

# ARISTOTLE

The “Good Life”  
and “The Function Argument”

# Today

- Announcements
  - Short Paper
    - Paper topic will be released on Friday (on Canvas)
- Aristotle on the good life
  - The methodology
  - Some basic claims
  - The function argument
  - The human soul
- Next time
  - Aristotle on virtues of character

The good life and the function argument  
Nicomachean Ethics (350 B.C.E.)

# ARISTOTLE



# The methodology

- *A pragmatic inquiry into ethics*
  - “Ethics”
    - “ethos” (character), “mores” (custom)
    - “Way of life”
  - Pragmatic
    - We study ethics to make changes to our personal lives
      - That is, we learn about what a good life is so as to improve our lives
    - Offering only a rough “outline” (“to be filled in later”) about the good life
      - Not offering a *theory* (e.g. general principles of morality)
        - » Not about moral obligations or duties are (e.g. “do not steal”)
      - \* We do not learn how to live a good life by merely learning general rules.
  - A pragmatic (or practical) inquiry requires a target, aim, or goal.
    - “...if, like archers, we have a target to aim at, we are more likely to hit the right mark.”

# The methodology

- A search for *the* good
  - *The* good (as opposed to *a* good) is the “supreme good” or “highest end” of a human life—“eudaimonia”
    - *Eudaimonia*: “happiness,” “flourishing,” “well-being” “living well”
  - According to Aristotle, the main *tasks* in ethics are:
    - (1) To identify exactly what eudaimonia is
      - We agree that it is a good life is one that “flourishes,” but there is no consensus on what exactly it is to “flourish” in life
    - (2) To clarify what eudaimonia *for humans* involves
      - Consider: what is distinctive of humans in particular (“*ergon*”: work, task)  
**(The function argument** tells us what it is)
    - (3) To teach us *how to achieve* eudaimonia
      - That is, to teach us *how to live well*

# “Ends” and “goods”

- What is *an* “end” or *a* “good”?
  - Claim: “Every craft and every investigation, and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good.”
    - In other words, human activities *aim at* something *as desirable*.
  - Consider examples within each type of activity:
    - *Craft*: basket weaving (a basket), practicing medicine (a healthy person)
    - *Investigation*: scientific experiments (data), detective work (clues)
    - *Action*: go fishing (catch a fish), singing (produce a song)
    - *Decision*: to study (studying), to eat dinner (eating)
  - *Every* human activity aims at something as a *desired* end or good.
    - But some things are *more desirable* than others.

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# Desirable “for the sake of...”

If P is desirable *for the sake of* Q, then Q is more desirable than P

- Ends or goods, themselves, have a *hierarchical* structure.
  - Levels of “completeness” of ends towards some “final” end.
    - I desire to get out of bed because I desire to make coffee...
    - ...I desire to make coffee because I desire to drink coffee...
    - ...I desire to drink coffee because I desire the pleasure of drinking coffee.
  - e.g. Drinking coffee is more desirable than making coffee.
    - » Why? Because I desire to make coffee *for the sake of* drinking it.
- Eudaimonia is the *highest* end or *supreme* good.
  - It is the only thing that has all three of the following characteristics:
    - (1) It is desirable for itself
    - (2) It is not desirable for the sake of some other good
    - (3) All other goods are desirable for its sake
  - *All* human activity is ultimately “for the sake of” eudaimonia
    - Nobody desires a good life for the sake of some further goal.



# What constitutes eudaimonia?

Which tiger seems to be living well, flourishing?





# What constitutes eudaimonia?

- Aristotle rejects the obvious or popular candidates for eudaimonia
  - **Pleasure, honor, health, wealth**

For the many think it is something obvious and evident, e.g. pleasure, wealth or honor, some thinking one thing, others another; and indeed the

same person keeps changing his mind, since in sickness he thinks it is health, in poverty wealth. And when they are conscious of their own ignorance, they admire anyone who speaks of something grand and beyond them.

The many, the most vulgar, would seem to conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals; and yet they have some argument in their defense, since many in positions of power feel the same way as Sardanapallus<sup>4</sup> <and also choose this life>.

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## **Pleasure**



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## **Honor**



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**Health**





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## **Wealth**



# What constitutes eudaimonia?

- Aristotle rejects the obvious or popular candidates for eudaimonia
  - **Pleasure, honor, health, wealth**
    - Which of them has the first characteristic? – “(1) it is desirable for itself”
      - Arguably, all of them have this first characteristic.
        - \* But which, we must ask, is more desirable than the other?
    - Look to the second and third characteristics –
      - “(2) It is not desirable for the sake of some other good.”
      - “(3) All other goods are desirable for its sake”
        - Aristotle argues that these ends fail to be “self-sufficient” or “completely good” because we ultimately desire them *for the sake of* a good life.
        - That is, for instance, we seek health because it promotes a good life. But health is not what a good life *consists in*.
    - A good life is not simply that of having those good things in life.
      - Achieving a good life is *not* one that merely that of attaining pleasure, honor, health, wealth, etc. (i.e. checking off of the list of good things)

# The function argument

- What does happiness, flourishing, or well-being *consist in*?
  - “The function argument” resolves the issue.
    - *Natural* things in the world and *artifacts* seem to have an *ergon*.
      - ***Ergon***: “function” “task” “work” “purpose”
    - Such things in the world have a functional nature *in virtue of which* they are the *kinds* of things they are. (*Teleology*)
      - What ergon or function do all hammers have, in virtue of which each and every one of them *counts as* a hammer?
        - » To hammer things
      - What function do all sunflowers have that makes them sunflowers?
        - » To physically track the sunlight each day (?)
      - What function do all livers have in virtue of which they count as a liver?
        - » To cleanse the blood
      - What function do all harpists have in virtue of which they are harpists?
        - » To play the harp



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      - Notice that *all* hammers have the *same function* in common, whether they are big or small, old or new, bad or good, which makes them the same *kind* of thing (i.e. a hammer).
      - But what makes a hammer a *good* or *excellent* hammer?
        - » One that hammers things *well*
        - A “good” X is an X that performs its function *well*

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        - » To play the harp
      - So what makes a harpist a good or excellent harpist?
        - » Playing the harp *well*

obeying reason>. (b) Now the function of *F*, e.g. of a harpist, is the same in kind, so we say, as the function of an excellent *F*, e.g. an excellent harpist.

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(c) The same true unconditionally in every case, when we add to the function the superior achievement that expresses the virtue; for a harpist's function, e.g. is to play the harp, and a good harpist's is to do it well. (d)

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    - Question: What do a hammer, screwdriver, and a wrench have in common?
      - They are all *tools*. That is, they share *a more general function* in virtue of which they counts as a certain *kind* of thing—a tool.
        - » To perform some operation on things to alter them somehow
    - Notice: In order to distinguish between different sorts of tools, we must specify *some distinctive function for each tool*
      - Otherwise we *could not recognize them as different* kinds of tools.

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    - Question: What do the lecturer before you, the harpist in the orchestra, the mailman, and the president all have in common?
      - They are *humans*. But to establish a distinct kind here, there must be some distinctive function of *humanity in general*, in virtue of which humans are distinct from, say, apes, chimpanzees, dolphins, canines, etc.
        - \* If there was no distinctive function of humans in general, how could we recognize humans at all?
        - \* If we are able to specify or identify what *ergon* or function is distinctive of humans in general, then we can say that a good human or human life is one in which that distinctive function is exercised or performed *well*