

Abstract

Title: Human Nature as a Man's Task. Study of Human Nature in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Abstract: The thesis concentrates on two basic concepts of Aristotle's ethics: happiness (EUDAIMONIA) and (human) nature (FYSIS). It's main aim is to show that human nature is not a state into which an individual is born but an end that is to be achieved through excellent, i.e. virtuous activity during the course of the whole human life. In chapter one ethics is introduced as a theoretical enquiry that is trying to understand the true nature of this end (EUDAIMONIA). This enquiry must be based on practical effort of acquiring the requisite excellence, which is shown in chapters two and three.

The best human life consists in performing excellent actions. Thus excellence is a criterion of what is good or bad in terms of living the best way life. But excellence for Aristotle is not a general concept: it is always a disposition of some individual that is manifested in his actions and in the way he understands variable actual situations. Emphasis on excellence so understood means also that human nature demonstrates itself not (only) in what is usual or common but also on what is excellent and unique. Still, excellent is not that which wins in competition over others but rather that which is fine and displays beauty (TO KALON).

Ethical enquiry requires *practical* understanding of what is good, i.e. an experience of good action (chapter four). Whereas in geometry the principals are constant and general and apprehended solely through reason, the principals in ethics can be grasped only through understanding singulars. Thus Aristotle's ethics is not an attempt to formulate general rules and prescriptions of how we should behave: rather it shows the importance of good examples of excellent actions. These are not to be mechanically imitated, but should rather be just examples of what it means to behave in a noble way. Still, this emphasis on practical competence of understanding unique practical situations (prudence: FRONESIS) does not eliminate the importance of general rules. For Aristotle laws are necessary not only to control the life of human society, but they also teach people to be just and moderate.

Chapter five introduces Aristotle's conception of pleasure (HÉDONÉ), another important term related to the issue of (human) nature. It is the primary source of motion for all animals including human beings, yet it is a motive that can easily lead human life astray. Pleasure, however, plays an important role in the best human life although it cannot be the highest principal of choice.

Aristotle's perspective on the best human life is not one of a solitary individual: a man is not only a rational animal (ZÓON LOGON ECHON), but an animal that lives in a community (ZÓON POLITIKON) based on speech and understanding (LOGOS). Therefore chapter six introduces his exposition of friendship and justice that shows the importance of the social dimension of human life.

In chapter seven the interpretation points out some of the blind spots of Aristotle's ethical conception. First his insistence on the theoretical life which is a variant of the Platonic conception of "becoming like a god". This raises an unanswered question about human nature: whether life of solitary contemplation is really the ultimate *raison d'être* of human life, or whether a man can find his highest purpose in living a noble life among other men.