion that happiness or flourishing is exercising these virtues. And to do so, you need to use reason.

³ (Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. 1095b-1096a)

⁴ (Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. 1098a)

⁵ (Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics 1098a 15-17)

Conclusion

For the conclusion and answer to the question of this essay I would like to break the result of the argument down. The good for a person is performing the activities unique to humans well. To fulfill that rationality is involved which leads to the closure that virtues need to be exercised. If we add the first premise from the discussion about the aim, meaning that desiring something for its own sake is a criterion for the final end or chief good, which for Aristotle can only be happiness, we derive in the conclusion, that happiness is exercising the virtues. To answer the question formally: Yes, I came to the conclusion that happiness (eudaimonia) is the thing at which all actions aim.

Literature

Aristotle. (2014). Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics. (R. Crisp, Ed.) (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.