

A Defence of Aristotle on the Good Life

Introduction

This article is a response to the previous one in this issue by Roy Jackson. Jackson sets out a series of penetrating criticisms of several of the key claims made by Aristotle in Books I, VIII, IX and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)*.¹ More specifically, Jackson attacks three of the arguments considered central to Aristotle's project in that text. He suggests that there is no objective account of the good life which will hold for all persons; he claims the 'Function Argument' through which Aristotle seeks to establish the purpose of human existence is invalid; and he argues Aristotle's emphasis on friendship belies the dubious importance this relationship really has, particularly when placed in the context of whether it provides any serious benefit for mankind.

What I offer here is a qualified defence of Aristotle on all three counts. I claim that Jackson rightly identifies a number of key problems for anyone who wishes to defend a broadly Aristotelian line, but there are sound responses which leave the substance of Aristotelianism in place. I proceed by looking in detail at each of the three areas of Aristotle's thought which Jackson subjects to criticism, and setting out a series of responses in each case.

Eudaimonia

Aristotle's claims about the best life for a human being are set out primarily in Books I and X of *NE*, but Jackson's focus is overwhelmingly on the ideas set out in the earlier section, and he largely avoids the claim in Book X that the best life for any human is one of philosophical contemplation. This makes sense for two reasons. Firstly, few of us are convinced that filling our days with logic and metaphysics is the best life for all humans, and secondly, whatever Aristotle really intended all those sympathetic to him tend to argue that the best life will involve the use of reason, but will include other key components such as friendship and moral virtue.

The substance of Jackson's attack here boils down to three distinct criticisms. He believes Aristotle is guilty of a logical fallacy when he claims that because all individual human activities aim at some good, there must be some single overall good at which human life aims. He is sceptical that there can be a single description of the best sort of life whose content would be the best life for anyone – there is simply too much variety between persons. And, he suspects Aristotle depends upon an unsustainable distinction between higher and lower pleasures, a distinction which is unreliable because we simply cannot arrive at a sufficiently detailed account of how to separate the two.

The first of the key points is the claim that Aristotle begins with an invalid argument which leads us to the conclusion that there is a best life. According to Jackson, Aristotle's claim in the opening lines of the book that 'every action and pursuit is considered to aim at some good' (1094a 2-3) is one which Aristotle believes to logically entail that there is therefore a single good at which all of us aim. He likens this to the 'roads to Rome fallacy', whereby one might mistakenly claim that because

all roads lead to some town, there is a particular town to which all roads lead. The implications of this logical error is that Aristotle has failed to establish that there is a single good which constitutes the aim of each human. He suggests that it is entirely plausible that our lives might consist in a never-ending series of different activities aimed at different goods.

The question now becomes whether or not this really is a logical fallacy, and I suggest there are good reasons for thinking it is not. Firstly, Aristotle raises the issue of there being a single aim to all our pursuits merely as a possibility, and not as a definite conclusion. He claims that 'If...our activities have some end which we want for its own sake, and for the sake of which we want all other ends.....it is clear that this must be the good, that is, the supreme good.' (1094a 19-23) A little later on he then asks 'what is the highest of all practical goods?' and answers that 'so far as the name goes there is pretty general agreement. "It is happiness"'.(1095a 17-18) Aside from being a moral philosopher, Aristotle was also a logician, and if he really intended this argument as one whose conclusion he believed logically necessary then it seems more likely that he would have set out the argument in the form of a syllogism, as he does elsewhere in the text.² Given the way in which he presents the argument then it is more likely that he intended the weaker claim that if there is a single sort of good at which all of us ultimately aim then it would be very important to establish what it is. He then suggests that there is general agreement that we all aim at happiness as an ultimate end, so there is indeed a single sort of supreme good which is worth examining. I suggest this is intended as a general, empirical observation rather than a necessary truth.

This means that Aristotle may not have been guilty of an error of logic, but this still leaves open the second problem raised by Jackson. Even if we can agree that we all aim at happiness, this does not mean that the content of a happy life will be the same for everyone. Jackson offers two distinct arguments to the effect that we cannot identify a single concept of happiness which applies to all humans. He suggests happiness is relative to each person in two different ways. Firstly, it differs according to the needs and interests of each individual, and secondly it is always transitory in that things which make us happy at some point become mundane over time. He gives the example of someone living in a famine-stricken country who would be happy for a time with three square meals a day, but would doubtless find this mundane after a certain time.

In answering this, it is worth starting with the separate question of translation. Aristotle's discussion centres on the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, which has traditionally been translated as 'happiness'. More recently, this translation has seemed unsatisfactory on the grounds that it understates the objectivity which Aristotle builds into his concept of *eudaimonia* in the original Greek. For this reason, modern translators have tended to use terms such as 'a flourishing life' or 'the best life' when rendering the original Greek into English. This is important because the less subjective tone of these translations generates different answers to the kind of questions an Aristotelian will wish to ask. If we ask whether someone could be evil and happy, then we might regretfully say that this is possible. But if we ask whether someone could be evil and leading the best life for a human being then this seems less plausible. We intuitively think that the best life would be one involving moral virtue, and this is precisely what Aristotle argued.

Now the reason this is important in the current context is because Jackson's counter examples look less convincing if one uses one of the contemporary translations. We might get away with claiming that three good meals a day is enough to make a famine victim happy, but this could not be sufficient for leading the best life. The obvious intuition here is that there would have to be certain qualities in any life beyond this sort of basic provision, and this in turn suggests that there may be objective criteria for determining a broad outline for what that life is. External goods including basic resources such as food and shelter would certainly be a part of it, but there is surely more we can say here. Some of Aristotle's own suggestions include friendship, the use of our intellectual abilities and certain sorts of pleasure. His claim is that any human benefits from having these, and this reflects certain universal features of our fundamental nature (of which more later).

As far as the second form of relativity is concerned, it is not clear that the kinds of goods which Aristotle took to be part of the best life ever come to be seen as mundane. Certain things which people aim at are certainly likely to become dull after a while, but Aristotle would simply suggest that these are the sorts of things which people often aim at in the mistaken view that they will make life fulfilling. Modern obsessions with consumer goods, celebrity and financial wealth are worrying in part because there is a tendency for them to provide a brief high before proving less satisfying than they were supposed to be. The same cannot be said of the love of one's children, good friendships or the reading of great literature. The latter are an enduring source of fulfilment, and this is so precisely because they fulfil certain fundamental features of human nature.

The final point of contention here is whether or not Aristotle provides us with a plausible account of the kind of pleasure which will be involved in the good life. Jackson is sceptical as to whether there is a clear distinction between the pleasures of the senses experienced in drinking good wine, and the intellectual pleasure of reading a great novel. Rightly in my view, he uses Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Aristotle saw sensual pleasure as being related to the 'appetitive' part of the soul concerned with desire and emotion, and intellectual pleasure as being related to the rational part of the soul. At this stage, I am simply unsure as to whether or not I share the intuition of whether this distinction is unclear. When we consider a great work of art, we may well be struck by the visual beauty as well as the expression of what we take to be a profound truth about the human condition. We might admire a great wine for both the pleasant taste and the sophistication which we know has gone into its production. It seems plausible to me that the sensual pleasure and the intellectual appreciation are two distinct forms of pleasure elicited by the same object. We may not always disentangle the two in the general course of things, but there is an intuitive difference which I suggest most of us recognise between the kinds pleasure which relate to different sorts of activities. Academic study, literature and poetry seem primarily aimed at the intellect, with sport, food and drink, and lying on the beach aimed at satisfying sensual desires. Where I am sympathetic to the general tenor of Jackson's criticism is that we may well wish to claim that the good life will involve a balance of both the higher and lower pleasures, and that Aristotle may well have been wrong to lay so much emphasis on a life of purely intellectual contemplation in the later section of the book.

The Function Argument

A number of the claims set out above turn on questions of human nature, and it is clear that Aristotle not only believes in the existence of such a thing, but relies on a series of substantive claims about it to support his wider views of the best life. Any weaknesses here therefore risk bringing down the wider claims about *eudaimonia* and reinforcing the kinds of criticisms discussed above regarding the possibility of a universally valid concept of the best life.

Once again, there appear to be three distinct criticisms which Jackson raises. He questions the validity of the claim that simply because certain classes of humans such as carpenters have a function, and the individual parts of humans such as our eyes have a function, it does not follow that the whole human has a function. In addition to questioning the validity of Aristotle's formal argument, he also cites Sartre's famous argument that humans are in principle not the kinds of creatures which can have a function because this presupposes a designer who has implanted the function in us. Sartre claims there is no god, therefore there is no designer of humans, therefore there is no human function.

The second criticism is the claim that Aristotle collapses the fact/value distinction, in that he makes the claim that by identifying what is natural in humans we can identify what is good for humans. The concern is that we cannot simply state that humans possess the faculty of reason and then deduce that it is good to exercise this faculty. Invoking Hume, he raises the sceptical doubt as to whether any value judgement can ever be derived from a fact.

The third criticism concerns Aristotle's claim that we can identify the best life for humans by identifying what is distinctive about us. Jackson suggests that this would allow in claims such as our distinctive ability to bring about a nuclear holocaust being the best life for us as we are alone in being able to bring this about.

Let us begin with the issue of whether humans have a function. Jackson is surely right that we cannot deduce the existence of a function for humans from the fact that our individual body parts have functions, any more than we can deduce that a football team must have two legs because each of its players has. But even if there is no valid inference we can make here, Aristotelians argue that there is a different way of phrasing this argument which makes more sense to a modern reader. The Function Argument reveals one of Aristotle's key concerns, which is related to the idea of having a purpose (*telos*). We can identify something's purpose by establishing its characteristic activity in that once we know the characteristic activity we know the purpose is to perform that activity well. For humans, Aristotle claims that as reason is distinctive in us, so the best life for us will be the excellent use of reason.

The final claim here is obviously problematic, and I shall return to it in a moment, but such a presentation of the argument avoids any mention of god or any other designer, and it reflects the widely held view that there are certain sorts of states and activities that humans characteristically aim at. Most modern interpreters are sceptical that the life of the mind could fully constitute the best life for any human, but if we acknowledge Aristotle's mistake in circumscribing the range of activities we aim at too narrowly, then the argument still seems plausible. Humans characteristically seek

communication with others, friendship, safety and at least a degree of intellectual satisfaction. The best life will be one in which we are able to satisfy our desires in these directions, and in achieving that purpose we will be living the good life for a human. The final aim for humans will be a collection of goods which constitute the best life if we can achieve them.

This leaves open the arguments concerning the distinctiveness of human reason and the fact/value distinction. I suggest Jackson is right to point out the fallacy in the claim that simply because humans have a distinct quality then the best life will be the exercising of this quality. Jackson's example from Richard Norman highlights one problem here, in that many of our distinctive qualities are quite immoral. A further problem is that if we were to discover other creatures with a similar level of rationality then there would be nothing distinct about us, and there would therefore be no good life for us. A more common sense approach would be that distinctiveness is not really to the point, and that the best life is one in which we exercise all our capacities excellently, regardless of whether they are distinct or not. This would mean that we should not only exercise our capacity for reason, but should also aim at a fulfilling emotional life and one in which the body remains in good physical health.

The issue of the fact/value distinction goes to the very heart of Aristotelian ethics, in that Aristotle is unequivocal that the best life would involve being morally virtuous. Like many Greek philosophers he simply saw this as obvious, and it was not until many centuries later that this distinction emerged as the philosophical problem it is now considered to be. As such, we are addressing a problem of which Aristotle himself was not fully aware, but there have been a number of responses over recent years which have addressed the problem of the fact value distinction from an Aristotelian perspective. Any Aristotelian is likely to acknowledge that there is some sense in which the fact/value distinction does indeed exist in terms of how we understand the world. But this won't rule out there being right answers to moral questions which can be cashed out in terms of what it is for a human being to flourish. Aristotle himself draws a crucial distinction between theoretical wisdom on the one hand, which aims at understanding eternal and unchanging truths, and practical wisdom on the other hand, which aims at right action in accordance with virtue. The fact that he sees a distinction in the first place indicates that he recognises that knowledge of the external world and abstract truths will not in itself deliver up right answers to the question of how we ought to live.

Aristotle does believe that there are right answers to be had in the realm of ethics, but he does not liken right answers in this context to factual claims. Instead, he asks us to consider questions such as 'what would a wise person do here?' or 'what is the courageous thing to do in this instance?' Such questions lead us into the realm of tradition, experience and character. If we have had a good upbringing, we will have developed the habit of awarding respect to others and we will bring to situations a sensitivity to the needs and interests of others which means we are likely to react in the right way. If we are older, then experience may have added wisdom to our perception of the world, and we are more likely to come to a correct judgement of the right action.

None of this means we can have access to a realm of moral facts which will ground a series of claims with the same certainty that we uphold the truths of mathematics. But

if no such realm of moral facts exists, then this is not serious criticism. More importantly in the context of the current discussion, it means the fact/value distinction is one which Aristotle can be interpreted as having recognised. His response may well have been that although such a distinction exists it is one which cannot lead to a full-blown subjectivism, because this would involve denying the immense influence of our upbringing and our embeddedness in the world around us. When we use terms such as 'honest', 'courageous', 'charitable', 'kind' or 'cruel', we are using terms which describe certain specific sorts of actions on the one hand, but also indicate value judgements on the other. We think of cruelty as involving certain sorts of actions and attitudes, as well as being a bad thing. This unity of description and value within the same concept reflects a moral training in which we come to 'perceive' the world as one which certain actions just do count as good or bad. Given that we are social beings who flourish in the company of other humans, then it also makes sense for us to err on the side of goodness. This last point brings us to the final area of discussion. On balance, this means that Aristotle is indeed guilty of a partial collapse of the fact/value distinction, but in a way which is consistent with our general practice within the ethical realm of believing there are right answers to moral questions which are in some sense distinct from right answers in physics or mathematics.

Friendship

It is fair to say that the intuitive response to the question of whether or not friendship is a good thing is that we would say it is. Quite rightly, Jackson questions this and draws on a number of sceptical responses to the value of friendship. He points out that if a pair of individuals share a friendship, this need be of no great value to the wider community. Jackson draws on Hume's observation that friendship is of no obvious benefit to humankind as a whole, and on the fact that Kant found no place for it in his system of ethics. Friendship may even be seen as immoral in certain circumstances, with the mafia being cited as one example.

The best way to approach this is to begin by distinguishing the kind of project Aristotle was engaged in from that which Kant especially was considering when addressing these sorts of issues. There is a modern distinction which is often drawn between 'morality' on the one hand and 'ethics' on the other.³ Morality is defined as a set of rules governing how we should treat others. Ethics is a wider concept which includes the issue of how we should treat others, but as a part of the wider question of how we should live and what kind of character we should try to develop. One practical difference is that a Kantian may have very little to say on questions such as whether we should develop a personal gift for playing the violin, whereas an Aristotelian is likely to claim that you live a more fulfilling life if you develop this sort of personal talent.

When we come to the question of friendship, Aristotle would simply have responded that there is no moral imperative to develop friendship, but such relationships will be part of the best life in light of the fact that we are naturally social beings. The fact that my friendship is of no great benefit to the wider community is not relevant here, in that the reason for engaging in friendships is what makes for the best life for me. This need not be in any way selfish, in that the best life will involve a consideration for others coupled with the development of one's own interests and talents. It is not clear to me that either Hume or Kant would have disputed this, in that neither

considers friendship immoral, and as long as it was not being used as a basis for wider morality then they would probably have agreed that it is an important feature of a good life. As far as the mafia is concerned, Aristotle would have agreed that this is an immoral form of friendship, but would probably also have been sceptical as to the quality of such a relationship. In such cases, self-interest, fear and greed are likely to taint the genuine concern for the well-being of the other which Aristotle thought constitutive of the highest form of friendship.

Conclusion

At the heart of Jackson's challenging paper is a sceptical attack on the possibility of establishing even in outline a description of the good life for a human being. I have suggested that many of his criticisms can be met with responses which keep in play the central Aristotelian project of describing the kind of life we should aim at and why we should treat others with respect. Many of the claims that Aristotle makes are ones which I believe conform to common sense. Because we are social beings then the best life for us will be one lived in a community. We have the capacity for reason, and the best life will be one which includes the use of that capacity in the development of the intellect. Each of us is born with the possibility of developing the moral virtues, and we lead a better life if we are fortunate enough to acquire them. I suggest these observations are as valid now as they were when Aristotle first presented them, and there is therefore every reason to believe in the plausibility of there being some sort of general account of the best life for any human.

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Further Reading

Two brief and highly accessible commentaries on *NE* are Gerrard J. Hughes *Aristotle on Ethics*. Routledge: London, 2001, and J O Urmson *Aristotle's Ethics*. Blackwell: Oxford, 1987.

A more challenging but outstanding collection of articles is contained in A O Rorty ed. *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1980.

For an introduction to the modern Aristotelian approach to ethics see Stan van Hoof. *Understanding Virtue Ethics*. Acumen: Chesham, 2006, especially chapters one and two.

¹ All references will be to the J A K Thomson translation in the revised 2004 edition published by Penguin.

² A syllogism was the standard form of logical argument employed by Aristotle. An example would be:

All horses are mammals
Red Rum is a horse

Therefore Red Rum is a mammal

Aristotle employs the practical syllogism in Book VI when discussing practical wisdom, and in Book VII when discussing weakness of will.

³ See for example Bernard Williams, 'Morality, the Peculiar Institution', in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Fontana: London, 1985.